

Mary Potter *A Transformative Vision 1960-80*



Mary Potter *Grasses and Shadows*, 1973 Oil on canvas

An exhibition of late paintings by Mary Potter

Opening 1 June 2024 at Roche Court Sculpture Park

The New Art Centre at Roche Court Sculpture Park opens its summer programme with an exhibition of paintings by Mary Potter (1900-1981). The exhibiting works were all created whilst Mary was living in Aldeburgh and focus on her paintings from the 1960-1980s. The opening of the exhibition coincides with the 75th year of the Aldeburgh Festival founded by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, and it remains one of the most well-known music festivals in Britain.

Fragments of the external world appear in these late works, even though the predominant move is clearly towards abstraction. When the Tate Gallery acquired her *Bonfire* painting in 1974, she was asked to comment on the picture. 'It is certainly not meant to be representational,' she wrote, adding, 'I haven't been that for a great many years.' Yet a tiny

stick-like figure of a man can be detected in one corner and the main shapes that fill the rest of the picture relate to her sighting of the bonfire a gardener was making among nearby pine trees. She noted: 'As the smoke goes in clouds through the trees, they are crossed with paler transparent passages, which is very beautiful...'

There are many influences that assisted Mary Potter's arrival at her late style, but it was Paul Klee who above all helped her find a method of representation that freed her from logical, or too literal, representation. She kept a segment of a book on Klee in which the author quoted a passage from his diary, where he refers to a lecture he had given at the Bauhaus. His main concern had been to elucidate the part played by the associative elements in art. He showed, by pointing to his own work, how associations had brought into existence a conceptual imagination capable of creating new worlds or variations on the existing world, as well as greater mobility and flexibility.

Similarly in Mary Potter's late work we have the sense that whatever the starting point, the artist has gone further, moved beyond it. It is as if she is looking for something hidden, also more real than the multiplicity of impressions surrounding us.

It is often observed that the Suffolk coast and its light also fed into her work. But so too did her friendship with Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. Because Pears's growing renown as a singer required him to travel a great deal, it was Britten she saw most. They had similar working patterns, both welcoming conversation and a drink at the end of the day, when Mary Potter was living in the Red Studio. This was built for Mary by Britten and Pears in the grounds of their own house and designed by Peter Collymore.

In 1964 Bryan Robertson, then Director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, offered her a solo exhibition in the gallery. He wanted to see her vein of painting attain its right scale, and he encouraged her to increase the size of her canvases. Her show was preceded by an extraordinary list of exhibitions that changed the British art scene. They included Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Barbara Hepworth. The exhibition was followed immediately after by Jasper Johns and Lee Krasner. Mary Potter's standing in post-war art was significant.

Kenneth Clark introduced Mary Potter to the New Art Centre when it was in Sloane Street, London in the mid-1960s. Clark, himself, was a founder-patron of the New Art Centre and set up by Madeleine Ponsonby and Caryl Hubbard in 1959. Caryl had assisted him with his book, *The Nude*. The gallery took over responsibility for Mary Potter's art at a good moment in her career: soon after her exhibition at the Whitechapel. Mary's first exhibition with the New Art Centre was mounted in May 1967. Twelve further solo exhibitions followed during the artist's lifetime, widening her audience, to such an extent that her final exhibition, in 1981, organised by the Arts Council at the Serpentine Gallery, was a signal success, with an audience that came close to 25,000 people.

Of the 2024 exhibition Madeleine Bessborough, Founder and Director of the New Art Centre comments *"It seems the right time to return to some of the roots of the New Art Centre. Mary Potter regularly had exhibitions with us in Sloane Street, thirteen in total. She always used a chalky surface to her pictures, which gave them their beauty and glowing qualities.*

We are now delighted to be able to put together this group of her work in the galleries here at the Sculpture Park, where they echo so much of the mantra of learning to look, think and speak, the essence of our Education Trust, which is such an important part of Roche Court Sculpture Park and we believe that this exhibition will give pleasure to a new generation."

Notes to Editors:

About the New Art Centre

The New Art Centre was established in London in 1958.

In 1994, the gallery moved from London to Roche Court, East Winterslow in Wiltshire.

The New Art Centre, Roche Court Sculpture Park is set in the Wiltshire countryside near Salisbury. Works of art and sculpture are sited in the woodland, park and gardens.

Further works including contemporary painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics and textiles are exhibited in award-winning contemporary spaces: the Gallery, Artists' House and Design House and all were designed by the architect Stephen Marshall.

The Roche Court Gallery project was awarded the RIBA Stephen Lawrence Award in 1999, as well as AIA, three Civic Trust awards for The Gallery, Artists' House and Design House.