



The Scottish Contemporary Art Auction

Sun, 29th May 2022

Viewing:

Thursday 26th - 9am-5pm
 Friday 27th - 9am-5pm
 Saturday 28th - 9.30am-12pm
 Sunday 29th - 11am-12pm

Lot 65

Estimate: £10000 - £15000 + Fees

THE FINNON SMOKER, A LARGE 1965 OIL ON BOARD BY JOHN BELLANY

* JOHN BELLANY CBE RA HRSA (SCOTTISH 1942 - 2013),
 THE FINNON SMOKER

oil on board, signed, further signed verso
 image size 183cm x 122cm, overall size 186cm x 125cm
 Framed.

Provenance: Acquired at the railings outside the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh during John Bellany's outdoor protest exhibition with Alexander Moffat during the 19th Edinburgh International Festival in 1965. See additional images.

Note: It is extraordinary to contemplate that Bellany was only in his early twenties (22/23) when he painted these exceptional works about which London Standard art critic Brian Sewell later commented "... in the 1960s (Bellany) painted such pictures as to make us think him as a painter with Rembrandt". The Bellany/Moffat outdoor exhibition was a watershed for Scottish art in two ways: they proved that it existed, and they showed the way for a radical new direction. The works included "Allegory", later acquired by the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, "The Gospel Spreaders" "The Finnon Smoker" and only six other stunning tableaux, now mostly in public collections. "We were rebellious characters," remembers Moffat. "That was the period when our generation did make a stand. There was very little representation of Scottish art at the festival ... (we thought] if we can't get in the official festival, we'll put it into the streets. Scottish art didn't really exist. It existed in the studios of Edinburgh College of Art, but it didn't exist in the arts establishment, which was completely Anglicised, I believe. There has been an enormous sea-change. It's almost impossible to measure, but I think we had a hand in the beginning of that, the turn of the tide." The works were hammered together on Rose Street (where Bellany lived) before they put them up on the railings; the nail holes can still be seen. "They were mighty things, we could hardly carry them," says Moffat. "They were so big, they had to be painted in parts. You are talking about his early masterpieces ... they are priceless. It meant Port Seton, it meant fishermen, it meant working people – that had never been painted before. People had painted fishing boats, but nobody had ever painted about the life of people who did the fishing. That was John's fantastic contribution. "His place in Scottish art is defined by the Port Seton thing. That's really his life's work, the way he has mythologised the life of the fisherman. The fears, the spirit, the whole thing, the way he found the special imagery, that had never been done before, to say all those things – that puts him into the history books forever." Keith Hartley, senior curator at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, agrees. "What he was doing in the

mid-1960s in many ways changed the course of Scottish painting. It was like a manifesto: I don't want to do paintings for Edinburgh drawing rooms, I want to do something which moves people, about ordinary people's lives. It was very much a protest." John Bellany's very early work is highly prized by collectors and their appearances at auction are ever rarer. The "railings paintings" are the holy grail to Bellany purists and so far as we can ascertain, "The Finnon Smoker" is the first with documented provenance to be offered at auction anywhere for many years. Fresh to the market, never loaned or exhibited since 1965, the same family collection and completely in original condition. The frame is "basic" and has splashes of paint on it. The nails show through in places and thankfully, the owners have never reframed it or had it restored in any way. The frame and the nail holes are part of DNA of "The Finnon Smoker" and fundamentally, it's exactly how John Bellany painted it, exactly as he framed it and exactly how he exhibited it against the railings outside the Royal Scottish Academy in 1965.