

Durham Biographies Vol. VI

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Nerys A Johnson (1942 - 2001)

Artist and Gallery Curator

During her life, Nerys Johnson was best known as a gallery curator, but it is through her art that her life still shines. Everyone who met her was struck by her eyes, so big, clear and penetrating, peering out of a crumpled little body. She was diagnosed with Still's disease, a form of rheumatoid arthritis, when she was two. The treatment at that time was to keep sufferers in bed. Nerys spent the next six years in a hospital ward, until Dr Barbara Ansell radically changed attitudes, arguing that patients should as far as possible lead a normal life. Nerys told me that she had never known what it was like to run. The disease slowly but relentlessly gripped every joint in her body until, after various joint replacements, she was finally reduced to a chrysalis-like form in a purpose-built mechanical chair, with just enough strength in her shrivelled fingers to hold a brush, but not to lift a sheet of paper. (Someone else had to do that for her). The pain was excruciating, yet still she painted, and still her eyes shone.

Nerys Johnson was born in Colwyn Bay, North Wales, an only child. Her father was a car salesman; her mother a domestic science teacher for several years. She knew from the start what interested her in life: painting. The colouring books she was given when a child in hospital set her on her path. As her friend, the famous Op artist Bridget Riley put it much later: 'Nerys always points due north'. Art was like a magnet to her. And she went north - to King's College at the University of Durham (later, University of Newcastle) to study art. Her student works were vigorous large abstracts, arcs of blue and yellow leaping across the canvas, as she herself would have loved to have leapt. But her health problems were already beginning to dog her life. She knew that the only way to develop her own style was to paint full-time, but how would she become independent and support herself? She was good at art history, and had enjoyed writing her dissertation on Monet's and Derain's paintings of London, so wouldn't an academic life be more secure, as well as being one that she could cope with physically? At least she would be living with great artists' works, while her own was still such an unknown.

At first she tried teaching, but finding it too draining she settled instead on a curatorial career, and was appointed Keeper of Fine Art at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle at the exceptionally early age of twenty five. Art gallery work attracted her because she was dealing with real paintings, not slides in lecture rooms or illustrations in libraries. Though she worked on some interesting projects - notably the first retrospective of John Martin, with the critic and art historian, Bill Feaver - she still felt frustrated. She could appreciate the values of the Victorian paintings that were such a major feature of the Laing collection, but she wanted to be working with Matisse and Picasso.

Her move in 1970 to become Keeper-in-Charge of the Durham Light Infantry Museum and Arts Centre in Durham was, in museum career terms, a change of direction towards temporary exhibitions and modern art, away from permanent collections and art history, but it suited her creative spirit. The D.L.I., as it came to be known, unusually housed a temporary exhibition space, dedicated to showing work by living artists, above its military displays. As one councillor put it, 'If we're going to celebrate the arts of war, we'll need the arts of peace as well'. Here Nerys flourished for the next two decades, putting on a seemingly endless stream of high quality original exhibitions of contemporary art, from time to time dropping one in that nourished her own creative yearnings, such as *Colour: British Painting 1950 - 1979*, little knowing that one day she would make her own unique contribution to that continuing history. In 1982, she curated a Henry Moore

exhibition to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the University of Durham, in the process meeting him and being taken by him in his golf buggy to see his works displayed in his fields.

Under her visionary eye, the D.L.I. became known nationally as a centre for excellence in art and art education. Throughout her life she remained committed to 'art for the people', and would later will that, after her death, her works of art left in her studio should be sold to create a fund to help public galleries acquire paintings by living artists. In 1986 the South Bank Centre invited her to curate an exhibition for them which would tour the country. She chose to concentrate on the moment when a painting took off, when the artist became inspired and the marks and colours began to dance. She drew her own sketches, reproduced in the catalogue, revealing the underlying rhythms in each painting - the imaginative energy that inspired the whole. It involved her travelling the country looking at art in public and private collections - a remarkable physical feat in itself, for by then the disease had totally seized her knees, hips, elbows and shoulders.

She called the show *Moments of Being*. It could just as well have been called Moments of Becoming. For, of course, it was a personal journey. What she was really seeking was the take-off point in her own art. Any spare moments she had were spent drawing and painting. It is remarkable how much work she produced during that period - much of it large drawings of bunches of flowers spread across the white paper like clouds caught in a sunset. I remember once drawing a portrait beside her. I watched with envy as her eyes lit up and her line sang across the page, while mine remained plodding, hesitant and closed.

In 1989 she could just afford to take early retirement. Her body was now effectively imprisoned, but her creativity was, at last, set free. Her captive-liberated state was symbolised by her flat, on the ground floor at the top of Princes Street. It was small and cell-like but full of light, and always filled with the flowers which friends continually brought her, some in bud or in full bloom, others blown. She often liked the last best, and would not let them be removed until she had caught their crippled glory. Her windows looked on to a little garden and trees. You felt when you were inside that you were out there, and in sunshine. The sunshine came from the walls and from all the paintings on them. With a complex rotatory of helpers, some friends, some students, Nerys painted. Many were inspired by her. At last she had what she had wanted and needed for so long: time - time to get into her work, time to let the colours and brushes take over, and begin to sing and dance.

The last decade of her life was spent effectively incarcerated, except for increasingly rare outings, which had to be elaborately planned, one to visit Kew Gardens and, amazingly, two to Venice - a city she loved, where light and colour poured through everything and even the streets were running green water. She always did her best to attend previews; art degree shows, and meetings of several local art groups. Despite intense suffering, and sometimes months spent lying on her back unable to move, recuperating from operations, these last years saw a glorious flowering - literally and metaphorically - of her art.

It is virtually impossible and always misleading to try to sum up an artist's achievement in words. All artists of note have their own 'voice'. You immediately recognise a Nerys when you see one, whether it's a large, radiant charcoal drawing of a spray of tiger lilies, a watercolour of a canal scene in Venice or one of her last gem-like flower paintings which are as brilliant and small as fragments of stained glass. Looking at these works, you haven't really just seen a Nerys, but Nerys herself. Every painting of hers was a self-portrait. It isn't just that a solitary tulip head, a burning sunflower or a drooping amaryllis could look uncannily like her in different moods. What glows through them all is her intense love of life; those shining eyes.

Julian Spalding, Art commentator; DLI Art Assistant 1970-72