

AN ISLAND ON YOUR DOORSTEP BET LOW

11 January - 8 February 2025
Reid Gallery, Glasgow

1 March - 7 June 2025
The Pier Arts Centre, Orkney



The centenary of the birth of the Scottish artist Bet Low RSA RSW RGI D.Lit. (born Gourock 1924, died Glasgow 2007), is marked in both Glasgow and Orkney through a collaboration between the Reid Gallery, The Glasgow School of Art, and the Pier Arts Centre in Stromness, Orkney. Both Glasgow and Orkney played a crucial part in the artist's life and work, forming the backdrop to important stages in her long career.

This exhibition, celebrating the centenary of her birth reflects on Bet Low's working life, from early studies of Glasgow to the late Orkney landscapes and goes some way in reassessing this important Scottish artist's contribution to Scottish art and culture.

The exhibition contains reference to Low's wider contribution to Scottish arts, in Glasgow, from her role co-founding the New Charing Cross Gallery (1963-8), to her other activities with Glasgow Unity Theatre, the Clyde Group and open-air exhibitions on the railings on the Glasgow Botanic (1956).

The loans and exhibition are supported by the Weston Loan Programme with Art Fund. Created by the Garfield Weston Foundation and Art Fund, the Weston Loan Programme is the first ever UK-wide funding scheme to enable smaller and local authority museums to borrow works of art and artefacts from national collections.

Curators:

Jenny Brownrigg, Exhibitions Director, The Glasgow School of Art
Andrew Parkinson, Curator, The Pier Arts Centre

Cover: *In the Hoy Hills* (Orkney), 1977, oil on canvas, Bet Low.

Photograph: Alistair Peebles

Courtesy of the Pier Arts Centre, Stromness

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Introduction

Bet Low's early work captured city scenes and people, before she turned her attention to abstract work then landscape painting. In the latter, Low developed a uniquely figurative style, visually reducing landscape into key elements. The exhibition title, *'An Island On Your Doorstep'*, is a handwritten phrase from one of Low's drawings:

Marshes, rushes, water and islands. All wet, watery, island land. An island on your doorstep. Cool pools of light and wee black shadows. Black sea and towering rocks, sinking down fathoms.¹

Whilst Low moved to Glasgow in 1945 – the year she finished at The Glasgow School of Art – she and her husband Tom Macdonald (1914-85) later bought a cottage, sight unseen, in Hoy, Orkney, in 1967. Her summers there, on the edge of Mill Bay, with views from her kitchen window to the islands of Rysa and Fara, inspired a great part of her later career as a painter.

This essay, like the exhibition, predominantly focuses on her work relating to Glasgow and Orkney. At first glance, these are two very disparate locations for Low to be drawn to, creating different styles that bookend her career. However, Low's childhood in Gourock, near the Cloch lighthouse, perhaps provides the key:

From about seven years old, I lived in the country. The woods and everything, that was all magic to me... So I'd wander up all over the hills, which was safe to do then, and was inspired by that. And the sea was right in front.²

1. Notes on back of a sketch, Ms Gen 1764/C/5/2, University of Glasgow Special Collections.

2. An extract from an interview with Bet Low, 16.1.2022, Denis Agnew: from his Living Record Archive.

Early period

Following her high school years at Greenock Academy, Low commuted from the family home in Gourock to attend The Glasgow School of Art (1942–45). Her years there were during the period of the Second World War. Low's contemporaries included Joan Eardley (1921–1963), Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006) and Cordelia Oliver (1923–2009). Of her time at art school, she remarked, *'I loved the art school... I was at home the moment I went in the door'*.³ Low also attended evening classes there, running the gauntlet of the cold, late train and bus back to Gourock. She completed her diploma in Drawing and Painting unusually in three years, during a period where other students were called up for service. Muriel Scott (b. 1925), a contemporary of hers, both at Greenock Academy and The Glasgow School of Art, recalls that on Friday mornings, Hugh Adam Crawford (1898–1982) got everyone to line up their easels holding the work they had completed during the week, in order to give feedback.⁴ Scott further recollects that Low was quiet: *'You never knew what she was thinking'*.

Following art school, Low cited her three-month diploma course at Hospitalfield College of Art, Arbroath (1945), then a residential school under James Cowie (1886–1956), as a formative time. Low never completed teacher training at Jordanhill Training College, Glasgow (1945–6), as she found it stultifying. She experienced her next place of inspiration in the creative ethos and interdisciplinary milieu of Glasgow Unity Theatre.

Glasgow beyond art school

Low's activity associated clearly with Glasgow is two-fold: in her early Glasgow drawings, and in work linked to collective endeavours. Low was drawn to contribute to initiatives including Glasgow Unity Theatre, the Clyde Group, open-air exhibitions at the Botanic, and the New Charing Cross Gallery on Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow (1963–1968).

3. *Ibid.*

4. From a conversation between Muriel Scott, Roderick McCrorie and Jenny Brownrigg, 6.12.24.

The 1940s

Glasgow Unity Theatre

Glasgow Unity Theatre was based at the old site of the Refugee Centre (now the Dental Hospital on Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow) and formed following the start of the Second World War by several progressive theatre groups coming together. Cordelia Oliver described Glasgow Unity Theatre as a, *'political entity, democratically run by a diversity of members held together by an anti-Fascist aim'*.⁵ Owing to depleted numbers of established actors, because of the Second World War National Service, a range of diverse individuals formed this left-leaning theatre group.⁶ This included former members of the Glasgow Corporation Transport Players, Jewish Institute Players, Clarion Players and the Glasgow Worker's Theatre Group. Low had been introduced to Unity Theatre, by a chance encounter on Sauchiehall Street with Stanley Baxter (b.1926). The subsequent work she got there and access to a canteen saved her from poverty. She helped paint set scenery, did the set design for the production

'Men Should Weep' (by Ena Lamont Stewart, 1947), and assisted with publicity. Unity Theatre also staged exhibitions. Low had her first solo exhibition at the Athenaeum, the then Royal College of Music and Drama, Glasgow. She was also part of a group show that Unity Theatre staged, of the artists who worked as part of the company. She went on to marry Tom Macdonald, an artist set-designer at the theatre, with whom she collaborated on a further two initiatives that shared a similar manifesto of taking art to the people.

During her time at Glasgow Unity Theatre, she created portraits of theatre hands such as *'Old Larry Odd Job Man'*, alongside studies of actresses such as Eveline Garratt (1919-2015) in an egalitarian series that mostly drew on the people and places of 'backstage' Glasgow. She also painted portraits of the wider group, including that of the poet and writer Burns Singer (1928-1964).

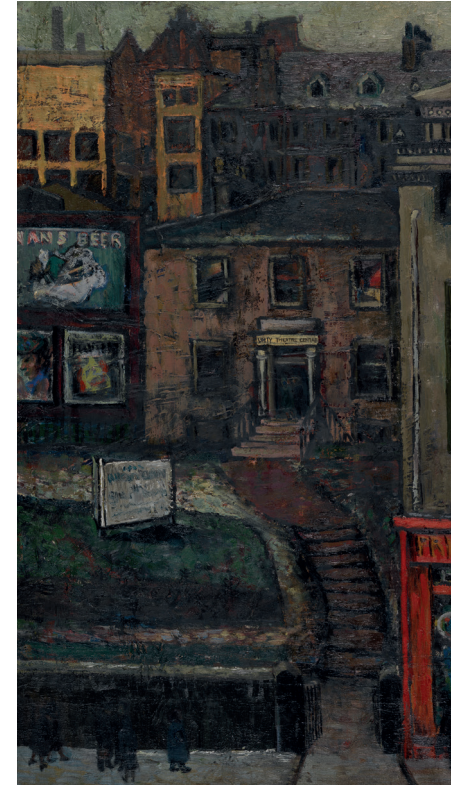
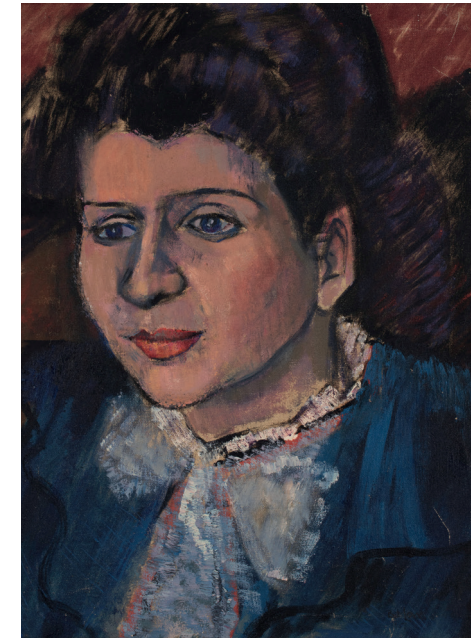


Image: Unity Theatre, Bet Low c. 1946 (STA GEN 9).
Courtesy of University of Glasgow Archives & Special Collections
© Bet Low Trust

Image: 'E Garratt', Unity Theatre, 1947,
Oil on Canvas, Bet Low.
Courtesy of Lyon & Turnbull
© Bet Low Trust



5. Oliver, Tom Macdonald, 6. Carrell, Chris (ed.)
Tom Macdonald (1914-1985): A Memorial Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings
Selected by Cordelia Oliver and Bet Low. Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1986.

6. Hunter, Russell. *'The Unity Theatre Years'*, 29.
In Tom Macdonald: Paintings, Drawings and Theatre Designs.
The Third Eye Centre, 1986.

Low's early drawings of Glasgow

Low's early work from the 1940s and early 1950s captured Glasgow city scenes and people, drawing on her local knowledge of the city's environs of Garnethill, Townhead, Cowcaddens, and the Gorbals.⁷ Her black and white expressionistic artworks, made with a variety of mediums, including linocut, black chalk, ink, oil or black Conte Crayon, captured pub singers, protests, processions, street musicians, hospital wards and Glasgow locations such as Phoenix Park that no longer exist. Her confident line is not always a kind one, capturing people often in caricature form. This social-realist approach was reflective of the work of her peers, including her husband Tom Macdonald, Joan Eardley and Louise Annand (1915–2012) who sought out a Glasgow that was 'under the grime of heavy industry'.⁸ The subject matter and style had also been brought to Glasgow by the Jewish-Polish painter Josef Herman (1911–2000), who came to the city in 1940 or 1941 as a refugee from the Second World War. Low was latterly to meet Herman through Macdonald and Unity Theatre. Herman and another refugee, Jankel Adler (1895–1949) brought an international outlook with their work, which chimed with the politics and realities of a poverty-stricken Glasgow.

John Taylor (b.1936), a co-founder of New Charing Cross Gallery, cited the influence that Herman and Adler had on Low and Tom Macdonald, stating that, '*Herman and Adler had no doubt about being artists and I'm sure that they helped harden the resolve of both Tom and Bet to follow a similar path.*'⁹

John Duncan Fergusson (1874–1961) and Margaret Morris (1891–1980) were to be an influence for Low during this period. They had returned from Paris to Glasgow at the point of the Second World War looming. Both were incredibly active in leading and supporting the development of cultural life in Glasgow, with Morris forming the Celtic Ballet Company in 1940, with Fergusson its Art director, and co-founding the New Art Club, with which Low exhibited. Fergusson was also President of the New Scottish Group, which formed in 1942. In Low's obituary, Agnes Samuel, a friend of Low's and Trustee of Bet Low Trust, noted that Fergusson and Morris,

*'...befriended Low and gave support to her and other independents when, in 1956, they organised the first open-air exhibition at weekends on the railings of the Botanic Gardens, Glasgow.'*¹⁰

7. From exhibition leaflet, *The Forties: Glasgow People and Places, Drawings and Paintings Tom Macdonald*, Cyril Gerber Fine Art, 1984.

8. Annand, *A Glasgow Sketchbook*, 7, Richard Drew Publishing, 1988.

9. Taylor, 'An Artist Remembers', 43, Carrell, Chris (ed.), *Tom Macdonald (1914–1985): A Memorial Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings Selected by Cordelia Oliver and Bet Low*, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1986.

10. Obituary, December 17, 2007, by Agnes Samuel, *The Herald*, Scotland.



Image: Warsaw / Peace Protes, 1954, Linocut, Bet Low.

Courtesy of Lyon & Turnbull

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Collaborative endeavours

Following Low's initial trajectory through Glasgow Unity Theatre, involved in artist-led groups such as the Clyde Group, and then co-founding the artist-led New Charing Cross Gallery, we see an artist whose early modus operandi was to make visible her work and that of others. This grassroots artist-led, 'do-it-yourself' ethos could be a forebear of artist-run gallery models such as Transmission, Glasgow, established in 1983. A distinct difference, however, is that the key primary aim of the New Charing Cross Gallery was to establish an environment that would primarily support a market, in this case for the sales of contemporary paintings in Glasgow.

Low joined the Clyde Group of Artists and Writers in 1946, going on to be part of their *'Art and Peace Festival and Exhibition'* in the McLellan Galleries, Glasgow in September 1948.¹¹ Her early work and ethics, developed through her involvement in the Clyde Group, whose manifesto was to be 'artists who are working for the community',¹² had led to her organising, with Tom Macdonald, Glasgow's first open air exhibition on the railings of Glasgow's Botanic Gardens in 1956. For being known to the general as well as gallery-going public, this was a key initiative as it was overtly public-facing. Low describes and reflects on this, in an article for the Scottish Review in 1996:

Hundreds turned out to see us. Queen Margaret Drive at junction with Great Western Road was so crowded, police were out directing traffic. People peered from buses. The BBC were filming ... paintings were sold. The weekly Scotsman gave us a huge spread and large photographs under the heading, 'Paris on the Kelvin'. It ran for a second year but then 'died a death'.¹³

11. Acc. 12177/7, National Library of Scotland.

12. Clyde Group, *'Art + Peace, Festival and Exhibition'* leaflet, McLellan Galleries, Glasgow, September 1948. Acc. 12177/1, National Library of Scotland.

13. Low, B., *'We Were Always Cold'*, typescript draft of a memoir, Acc 12177/9, National Library of Scotland. Published in Scottish Review, August 7, 1966, 77-86.

New Charing Cross Gallery

The New Charing Cross Gallery ran from 1963-68. Whilst the inaugural exhibition leaflet named Bet Low and John Taylor as the gallery's directors, the then businessman Cyril Gerber (1917-2012) was also involved in the enterprise as the third director.¹⁴ Others such as Tom Macdonald were also instrumental in the gallery's work such as exhibition installations. The gallery, situated above a busy printers' premises on Glasgow's Sauchiehall Street, was established in answer to what Low and Taylor saw as a specific lack in provision in the city:

For a long time now, Glasgow and the West of Scotland have had no gallery willing to market the work of modern painters. This has been a great lack. In recent years, more and more people have been aware of the need for such a gallery, and now this need is being met.¹⁵

In 1963 as part of the promotion of the gallery and its aims, Low wrote:

The idea is to make it smart, efficient and suitable for showing modern painting to advantage as distinct from the present mausoleum-like institutions we have here.¹⁶

Low used the marketing skills she had picked up at Glasgow Unity Theatre to promote the New Charing Cross Gallery:

I took on the task of attending to all the publicity which took hours of writing – several BBC programmes, TV, newspapers, invitation cards, catalogues, curtains, wine and raising a few donations.¹⁷

The gallery exhibited artists including, Anda Paterson (1935-2022), J.D. Fergusson, Neil Dallas Brown (1938-2003), Cecil King (1921-1986), Joan Eardley, Scottie Wilson (1891-1972), Benno Schotz (1891-1984), Tom Macdonald, Low herself and fellow director Taylor.

In her book *Social Sculpture* (1997), Sarah Lowndes notes that both the New Charing Cross Gallery (1963-68) and subsequently the Compass Gallery, set up by Gerber, at the conclusion of New Charing Cross Gallery, had the main remit of *'extend[ing] the audience and market for art within Scotland'*.¹⁸ The scope of the sales is noted in the final newsletter (5.9.68) when the gallery had to close due to the property being closed:

Numerous young painters have had their first exhibition with us and have been particularly delighted to sell some of their works to the Scottish Arts Council ... and other important bodies to have purchased from the gallery include the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow University, Abbot Hall Gallery Kendal, and the National Galleries of Malaysia.¹⁹

14. From an interview 29/2/23 with Andrew Parkinson and Jenny Brownrigg. John Taylor said: 'Bet and Tom knew Cyril and Betty Gerber. Cyril was already and avid collector. He came to the opening and Bet and John invited him to join.' However, an article by Emilio Coia (1911-1997) from 1969, suggests that Gerber had equal involvement in co-founding New Charing Cross Gallery. In 'Compass points the way' 15 March, 1969 he writes: 'When the New Charing Cross Gallery opened in 1963, Bet Low, John Taylor and Cyril Gerber were the most active and enthusiastic directors, but it is true to say towards the end of its existence Mr Gerber was almost solely responsible for its admin.' A Glasgow Herald, 30 April 1990 article 'Saint Cyril the Eclectic', states: *'...the man himself is a study in engaging modesty. I didn't do this all on my own. There was Johnny Taylor, Bet Low - a whole host of others.'* He is speaking of the opening of the New Charing Cross Gallery in 1963 - his first venture after a long career in the family business into gallery running.'

15. 1968, newsletter to gallery friends, reporting the closure of the gallery. Acc. 12177/1, National Library of Scotland.

16. Acc. 12177/1, National Library of Scotland (unpaginated).

17. *Ibid.*

18. Lowndes, Sarah, 35. *'Social Sculpture: Art, Performance and Music in Glasgow: A Social History of Independent Practice, Exhibitions and Events Since 1971'*, StopStop, 2003.

19. Acc. 12177/1, National Library of Scotland.

The move from city to landscape

Whilst the 1940s had been a vital time for Low, at the conclusion of the war, the exodus from Glasgow in the post-war period led to Low experiencing the early 1950s as:

*...the most depressing time in Glasgow ...[the] entire lot of everyone went to London. All these people vanished. And the '50s were the dearest, dullest, awful time.*²⁰

Moving from images of grimy, industrial-smog-laden Glasgow, studies of rural landscapes began to appear in Low's work from 1949 onwards. Cordelia Oliver describes this shift of subject matter initially resulting from the short visits Low made out of the city to Lendalfoot, a small village in South Ayrshire, and to her friends Marion and Ian Hamilton Finlay in Comrie.

Cordelia Oliver identified a 'study in landscape abstraction' made at Lendalfoot during this period, as a 'seed of abstraction'²¹ leading to a series of abstract gouaches and oil paintings during the 1960s. Given the linear nature of the earlier works, there are still lines in these paintings yet they operate on these surfaces as contrasting movement of water at different depths, broken shadow and light refraction. Works such as 'Merge and Emerge' (1961) and 'Water and Stones' (1961), take inspiration from the interplay of surface and depth in a stream.

Low's abstract works are often experimental in colourways, ranging from yellow ochres and oranges to purples, greens and blues, as in 'Estuary' (c. 1966), a study in blue and black signifies dark, fast-moving water. However, 'Green Place' (1962) signifies somewhere perhaps more inland, where the water is far more languid and tranquil. Towards the end of this phase, the passages of movement distil into one jagged band that morphs across the width of the paper, board or canvas. In 'Northern Water II', a white disc, like a sun on a broken horizon is perceptible.

A typed overview from University of Glasgow Special Collections, entitled 'Studio Exhibition June 1962, Bet Low, Gouache and Oil Paintings', describes the aim of this body of work, marking a departure for Low:

*These abstract paintings are constructed from the elements in Nature – Water, Stone, Light, Movement etc. Their intent is the mood and atmosphere of Nature, not its representation.*²²

The importance of these abstract works is that they form an important period of freedom to experiment for Low as she sought to find her own style. They act as a bridging phase between the earlier, bustling studies of the city and the later, pared back landscape paintings.



Image: *Untitled*, 1961, Oil on Board, Bet Low.
Courtesy of The Glasgow School of Art
© Bet Low Trust

20. An extract from an interview with Bet Low, 16.1.2022.
Denis Agnew: from his Living Record Archive.

21. Oliver, Cordelia, 6. *Bet Low: Paintings and Drawings 1945-1985*. Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1985.

22. MS Gen I764/C/5/3, University of Glasgow Special Collections.

Orkney

While Glasgow was to remain home, Low and Macdonald bought a small cottage in Lyness, Hoy, in 1967. Lyness had been a former Royal Military Base in both world wars. Clare Henry writes in her catalogue essay for Bet Low, at Billcliffe Fine Art Glasgow in 1995:

*... Low's introduction to Hoy in 1967 was initially disappointing. "We bought our cottage sight unseen because it was cheap. We sailed across the Flow from Kirkwall on a desperately grey day, and nobody had told me about the great ugly oil tanks and the wee wartime black huts that appeared as we got near Hoy. Our hearts sank. But we'd no sooner landed than everything miraculously changed. It was all that space, wonderful light and tremendous vast open sky."*²³

Cordelia Oliver further transcribes Low's response to Orkney as follows:

*If you went up the hill behind the house you could stand there at the centre of Hoy and you could turn full circle and see right up to the northern isles and right down to Scotland. My one regret was that I could never paint that experience. It was like a living cyclorama.*²⁴

Whilst Low felt she never captured this 360-degree view, this sustained relationship to place had a great impact on her practice. Low moved on to develop a unique style of figurative landscape painting and understanding of colour: reducing land, sea, sky and weather to simple elements that define a particular moment. The abstract close-ups of water, movement and shapes that she had focused on in the early 1960s offer an important bridge into the simplicity of the long view that Low experienced on Hoy: of landmasses meeting sea and sky.

Significant works from this period, gifted by the artist to the Pier Arts Centre in 1995, are 'Calm Water at Mill Bay (Hoy)' (1972), 'Red Rysa' (1970s) and 'In the Hoy Hills (Orkney)' (1977). The works admirably illustrate Low's ability to capture the phenomenon of particular fleeting conditions of day or night, and the manner of how light falls on land or sea. In 'Calm Water at Mill Bay (Hoy)' (1972), the use of gold leaf for the column of moonlight on water makes this work feel monumental. The flat, grey curved shape of the hills is mirrored as the reflection on the sea.

On a corresponding sketch for 'Red Rysa', Low notes the bands of colour that make up the composition: 'soft pale blue grey sky', 'hill deeper blue grey/ centre of hills pale soft greyish green/ Rysa darkest... Indian red or Venetian red/ silvery sea is palest.' 'In the Hoy Hills (Orkney)' (1977) gives weight to such a landmass, through a colour palette that renders the nearest shoulder of the hill the darkest. The light and rain flickers on the receding flanks of hills.

The method Low developed as part of the preparatory process was to notate particular views visually in sketch form, with written notes directly onto the drawings, often recording colour, composition and time of day. As well as paper from sketch books, drawings could be on the back of old invitations from the New Charing Cross Gallery or the reverse of the gallery Terms and Conditions. On an invitation for a William Crozier exhibition, Low notes: 'On road to Stromness. First views of Hoy Hills.'

Describing Low's methodology, Cordelia Oliver called her sketches a 'form of visual note-taking ... for the winter's work in her Glasgow studio.'²⁵ Many of these sketches, mostly in pencil, with a few as follow-up gouache or watercolour paintings, are held by University of Glasgow Special Collections and The Bet Low Trust.

The notes sometimes contain a reference to a painting technique:

*Foggy night - 1 August - All very soft misty colours - all tones of misty grey, merging, no details. Dove grey - bluish hills, lower ones towards water slightly darker, more greenish grey, as with darker strips of water. Brightest part, except for sun, is long straight strip of water at shore edge - pale, bright, silvery grey white dividing picture in two. Strip of sun brilliant gold/orange like moonlight on water. Soft and frosted when it is on light strip only. Except for sun - all picture frosted over - a pale milky grey.*²⁶

Regarding their shared choice of geographical location, Orkney, Low's work can be compared to that of Orcadian filmmaker, Margaret Tait (1918-1999). Their connection is seen most clearly through their process rather than final work. Low writes in her private visual note-taking, used as an aide-memoire for later studio paintings, 'Light rushes against blue water'²⁷ whilst Tait notes in Orquill Burn (1955) '... the everlasting dance and music of the water itself/are the stars.'²⁸

23. DC 050/115 Folder 1995. Clare Henry papers, The Glasgow School of Art Archives and Collections. 25 Mar 1995, Clare Henry essay for exhibition catalogue Bet Low, Billcliffe Fine Art Glasgow.

24. Low, quoted in Oliver, Bet Low Paintings and Drawings 1945-1985, II.

25. Oliver, Bet Low: Paintings and Drawings 1945-1985, 10.

26. MS Gen I764/C/5/5, University of Glasgow Special Collections.

27. MS Gen I764/C/5/2], University of Glasgow Special Collections.

28. Tait, Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings, 126. Neely, Sarah (ed.), Margaret Tait, Poems, Stories and Writings. Carcanet Press, 2012.



Image: **Calm Water (at Mill Bay, Hoy)** 1974, oil and gold leaf on board, Bet Low.
Photograph Alistair Peebles
Courtesy of the Pier Arts Centre, Stromness
© Bet Low Trust

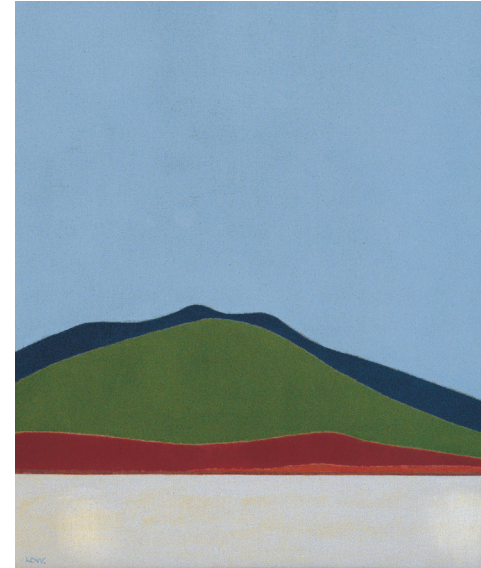


Image: **Red Rysa**, c.1970s, oil on paper, Bet Low.
Photograph: Alistair Peebles
Courtesy of the Pier Arts Centre, Stromness
© Bet Low Trust



Image: **In the Hoy Hills (Orkney)**, 1977, oil on canvas, Bet Low.
Photograph: Alistair Peebles
Courtesy of the Pier Arts Centre, Stromness
© Bet Low Trust

Post-Orkney work

Low's later pencil drawings captured light itself, such as sun cutting through mist or silhouettes of landmasses emerging through fog. *'Moon Over Wood'* (undated) shows the artist's confident execution and style enabling her to render light coming through cloud. The work reverberates, using the ground of the white paper as the moon itself, 'shining' between close-set, repetitive, downward pencil strokes. Slight changes in pressure on the pencil create heavier areas of the trees, amalgamating into darkness in the foreground of the composition. The suggestion of individual trees is made through the slightest variance of direction in chosen line of their uniform branches. The simplicity of the two elements in *'Moon and Clouds'* (undated), from North Lanarkshire Council Collection, becomes a complex study through Low's handling. The intensity of the orbs of light around the moon are represented in decreasing gradient as they travel out through the cloud. This later work has an almost spiritual feel to it.



Image: *Moon and Clouds*, undated, pencil drawing, Bet Low.
Courtesy of North Lanarkshire Council, Museums & Collections
© Bet Low Trust

Recognition and Critical Support

During her lifetime, Low's work was acquired for both public and private collections. The Scottish Arts Council (SAC) collection was begun in the 1950s, through the Arts Council of Britain Scottish Committee. It was then dispersed in 1996, through a collecting initiative, to Scottish museums and galleries, which saw several of Low's works from the SAC collection gifted to Orkney Islands Council. In 2011 SAC gifted 'Eyam Edge' to the Pier Arts Centre.²⁹ The library tickets are still on the back of some works in the North Lanarkshire Council Collection, illustrating the loans were also on a far more democratic level to people's homes.

Whilst Low's carefully sustained and grew her own links to national media particularly during the New Charing Cross tenure, the support of her friend, artist and critic Cordelia Oliver cannot be underestimated. Oliver wrote about Low's work over the trajectory of her career, in particular, for the Glasgow Herald and The Guardian. She also curated Low's work in three significant exhibitions. This included two group exhibitions in 1978 'Painters in Parallel' and 'Crawford and Company'. Oliver then curated Low's 1985 retrospective at the Third Eye Gallery 'Bet Low: Paintings and Drawings: 1945-1985', which was to tour to Gracefield Arts Centre, Dumfries, Perth Art Gallery, and the Pier Arts Centre, Orkney the following year. The latter remains the most comprehensive exhibition and catalogue of Low's work in her lifetime and marked a level of national recognition and achievement.

Indeed, she was the only woman artist with a solo exhibition in 1985 at the Third Eye Centre.

Low was also championed by Cyril Gerber, who went on to set up the Compass Gallery in 1969 after the New Charing Cross Gallery closed. Low had several solo shows through Cyril Gerber Fine Art, including 'The Forties, Glasgow People and Places: Drawings and Paintings, Tom Macdonald & Bet Low' (1984).

Her work had first been categorised as key in Scottish painting in 1995, with Sandy Moffat's (b.1943) wide-ranging selection for 'The Continuing Tradition: 75 Years of Painting at Glasgow School of Art' that took place in the museum and studios of the Mackintosh Building on the occasion of The Glasgow School of Art's one hundred and fiftieth anniversary. Moffat, Head of Painting and Printmaking at The Glasgow School of Art from 1980 to 2005, was a key figure in the resurgence of figurative painting in Scotland in the 1980s.

Low achieved limited international visibility of her work during her lifetime, mostly through exhibition surveys of Scottish art, such as the 1971 exhibition in Nice, 'L'Ecosse, la femme et l'art' or 'Contemporary Scottish Art', which toured Denmark in 1981. She was particularly proud of a 1954 international exhibition of Drawings and Prints in Warsaw, where she was one of only two artists (the other Tom Macdonald) from Scotland to have work in such a context.

Although Low was working outside an institutional context, in 1964 she was elected a Professional Member of the Society of Scottish Artists and also an invited Professional Member of the Scottish Society of Women Artists. She was elected an Associate of the Royal Scottish Academician in 1988 and made a Royal Scottish Academy Academician in 2005. In 1999 Low was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters from Glasgow University. Bet Low died at the age of 82 in Glasgow.

Low's legacy

Reminiscent of her aims of supporting artists in her earlier career with New Charing Cross Gallery, in 1994 Low established the Bet Low Trust, with the help of Kenny MacKenzie, which awards grants to artists in drawing and painting in Scotland. Low's work continues to be shown by Compass Gallery. Following her death in 2007, Low's work has been selected for several survey shows, primarily within the curatorial thematic of women artists in Scotland, by curators including Liz Arthur, Alice Strang and Sarah Lowndes. The numerous collections of her work in Scotland have also utilised it as part of larger exhibitions including the group show, 'Inside Landscape' (2023), curated by Kari Adams at the Pier Arts Centre, Orkney, selecting work by Low and others from their collection including Winifred Nicolson (1893-1981), Sylvia Wishart (1936-2008) and Margaret Tait.

Her work has been increasingly recognised by, or read in conjunction with, a later generation of artists, such as Karla Black at Inverleith House, Edinburgh (2010), and 'Lowlands' (2021) a group show by the Lowlands Artists Collective at Oxford House, Glasgow, with support from the Bet Low Trust. Lowlands are eight artists based in Glasgow, Fife and Finland: Andreas Behn-Eschenburg, Rachel Duckhouse, Claire Forsyth, Alistair Gow, Abigale Neate-Wilson, Bronwen Sleight, Karen L. Vaughan and Alasdair Wallace. Low's work is also amplified by the scholar Hildegard Berwick. These new connections, by creating a discursive visual space between works, begin to engage with the content of Low's paintings and her methods, moving her work beyond the category of being simply an, albeit latterly, overlooked Scottish woman painter.

Conclusion

Given Low's centenary, 'An Island On your Doorstep' aims to show the range of Low's work through early, abstract and formal landscape periods. The evolving synthesis of Low's work, to its essential components, is perhaps best echoed in tracking her name across her early identity papers and Unity Theatre Glasgow membership card. Elizabeth - Betty - Bet. A revisiting and reduction of name, until it settles in sound, intention and attention: Bet Low. In conclusion, Low's stripped-back aesthetic increasingly holds a connection to and relevance for a later generation of artists, curators and researchers working today.

29. The Scottish Committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain devolved to become the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) in 1967. SAC leased the Lady Artist's Club gallery, Glasgow, for exhibitions, of which 'New Painting in Glasgow 1940-46, 1968, was one.

This essay has been revised from *Bet Low - An Active Career*. Brownrigg, J. (2020). *Visual Culture in Britain*, 21 (1). pp. 57-72. ISSN 1471-4787.

Biography

Bet Low RSA RSW RGI D.Lit.

Bet Low was born in Gourrock in 1924.

She attended The Glasgow School of Art (1942-45), during the period of the Second World War, gaining a diploma in Drawing and Painting. In 1945, Low undertook a three-month diploma course at Patrick Allan-Fraser School of Art, Hospitalfield, Arbroath. Low attended teacher training at Glasgow's Jordanhill Training College in 1945. However, she did not wish to teach and left the course and become involved in Glasgow Unity Theatre. She helped paint set scenery, and assisted with occasional set design and publicity.

In 1946 she joined the Clyde Group of Writers and Artists, going on to be part of their 'Art and Peace Festival and Exhibition' in McLellan Galleries, Glasgow. In 1956, with her husband Tom Macdonald and others, she co-organised a series of open-air exhibitions on the railings of Glasgow's Botanic Gardens. She joined the Glasgow Group Society in the mid-1960s, taking part in many of its exhibitions. In 1963 she co-founded and was one of the directors of the New Charing Cross Gallery in Glasgow (1963-1968). Low was elected a Professional Member of the Society of Scottish Artists in 1964 and was an invited Professional Member of the Scottish Society of Women Artists.

Whilst Glasgow was to remain home, in 1967 Low and Macdonald bought a small cottage in Lyness, Hoy (Orkney). This sustained relationship with place had a great impact on her practice. Low had several solo shows through Cyril Gerber Fine Art, including *'The Forties, Glasgow People and Places: Drawings and Paintings, Tom Macdonald & Bet Low'* (1984). In 1985 she had a significant retrospective, selected by Cordelia Oliver, at the Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, which toured Scotland to Dumfries, Perth and the Pier Arts Centre, Orkney. Her work was acquired for both public and private collections in her lifetime. Low was elected an Associate of the Royal Scottish Academician in 1988 and made a Royal Scottish Academy Academician in 2005. In 1999 she was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters from Glasgow University.

Bet Low died at the age of 82 in Glasgow.

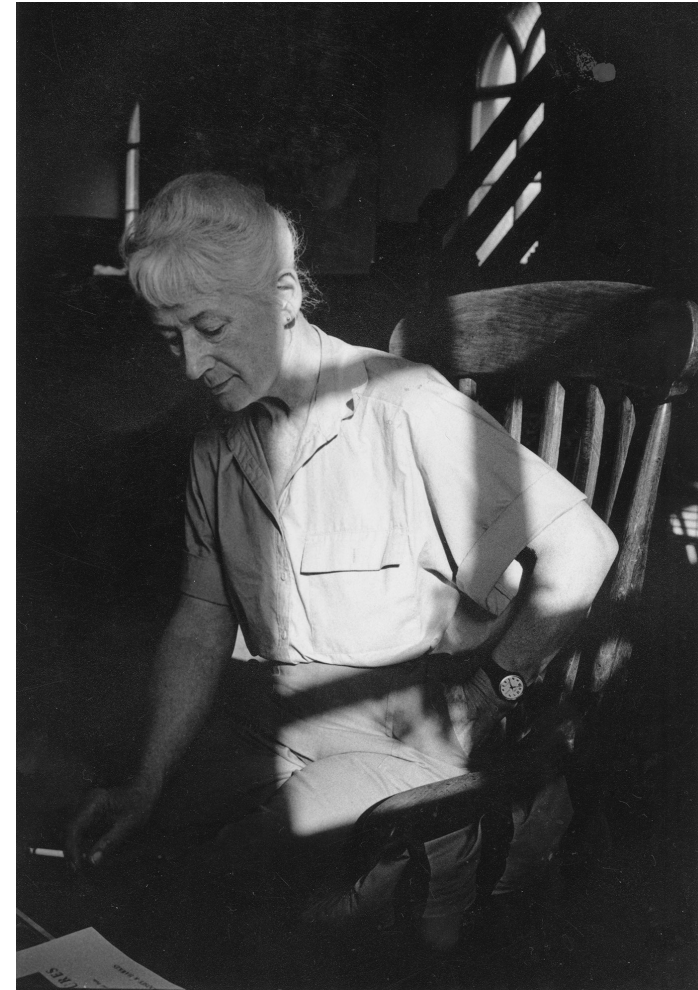


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