



John Wells George Dannatt

A Small Selection of
**Paintings and
Constructions**

With some archival material
at Room 7

Southampton City Art Gallery
in conjunction with the
'St Ives School' Exhibition
April 20 – June 17 2007

I am grateful to Southampton City Art Gallery for allocating to me the individual space of Room 7 for the showing of work by myself and by John Wells during the currency of their St. Ives Painters Exhibition of April 20th to June 17th 2007, and I have to thank Curator Tim Craven and his acting Exhibitions Manager Clare Mitchell for their cooperation.

It would not have been possible for me to select the work without the constant assistance of Jacqueline Sarafopoulos colleague and Trustee; I owe her a double debt for taking over my initial draft for this catalogue, helping me to decide upon the reproductions, and negotiating the production with Summerhouse Graphic Design. I am grateful for the support of my wife, Ann in encouraging me to pursue the project. I thank too, Mandy Lita Schaller for her frequent help photographically.



John Wells b. London 1907, lived at Ditchling to 1921
Died Newlyn 2000
Frequent stays in West Penwith area and
Lived in Scilly Isles 1936 - 1945

George Dannatt b. London 1915
Frequent stays in West Penwith area from 1963
Lives at the Wiltshire/Dorset border

Throughout some thirty-seven years of close and rewarding friendship with John Wells George and Ann Dannatt shared many interests. There were frequent explorations via their car, and then by foot, of the sea-bounded landscapes between Newlyn at the South and St. Ives at the North of the peninsular, especially to remote almost "sacred" places known to Wells from his earlier bicycling days. Inevitably, there was much discussion of painting and painting procedures. Despite the urge and desire to pursue their artistic quests both Wells and Dannatt had spent long years in their respective professions – Wells as Doctor and Surgeon (Qualified University College and Hospital, 1930), Dannatt as Chartered Surveyor (Qualified College of Estate Management, 1940). These disciplines undoubtedly helped their artistic achievements.

This Room 7 exhibition is intended to give some idea of the search of two similarly motivated artists. Their quest was to achieve in paint and occasionally in constructions, something of the infinity of visual experience derived from that special West Penwith area. John Wells had learned much from Naum Gabo, from Ben Nicholson and from fellow artists of that genre so that he was, in turn, able to pass on much knowledge to George Dannatt; this he did with constant encouragement and belief in the latter's commitment to pursue his own path.

Illustrations:

Above: George Dannatt and John Wells after the opening of the George Dannatt, John Wells and Alexander Mackenzie Exhibition Newlyn Orion Gallery, 1975

Front cover: George Dannatt and John Wells in Wells's studio, 1975

Back cover: George Dannatt, Project for a large screen, 1972

We first met John Wells, my wife Ann and I, when Alex Mackenzie fellow artist and friend, took us to the house and studio which Wells, 'Johnny Wells' as he was generally known, was then occupying, formerly the home of Stanhope Forbes. Over the some thirty-five years of our enduring friendship we had many walks together and talks and discussions of a wide variety of subjects – talks on those walks, in his studio, once when he came to our home in London and, later to our house and my studio in Wiltshire. He gave me never to be forgotten encouragement and suggestions derived from the trained mind of a physician and surgeon who organised and built a hospital in the Scillies when he was Doctor there all through the war years, a trained mind which turned to the lyrical outpourings of his paintings. He liked to recount a conversation he once had with his great friend and constructivist artist Naum Gabo. Johnny had shown a recently completed painting to Gabo. Gabo asked him "are you satisfied with it"? Johnny hesitated and said "well, perhaps not entirely" (or words to that effect), "then", said Gabo "there is hope for you". I think that Johnny has always born that observation in mind as, indeed, I have in my own work. It might prove food for thought for many budding artists.

For close friends Johnny was in the habit of making and sending greetings cards for special occasions. Typical of the wording of his cards to us was, at Christmas 1977, "To George and Ann with great affection and fond wishes". Some of these small evocative prints can be seen in this Exhibition at Southampton City Art Gallery.

Although we often discussed technique I never really understood his in that respect – he called them 'multi-prints' and mentioned that they embraced both oil and watercolour, and I know that they were produced via a hand press. They, like so much of his work, especially that of before his move into more geometrical formats, have his own musical quality which truly makes them 'glow', and bear the unmistakable Wells stamp.



Illustrations:

Left: From left to right: John Wells, Ann Dannatt and George Dannatt outside John Wells's studio, 1981

Above: John Wells, Two Greetings Cards, 1980 & 1981

Above right: Left to right, John Wells, Ann Dannatt & Denis Mitchell, 1969

Far right: John Wells, Untitled Relief Composition, 1964



Music was a subject which we very regularly discussed, particularly when we were in his studio. Quite clearly, he had an extensive knowledge of both orchestral and chamber music gleaned particularly from a large collection of 78's – but inadequate means of playing these. We were able to give him a good player, one very popular in the post-war years known as 'The Black Box'. Encouraged by that he acquired a recording machine; these ventures stimulated him

greatly and, knowing of my work as a music critic, he plied me with very penetrating questions. I don't recollect ever discussing with him that famous essayist and critic Walter Pater (1839 -1894) but John would have talked eagerly of Pater's observation that "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music". This is meaningful to me and I am never more grateful than when an observer refers to a work of mine as having a musical quality.

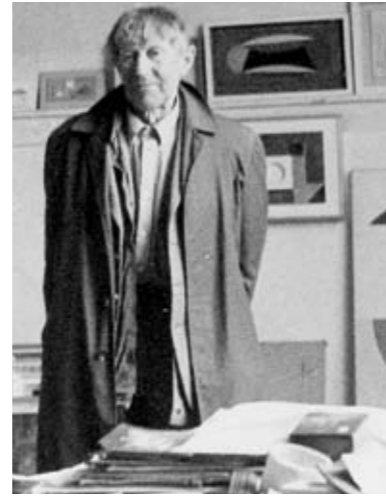
Although there were easels in his studio, often with one of his larger paintings propped on them, his method of working – and this was another aspect of our working methods which we shared – was on a flat surface. With our type of work, generally using hardboard or heavy card supports, a flat surface for drawing, applying paint, scratching and sandpapering is essential. As someone remarked "the days of the easel are past" and I think that John and I tended to distrust the mannerisms so often inherent in easel painting. Another attribute to working on a flat surface is the ease of deleting. One of the earliest and eager advices which John gave me was the usefulness of obliterating paint. Now no longer available, it was a comforting standby to wipe out what hadn't worked. This tied up with my own finding after much initial drawing for a painting that the important aspect of a successful drawing is that which you rub out!

An interesting aspect of his need for a flat painting surface was that a very great deal of Johnny's work was done in the silence of the night and in the artificial light of an Aladdin lamp. He made a great point about the purity of the white light produced from such lamps. These lamps produce not only light, but considerable heat without the need for other means of room heating and the cost of that.

I could recollect many almost heartbreakingly sad stories of John's reluctance to spend. He was, in fact, miserly in this respect, but entirely the contrary, anyhow to me, in generosity of giving advice and information on techniques. Getting warmth without spending any money became an obsession; he had one small slow burning stove in the vast ex-schoolroom which became his studio and he pursued an extraordinary quest to burn but one bucket of coal in a week! In his generosity of spirit, this was never more manifest than when I accompanied him to the frequently amateurish exhibitions of the area. However much we knew that a work was quite awful, he would try to point out some aspect which was of some interest.



I think that we were both great believers in influences, provided, of course, that such are sublimated. John Wells gladly acknowledged that debt to Naum Gabo, and he was well aware that Ben Nicholson's work had much affected his own. Through our close friendship, our many discussions, I was in the fortunate position of inheriting something of those influences. In due course Wells purchased a disused school building at Newlyn and, shortly afterwards another good friend and long time colleague of Wells, Denis Mitchell, moved from his studio and workshop in Fore Street, St. Ives, to that same building. It was from there that Denis and John regularly saw my work and never ceased to encourage me to pursue it. However individual one's work became there could be no doubt that I – indeed we – were influenced by the group of artists, by 'the feeling in the air' of post-war West Penwith abstractionists. I was a latecomer to that scene but as I progressed and Denis saw the vein in which I was working he remarked, though perhaps exaggerating a little, that "I was the only one who had continued to produce in that tradition" – or words to that effect. I learned a lot from Denis and I continue to prepare many of my 'supports' on hardboard with the slate grey/black technique which Johnny taught me. I am glad to say that I still delete and still rub out!



What might be termed 'constructive deletion' promotes re-thinking. I feel that with Wells this led to the production of more mathematical and therefore entirely abstract compositions held together through his colour sensitivity; he followed Nicholson with work in that genre but greatly developed it. It absorbed him, as indeed it does me, for it shares its mathematical structure with that of music.

Johnny could be interesting and expansive in his views upon his more geometrical approach and on some occasions explained to me the mathematical structure on which he had worked. Without any direct influence from him I have found that, in my own work, so largely based on the observation of landscape shapes and textures, that I, too, have become more mathematical in a deal of my work. But I do believe that in this approach, both with Johnny and myself, there does remain a degree of lyricism and I like to be thought of as a lyrical-abstract painter and constructivist. Together we many times talked of the rôle of the unconscious upon some of our work. We found, too, that we both suffered that strange experience of our pursuits taking over in a sort of frenzy of composition which increased our physical makeup and almost invariably concluded with a high temperature or a bad cold or an unaccountable indisposition. Such experiences can arise from intense concentration in composition, doubtless that which Beethoven referred to as a "raptus"!

We were – and I remain – constant experimenters. And when experiment is combined with experience there can be produced a work which one knows to be entirely successful – or entirely a failure. If the latter, that is the time for destruction or, alternatively, a signal to set the thing aside. Setting aside and returning to a seemingly unsatisfactory work can prove rewarding. For the artist the intervening period is an indication for the resolution of the initial conception. This quest is to produce, through self-criticism, a construct which will be visually stimulating and correct in the organisation of the basic materials of line, colour and texture.

Writing here, as a practising artist, not as a critic, I hope that I may have given some idea of the technical and general interests of two artists who, despite some eight years disparity in age, and the much earlier experience of the elder John Wells, shared the same hopes and misgivings in their self-set tasks. Johnny was a slow worker and an extremely critical one, in many respects a sad man. Clearly he lacked intellectual companionship for his keen and enquiring brain and this lack becomes particularly evident to us through a re-reading of the some one-hundred and twenty letters which he wrote us between 1963 and 1999 – letters enthusiastic for our many visits to Penzance and referring more often than not to matters musical rather than visual. But then I have tried to convey that for him and for me the two arts are integral one to the other, resolved from time to time in a successful composition.

In Anthony Powell's 'A Writers Notebook' he wrote "someone said they knew no better definition of hard work than taking decisions. In that case no work is harder than (that of) an artist, because that involves taking decisions all the time". In a further note he wrote "An artist is almost always something of an embarrassment to his work." True indeed, but how understanding and how stimulating.

George Dannatt

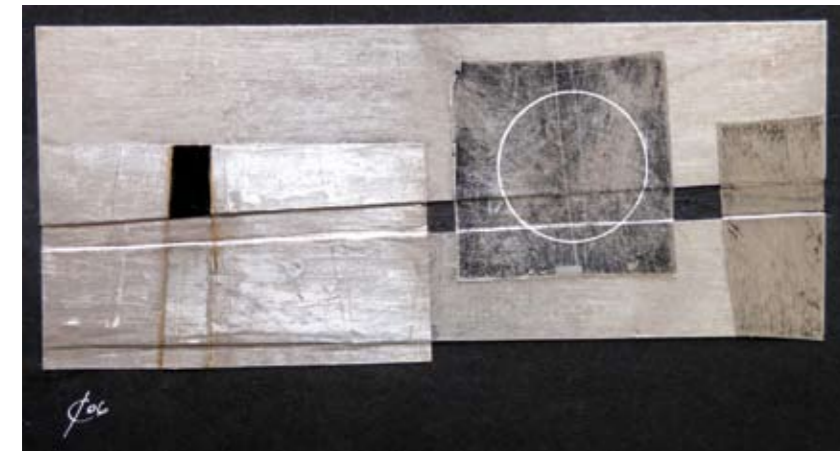


John Wells and George Dannatt leaving Newlyn Gallery, 1976

Naum Gabo (1890 – 1977) Russian-American Sculptor. One of the founders of Constructivism. Co-editor of Circle with Ben Nicholson and J. L. Martin. Member of the Design Research Unit, London. Lived in St. Ives during the war years.

Ben Nicholson (1894 – 1982) British painter, son of William Nicholson and Mabel Pryde. Without formal training apart from a very brief period at the Slade School in 1911. Amongst a large output of lyrical abstract paintings worked a great deal in geometrical abstracts, especially for his white reliefs. Prominent amongst the artists, which included his second wife, Barbara Hepworth, who made their centre in St. Ives during the war.

Anthony Powell (1905 – 2000) English novelist of particular fame and interest for his 12 volume opus 'A Dance to the Music of Time'.

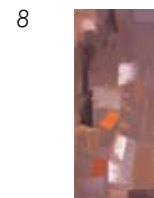
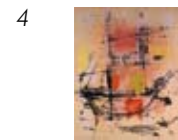
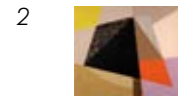
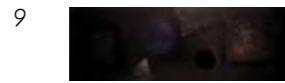


Above: George Dannatt, Silver and black progression ("metallic" collage), 2006

Top left: John Wells in studio

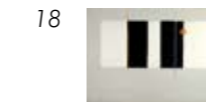
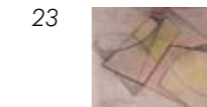
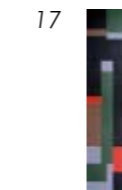
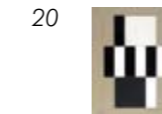
Top right: George Dannatt

John Wells



1	John Wells	Island Abstraction	1961-74	Oil on Board
2	John Wells	Violet – Corail	1965-75	Unusually, Wells has stated the materials used on the board – W13 ‘oil. w. proof ink, pencil’.
3	John Wells	Untitled Relief Composition	1964	Various papers in thickness & texture. Painted in different whites
4	John Wells	Drawing 63/2D	1960	Mixed media
5	John Wells	Drawing	1969	Pencil & mixed media
6	John Wells	Red Figure	1952	Black and two red paints over an intentionally rough painted & scratched hardboard support
7	John Wells	Cross Section	1950	Oil on board
8	John Wells	PARIS	1959	Oil on board
9	John Wells	Painting 63/15	1962	Oil on hardboard
10	John Wells	Two Greeting cards	1980 & 1981	Mixed printing/etching technique on thin card
11	John Wells	Composition No.9	1963	Oil on hardboard
12	John Wells	Nocturne	1957	Oil on hardboard
13	John Wells	Untitled Etching 1/50	1951	Etching

George Dannatt



14	George Dannatt	“For August 22nd 1975”	1975	Oil on paper mounted on hardboard
15	George Dannatt	Collage Construction	1977	Painted card and paper on flat with independent vertical elements
16	George Dannatt	White & grey relief painting	1986	Various papers in weight & texture painted with different whites on card On a white painted cotton background
17	George Dannatt	Sectional Vertical Painting	1989	Oil on sundela board
18	George Dannatt	Project for a large screen	1972	Pencil, crayon and gouache on card
19	George Dannatt	Neuchâtel No. 4	1988	Collage on grey card of Textured and glossy black and white
20	George Dannatt	Neuchâtel No. 5	1989	Collage on grey card of Glossy black & white card
21	George Dannatt	Silver and black progression (“metallic” collage)	2006	Black & white Indian ink with collaged & indented metallic materials.
22	George Dannatt	Silver collage with yellow & black figuration	2005-6	Four piece collage in “metallic” material on black paper with figuration in Indian ink
23	George Dannatt	Newlyn Quay Drawing (Sea Wall)	1987	Pencil over a Stabilo crayon ‘wash’ on paper.

George Dannatt

24



24 George Dannatt Painting in blue black & grey 2006 Oil on board

29



25 George Dannatt "Sens Unique" 1982 Ticket collage

25



26 George Dannatt Breakwater 1970 Gouache on paper

30



27 George Dannatt Study for 'Parsifal' 1970 Acrylic & watercolour on paper

31



28 George Dannatt Two Newlyn Impressions 1969-70 Acrylic gouache on paper on card

26



29 George Dannatt The Moor-Derelict Dolmen 1962 Pencil and egg tempera on paper

32



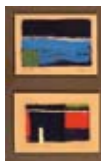
30 George Dannatt Red Landscape 2006 Oil on canvas support

27



31 George Dannatt Black Vertical 1960 Pencil and gouache on paper

28



32 George Dannatt Painting 1960 1960 Gouache on paper

16.1.66. ✓ 1572/66
Anchor Studio 3
Trenarvon St
NEWLYN.

Dear George
Have heard from Haddenham that they are asking Pat to bring the painting down for me to scrutinize. I haven't seen it yet and I fear you may have lost interest in it long ago.

About the Bartok quartets I'm sorry about my silly remarks. I enjoyed them much more on further hearing and I'm sure they will continue to grow on me. I must have been in a very bad mood to find so much aggression the first time! Playing records is out at the moment because my studio is impossible in this weather. Temperature two mornings ago was

30° F. and never rose above freezing point all day. Today comparatively warm at 34° F.

If you have not yet obtained the A. Hordine book 'Since February' I see it offered at 5/6 in a catalogue of Pat's remains from W. Heffer Sons Ltd, Petty Curry, Cambridge. Reference Remains list No 785 - winter 1965.

I used to get lots of books from those people who I lived in Scilly & there one too many I would like. This list which Mrs. Hordine lent me.

By the way could you add an X to the number on the back of the drawing you had - ie 65/50 X. I put the same number by mistake on another drawing sent out later & the X would prevent any confusion.

Are you snowed up in Wiltshire. We are waiting for the snow here.

I hope you and Ann are flourishing and enjoy my many manifold activities.

Every good wish to you both
John

Above: An enthusing letter from Wells to Dannatt, 1966

