

Hella Bailin Visceral Impressions

Chosen from an archive of more than two thousand oil paintings, watercolors and drawings, this is the first comprehensive exhibition of Hella Bailin's artwork since her passing in 2006. Held at the Kean University Art Gallery from February 7, 2007 to March 9, 2007, it is indeed the first time her artwork is being shown without her personal input. One can imagine the transformation as these paintings now have to live on their own. The artist no longer can influence the way her own work is perceived. It is the object or painting that causes us to respond. To Hella Bailin's credit, the work is now free to speak for itself and it is a privilege to begin the dialog with this exhibition.



Hella Bailin in her studio c. 1960

As curator, I had a very unusual opportunity, to encounter Hella Bailin's personal collection of works created over a lifetime. Additionally, to ponder the many pieces that were sold, given away or perhaps lost or even destroyed is an interesting process as well. When choosing this show I had the liberty to indulge myself, perhaps connecting with works that had been neglected for decades. I will never know which pieces were her favorites, which pieces she thought might sell or which pieces were made in the truest moments when the artist creates out of the very essence of who they are — moments when self-consciousness is replaced with connection — connection with the greater world, connection with the greater scope of humanness. Bailin knew those moments and captured them most effectively on the small sheets of watercolor paper, and in her sketchbooks in distant lands. Looking at these works you sense the visceral nature of her work. She was in the moment, creating a connection not making a memory. You can imagine her hair blowing in the wind as she quickly touched brush to paper and liquid color. So effectively she brings us to that moment of creativity, capturing the world that many of us will not take time to engage.

Hella Bailin said of herself — "Influenced by my surroundings, I draw most of the subject matter from humankind, conveying their moods, feelings and anxieties to the viewer without prejudice or sentimentality, portraying people of all ranks and ages in their environment, depicting their activities at work and play."

Bailin exhibited her work extensively in the region winning over 100 awards. She showed many times in New York City at the National Academy of Design, the National Arts Club, and the Lever House. Bailin was a member of many organizations including the National Association of Women Artists, the Audubon Artists, the American Watercolor Society, and the Allied Artists of America. In addition, her work was shown in museums throughout New Jersey including the State Museum in Trenton, the Morris Museum, the Monmouth Museum and the Montclair Art Museum. Hella Bailin also applied her artistic skills to the illustration of children's books, and was known for teaching drawing and painting classes and leading workshops.

For most of her life Hella Bailin lived very near what is today, the Kean University campus. She was a beloved member of the community and even taught some classes in the art department. Her influence is felt to this day as people smile and grin at the mere mention of her name. Hella Bailin's paintings hang at Kean Hall in the President's office. These particular images depict the Kean family estate when it was still a farm, before anyone had thought the property would one day become the site of a leading institution of higher learning. With such artworks we are politely reminded of our place in history and the continuum of life.

I want to thank the Bailin family for making this exhibition possible. Son Michael, and daughter, Bobbi, generously opened their personal space and made all 39 works in the exhibition available to loan for this show. Sarah Bailin, granddaughter, whose many months of organizing, cataloging, photographing and preserving the family collection represent an amazing effort. Many thanks to the President of Kean University, Dr. Dawood Farahi, the Provost, Dr. Vinton Thomson and the Dean of the School of Visual and Performing Arts, Dr. Carole Shaffer-Koros. We appreciate their support for the growing exhibition program and the opportunity to investigate the work and career of Hella Bailin.

Professor Neil Tetkowski
Director of University Galleries



Hella Bailin c. 1960



Balconies date unknown

Watercolor 11" x 8"

"I draw most of the subject matter from humankind, conveying their moods, feelings and anxieties to the viewer without prejudice or sentimentality, portraying people of all ranks and ages in their environment, depicting their activities at work and play." - Hella Bailin

Cover: People, c.1983, Watercolor 15" x 23"



Hella Bailin
KEAN UNIVERSITY

Hella Bailin Arc of an Artist

Hella Bailin's life (1915-2006) spanned major periods of upheaval in art history. Through cubism and expressionism, surrealism to social realism, Bailin's art absorbed the influences from those modern movements and shaped her unique imagery.

Born in Germany, Bailin studied at the Reiman School and the Art Academy in Berlin (1933-36). Leaving Nazi Germany in 1937, she immigrated to the United States. In New Jersey, Bailin trained under John Grabach at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial

Arts as well as Bernard Gussow (1881-1957) and Stanley Turnbull (1896-1986).

As a teacher of painting and drawing, Bailin enthusiastically passed on the knowledge she acquired from so many sources to her hundreds of students over five decades. Bailin's rigorous but gentle approach to painting — its visual language and formal properties — made her one of the most inspiring art teachers in New Jersey.

The artist's restlessness is clearly made visible in this exhibition. Bailin's work forms a record of the sheer immediacy of the highly personal visual experience that exists both before her and within her. Her flickering, broad brush-

strokes and inventive use of color are put into the service of expressing her inner unique dialogue to the viewer.

One of the artist's earliest works in this exhibition was executed under the tutelage of the American painter John Grabach (1886-1981). Grabach studied under the academician Kenyon Cox (1856-1919), and absorbed his mentor's lessons, using a painterly approach to convey the solidity of the figure.

The influence of Grabach's style and color is present in *Portrait of a Man* (c. 1955). Expressionistic in the application of paint and subdued in a palette that reflects back to those raw emotions from the Great Depression, the figure's attitude is evident in his crumpled demeanor and weariness. Bailin achieves a sympathetic and complex psychological portrait of one man's meditation on exhaustion.

Newark Rooftops (1948) is a noteworthy painting from this period. The work's high vantage point, strong contrasting shadows and

radiating light achieve the equilibrium of quiet. The influence of Edward Hopper (1882-1967) is clearly evidenced in the picture, and there also is a strong connection in iconography to the nineteenth century French realist Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) — and to Bailin the realist.

In Courbet's monumental *Burial at Ornans* (1850), the artist positions the crucifix above the horizon, symbolizing the heavenly above the mortal. In Bailin's painting, the same crucifix is depicted with the period architecture, in the realm of the worldly, of the here and now.

In speaking of her art, Bailin said, "I am considered an expressionist painter... capturing the fleeting moments of people and sharing these pictorial documentations of our times." In *Hills of New Jersey* (c. 1955), Bailin's expressionistic vision is infused with the color of Fauvism — the invented and expressive use of color by a group of artists led by Henri Matisse (1869-1954) begun in 1905 — and the knitted structure of post-impressionist Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). High-keyed hues and swift brushstrokes are liberated from their natural forms. The figure is seen at a distance, as just one part of the composition, drawing from the colors of Matisse and the construction of Cézanne.

Bailin is keenly aware of Cézanne's use of passage — objects or forms "sliding" into one another to indicate an immediacy of vision in time and space. Legitimized by the Fauve Matisse, the dissonant, aggressive color that we are accustomed to is applied by Bailin with a sense of urgency, to quickly commit it to canvas, its ephemeral qualities frozen.



Industry 1997 Mixed Watercolor 16" x 22"

A similar post-impressionist style is found in several paintings of a village on a precipice in Ronda, Spain. A prime example from that series is *Iberian Landscape* (1985).

In this picture the dwellings are perched upon the steep cliffs like sculptures on a rocky pedestal, facades bleached in the strong Mediterranean light in contrast to the orange ceramic barrel roof tiles.

In her search for the exotic, Hella Bailin made many wide ranging journeys, including twenty-nine trips to Greece where she created a studio and home on the island of Hydra. Though her love for her family was unwavering, Bailin left them each summer to pursue her need for exotic subject matter and intense light in her art; not only to Greece, but to the south of France, Spain, and Portugal. There were travels to South and Central America, Mexico, Haiti, China, Tibet, India, Iran, and Eastern Europe — forty-nine countries in all. It was Bailin's unrelenting drive to know the world and its people and to translate those far-reaching experiences into art.

Like Van Gogh's and Matisse's excursions to the south of France



Wash Day c.1970 Oil 15" x 29"

before her, the change of scenery to foreign locales provoked a transformation in the perception and use of color. Bailin's palette became brighter and more intense, due to the strong Mediterranean and Aegean light, and she learned to fashion her own vision from the examples set by her predecessors.

Though expressionistic in style, Bailin was a realist by nature, painting the modern world around her. For example, in *People* (Telephone Booths, 1983), Bailin confronts the viewer with five figures, three of which are in various stages of chatting on the phone. One can liken the tableau to a modern version of a Hellenistic Greek relief with the figures in various stages of leaning in and out overlapping the "niche" of the phone booth. The forms and figures are heightened by intense orange strokes and swipes at motion and modernity. Bailin said of this painting "The constant change of people in and out of telephone booths were instrumental for many of my paintings...I always look for movement in a composition..."

A similar sense of the role of genre paintings is found in *Wash Day* (c. 1970). Eschewing phone booths for a Mediterranean-like



Gathering date unknown Watercolor 12" x 18"

arcade, Bailin achieves a comparable sense of animation from observation, of the locomotion of the everyday, commonplace subjects that are the hallmark of realist painters.

By stripping away the grid of the phone booths and the architectonic movement of the *Wash Day*, Bailin liberates the figure in *Untitled* (Study of Woman in Motion, c. 1948-55). The sense of unbounded joy and liberation from a site-specific place to this neutral, unbounded space is palpable — much like *Matisse's Dance* (1910) unfurled.

Bailin sought out a variety of different subjects on her annual return to the States. The urban landscape, once the source of powerful and proud images of a nation in the first half of the twentieth century, were portrayed by others as desolated and emptied of function — a stage set for a failed utopian vision.

But in *Industry* (1997), Bailin's vision challenges the landscape of despair, contradicting desolation with brilliant color. The picture achieves a monumental quality by pushing back and up the elevator towers into a fiery orange/vermillion, as the workers below list and sway.

Vermillion is also a key visual element in the watercolor *Burgos* (House at End of Block, 1962). The sensuousness of the brushstroke belies the subject matter. Through the use of shape and color, the building takes on an element of portraiture as it dominates a landscape of loneliness.

Another notable group portrait is found in *Waiting Room* (c. 1980). Figures are slumped and static, emotionally exhausted. Their visual "weight" is reflected in their "wait" — the weariness within a non-descript medical office is realized psychologically by the drained color.

Bailin's aquarelles were worked *sur la motif* (in front of the

subject), producing drawings and watercolors with spontaneity and freshness found in artists that one finds in the modern movement. The tradition of *plein air* (working out doors) became the impetus that gave birth to modernity that has been in play since the Barbizon artists such as Jean Francois Millet (1814-1875) and Theodore Rousseau (1812-1867) and filtering through the impressionists Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Camille Pissarro (1830-1903).

There is the sense of joy in the clarity of light that extends to the artist's watercolor pictures of Greece — winding back alleys, arcades, and apartments. Complimentary, keyed-up colors, vivid shadows, and a glaring light infuse the paintings with the sensual qualities revealed by Bailin in those Aegean villages.

Many of Bailin's paintings and watercolors were inspired by her need to commit the visual pleasures encountered during her far reaching travels on to paper. She created a play of light and contrast and a vibrant, quick brushstroke that fills the paper with what Matisse described in his painting as a "joie d'vivre."

Hella Bailin's art brings us images of a modern world, a world of relentless motion and energy that is constantly in flux. Through dedication and discipline of her craft, Bailin's distinctive interpretations of the world of shared images embody one artist's recitation of visual poetry. Bailin gives us a new sense of the possibilities in the act of painting — a sense of the spiritual — that elevates her art to a visual triumph.

Professor Robert Yoskowitz
Art Historian



White Walls c. 1990 Watercolor 9" x 14"