

Elizabeth Blair Barber:  
A Life Amongst Painters







*Lyalls Mill*, c 1930s, watercolour on paper  
*Untitled Landscape*, c 1970s, acrylic on board

## Elizabeth Blair Barber

Elizabeth Blair Barber (1909 – 2001) was embedded in the art life of Perth for eight decades. At the age of eleven when she first enrolled in Henri Van Raalte's Perth School of Art in 1921, she became part of the City's artistic milieu, both absorbing and contributing to it. Her importance lies in her endless recording of the world around her, in particular her personal engagement with the forests of the Southwest of the state and her portraits of her peers in the Perth of the nineteen sixties and 'seventies when her management of the Cremorne Studios played such an important role as a home for young aspiring artists.

To understand her work is to understand the cultural environment that moulded it. How reliable an interpreter of her own past she was is perhaps up for question, but her paintings remain a legacy of her life in art. The two substantial accounts of her life, Paul Thompson's catalogue essay that accompanied the show *Running with the hares, while hunting with the hounds*<sup>1</sup> and the thorough biographical account of her

life by her daughter, Jenny Mills', *I buried my dolls in the garden*<sup>2</sup>, differ in some details. Those details are perhaps incidental, for Elizabeth's life was endlessly performative, acting and painting the moment that she found herself in. She was a constant recorder of her life through her drawing and painting, and an enthusiastic participant in the theatre, performing as an actress and writing her own life into plays for private shows at the family home in Peppermint Grove. Her legacy is a fascinating one, affording us an insight into the world of art making in 20th century Perth.

Elizabeth finished her studies in the Perth School of Art under the tutelage of Margaret Saunders when her family moved to Melbourne in 1925. In 1927 she enrolled at the National Art Gallery School where her traditional aesthetic education continued. The curriculum was very conservative, but she had contact with the student circles around George Bell (who had been influenced by the New English Art Club and their interest in French post-impressionism).



*Joslyn Summerhayes, c 1960s, oil on canvas*  
*Arthur Russell, 1950, oil on canvas*  
*Kathleen O'Connor, c 1960s, oil on canvas*

In 1931 after the conclusion of her studies and her marriage to Charles Bunning, Elizabeth returned to Perth and enrolled in drawing classes in 1932 at the Linton Institute of Art. She was here until 1934 when the classes were run by Harald Vike under the auspices of the Workers' Arts Guild.

Her work in the Southwest in the 'thirties and 'forties, recording the forest and the family's sawmills, was traditional in its tone and colour, but less so with regard to form which became looser and spontaneous. In the mid '40s Elizabeth made the decision to work and exhibit under her birth name rather than her married one. She enrolled for a term's study at Iain Macnab's Heatherly School of Art in London while her husband was travelling on business in 1947. At the school she was exposed to modern concepts of composition, colour and form. It seems to have been a liberating experience for her. Elizabeth continued with life classes and portraiture and while her technique was as idiosyncratic as ever, she had entered a creative

space where her personal conviction as to what was there in the world and how it could be represented, was seen to have a positive value.

In 1950 Elizabeth returned to a final period of study at the National Gallery Art School under Alan Sumner's tutelage. Whilst confused by his ideas at the time she later (in 1992) laid claim to them as foundational to her practice. Like her claim to have been influenced by Van Raalte, Lindsay Bernard Hall, Charles Wheeler, and William McInnes, there is little evidence in her work to suggest a profound structural understanding of those painters' works, neither the techniques of atmospheric perspective in the older artist's practice nor the new forms of composition derived from early modernism in the work of George Bell, Iain Macnab and Ian Sumner. Rather, one must assume she found emancipation through their encouragement to free herself from the constraints of traditional technique.



Untitled, c1970s, oil on canvas  
Fisherman's Wharf Fremantle, 1963, oil on canvas

During the nineteen fifties Elizabeth continued to exhibit in group shows building her network of supportive artist friends. Her work had thrown off most notions of traditional representation. The world she painted was identifiable but her rapid painting technique meant the resulting imagery had to be taken on Elizabeth's terms. She had developed a style that represented the moment, about her in the space experiencing it, not about the space itself.

Elizabeth opened the Cremorne Galleries and Studios in 1968 and they closed in 1979. During that decade hundreds of artists exhibited their works, and it became the de-facto gallery of the Perth Society of Artists. The remaining two decades since that show has seen Elizabeth's oeuvre gain a place in the history of painting in Western Australia, important for its insight into the nature of the forests and their logging, and as a testament to the determination and diligence that the artist needs to continue their work in the face of indifference during their career.

Elizabeth Blair Barber died in 2001. Her work is in the collections of The University of Western Australia, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, Edith Cowan University Art Collection, City of Perth Cultural Collection and the Janet Holmes à Court Collection. In a 1992 interview Gregson's Art Division Quarterly Journal July 1992<sup>3</sup> she described her work as "*partly impressionist, partly my own style*".

By Connie Petrillo, exhibition curator

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1. Thompson, P. (1990) *Elizabeth Blair Barber ...running with the hares while hunting with the hounds...* Perth: Curtin University
  2. Mills, J. (1999) *I buried my dolls in the garden. The life and works of Elizabeth Blair Barber.* Perth: UWA Press
  3. *Gregson's Art Division Quarterly Journal* July 1992, p. 3.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the following for their contribution to this project

Janet Holmes à Court AC  
Dr Connie Petrillo  
Dr Laetitia Wilson  
Louise Dickmann  
Patrick O'Doherty  
Merrick Belyea  
Elsie Metcalf  
Clare McFarlane

The Bunning Family  
Guest Fine Art Services  
Dr Christopher Crouch  
Elizabeth Saunders  
Melanie Ambrose  
Carla Shearman  
Caitlyn Maher  
Becky Chilcott

Published by Holmes à Court Gallery, on the occasion of the exhibition:

### ***Elizabeth Blair Barber : a Life Amongst Painters***

June 21 – August 10 2024

Exhibition Curator: Connie Petrillo  
Co-ordinating Curator: Laetitia Wilson  
Catalogue Design: Clare McFarlane

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ISBN: 978-0-9756655-2-7

Cover image: *Untitled* (detail), c 1950s, oil on canvas on board

Inside cover image: *Sir Lawrence Jackson* (detail), c 1960s, oil on board

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*We acknowledge the Noongar people as the original  
custodians of this land.*



Holmes à Court Gallery @ no. 10  
Douglas Street, West Perth WA 6005  
t: (08) 6217 2640  
Gallery hours: Tues – Sat 11am – 5pm  
w: [holmesacourtgallery.com.au](http://holmesacourtgallery.com.au)  
e: [hacgallery@heytesbury.com.au](mailto:hacgallery@heytesbury.com.au)



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