

## Nerys A Johnson - Artist and Curator (1942-2001)

Nerys Ann Johnson was born on 1 October, 1942, in Colwyn Bay, North Wales. Her family later moved to Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, where she grew up. For several years she was treated in hospital for childhood arthritis. In 1961, she went to study Fine Art (Painting and Art History) at Durham University, and made her home in the North East. In 1967, after teaching Art for two years, she was appointed Keeper of Fine Art at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle. In 1970, at the early age of 28, she became Keeper-in-Charge of the Durham Light Infantry (DLI) Museum and Art Gallery. There, she created a seemingly endless stream of high quality, original exhibitions of contemporary art, including *Henry Moore: Head-Helmet*, an exhibition to mark the 150th anniversary of Durham University (1982); *Moments of Being*, a touring exhibition curated for the Arts Council (1988), and *A Fresh Look*, a touring exhibition of drawings and paintings by 20th century British artists selected from the collection of Middlesbrough Art Gallery (1992).

Nerys had drawn and painted during her childhood, continuing as time allowed throughout a demanding career. Her initial subject matter consisted mainly of abstracts and landscapes. She continued to work on landscapes and townscapes, but became increasingly absorbed in drawing and painting flower and plant forms. In particular, she focussed on flowers, following their metamorphosis as they budded, bloomed and faded, deploying line, colour, contrast and form to create striking, near-abstract, compositions. She said of her work: "in a drawing, the sense of movement, structure and rhythms is expressed through the marks and lines; in a painting this is achieved through the balance and contrast of colours. Whether the flowers are grouped in a riotous bunch or [depicted] singly, my aim is to reveal the particular feeling of that image – a potent lily – a burst of spring or the battered remains of winter".

Julian Spalding, museum director, now writer, said of her work: "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 ... or one of her last gem-like flower paintings which are as brilliant and small as fragments of stained glass". Her output during the last decade or so of her life was prodigious. Of her unwavering commitment to her art, Bridget Riley was to say: "Nerys always points due North".

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Nerys's work is held in various public collections, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the National Museum of Wales, the Laing Art Gallery and the Arts Council Collection, and is also to be found in many private collections in the UK and abroad.

Throughout her life, Nerys was committed to 'art for the people', and she gave instructions that her artworks, left in her studio, be sold and the proceeds used to help public galleries acquire paintings by living artists. The charity *Nerys Johnson Contemporary Art Fund*, was established for this purpose. Information about the *Fund*, Nerys herself and images of her work (including works for sale), is available at [www.nerysjohnson.com](http://www.nerysjohnson.com)