

## Wilhelmina Barns-Graham

**A Line of Drawing: 1943 – 1993**

**Exhibition Dates: 27 March – 12 May 2012**

2012 is Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's Centenary year. Art First was the principal gallery to represent her work for the last highly productive decade of her life (she died in 2004), and it gives us particular pleasure to present for the first time a remarkable body of her drawings covering a fifty-year period, released by the Barns-Graham Charitable Trust. Starting with two enchanting drawings of St Ives from 1943, we travel with the artist to Italy, Lanzarote and Scotland, following her eye as she explores the lyrical landscape around San Gimignano in the 1950's, the intriguing clay works in Chiusure, the lava and rock formations of Lanzarote, or the windswept topography of Stromness.



*A Discipline of the Mind* is the title given to Mel Gooding's definitive publication in 2009, in which he writes about Barns-Graham's drawing practice:

'Wilhelmina Barns-Graham once spoke of her extraordinarily prolific and diverse output as a draughtsman as 'just drawings'. By this apparently diffident reference to one of the most brilliantly distinctive bodies of graphic work in twentieth century British art, she meant that her drawings, for the most part, were not regarded by her to be an aspect of her primary artistic practice, which was in painting and printmaking, but somehow secondary to it: not so much an end in themselves as a means to the discovery of a kind of information which, assimilated, could be used later in her continuing creative project. She regarded them as exercises, at once perceptual and conceptual - 'a discipline of the mind' - that might nourish and inform the visual imagination.'

*"I've studied cloud formations, wave movements, the effect of water and heat on clay country, ice and so forth... I was interested in bird flights, the design of foxglove leaves, the backs of fern leaves..."* she said.

Drawing became for Barns-Graham the basis of an artistic practice that was essentially a mode of research into natural reality, the underpinning of her experiments in successive styles of abstraction.

The Centenary year begins with a radical re-appraisal of the Scottish influences within her art, presented at the Fleming Collection in the exhibition *'W Barns-Graham: A Scottish Artist in St Ives'* (10 January – 5 April). It has been curated by Lynne Green, author of the major monograph on Barns-Graham's studio life, now in its second publication by Lund Humphries. Born in St Andrews, trained at Edinburgh College of Art, and from 1960 onwards, spending several months every year at her St Andrews home in Scotland, Barns-Graham's primary studio for sixty years was in St Ives, but her development in that context needs to be seen afresh with her Scottish background in mind.

Mel Gooding points out that her interest in the work of D'Arcy Thompson for example, whose family she knew from St Andrews, may serve to remind us that the conventional critical association of Barns-Graham with the post-war St Ives artists, though it has an historical and circumstantial basis, has obscured important and specifically Scottish affinities in her intellectual and artistic identity. She was familiar with D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form*, and she had been deeply impressed by his emphasis on the relation of inner space to outer form, and on how the mechanical and energetic determinants of organic structures were reducible to the mathematics of geometry and logarithmic progression. Drawing, as D'Arcy Thompson was aware, is the means to the clearest demonstration of these dynamic relations. *"Studying Leonardo's drawings of waves led me to D'Arcy Thompson"*, said Barns-Graham, in an interview to celebrate her eightieth birthday; *"[his drawings of] shell formations led me to [the sea-wave and snow-storm spiral paintings of] Victor Pasmore, then back to Leonardo da Vinci and back to my own studies..."*

‘From then on,’ Gooding continues, ‘it was the dynamic, shifting relation between inner energy and outer form, and her inner and outer sense of that dynamic, that her art sought to reveal. This deep feeling for nature as a living force, and for the landscape as the expression of hidden and ultimately ordered energies, she shared with certain of her most distinguished Scottish contemporaries, among them the visionary writer, Neil Gunn and Nan Shepherd... Barns-Graham dedicated herself over the years to her own version of this intellectual and intuitive creativity, this opening of the inward gate of natural common sense, the common sense of the senses’.

The exhibition at Art First demonstrates how her drawing registers with extreme economy the dark monumental mass of a volcanic hill and the magical translucency of a glacier, the inner dynamics of up-rearing rock forms or the inner currents of a rolling sea-swell, and then throughout her practice, the geometry of architecture in the space of human landscape.

This survey of Barns-Graham’s drawings brings to London a fresh insight into this distinguished artist’s career and explores a different dimension of the ever-unfolding story relating to members of the ground-breaking St Ives Group, including Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, that came together during and after the Second World War.

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Available from Art First are copies of Mel Gooding’s book *A Discipline of the Mind: The Drawings of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham*, published in 2009 by the Pier Arts Centre and the Barns-Graham Charitable Trust.

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Illustrations:

First Page

Monreale, Sicily, 1955  
Pencil & wash on paper, 46.8x58cm

Above Left

St Ives, 1943  
Gouache, 38x56cm

Below Left

Stromness, 1986  
Pencil & wash on paper, 56.5x77cm