

TRYING TO DRAW MYSELF

The art of Mary Bishop tells a story of grief, pain and institutionalisation that is powerful and relevant

ROSE RUANE and DAVID O'FLYNN





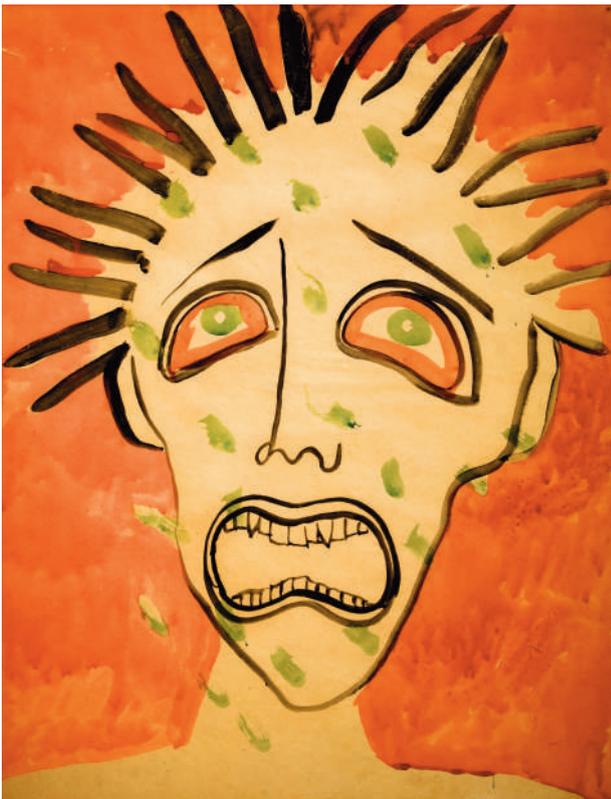
all images: poster paint on paper, approx 18 x 22 in. / 45.5 x 55.5 cm, courtesy: Adamson Collection / Wellcome Collection, unless otherwise stated

above: *All I Want to Do Is to Give My Doctor Flowers...*, c. 1958
opposite: *Untitled*, 1962, poster paint and pencil on paper

For much of her adult life, Mary Cecil Hamilton Bishop (1914–1990) was compelled to live at Netherne, a mental hospital, in Surrey, England. There, from the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s, she regularly attended the art therapy studio run by artist Edward Adamson (see *Raw Vision* 72). She produced thousands of drawings and paintings, the diverse range of which run the gamut of the figurative – which articulate states of distress so lucidly that they seem to

act on the viewer as direct transmissions – to her own language of repetitive abstract marks.

Depicting embodied experiences of suffering, her most profoundly communicative works see faces expressing torment, dizzied and disorientated; often covering their eyes as if horrified by themselves. In others, small, colourless figures, representing Bishop herself, are sketched in pencil, always under threat of being engulfed and overborne by bruises and storms



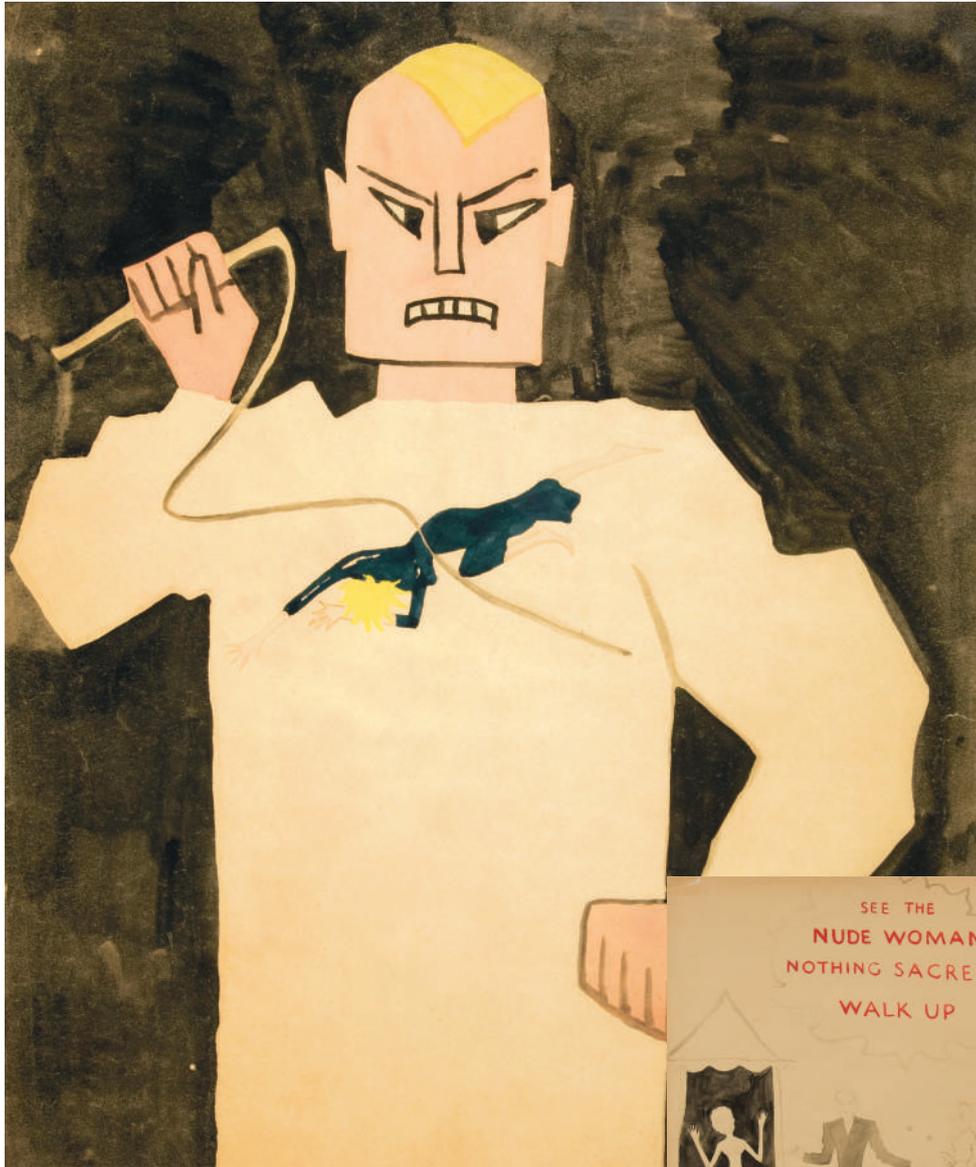
above: *Cri de Coeur*, 1963
 above, top: *Untitled*, 1963

above: *The Horrors of Intercourse*, 1963, poster paint and pencil on paper
 above, top: *Me Being Tortured by the Other Children*, 1967

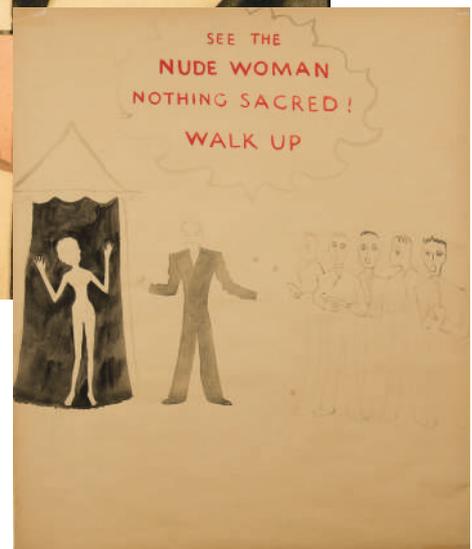
of dark paint. These figures are often caught in attitudes of despair, with arms raised to the heavens. Religious motifs occur frequently – in fact, Bishop's art is permeated by a whole set of recurring themes: childhood, self-rebuke and disgust, experiences of being scrutinised, first by the parental, then the

medical, gaze. Death and war also feature heavily as preoccupations. She wrote on the backs of many of her paintings; short bright-burning sentences which give invaluable insight into her intentions for the works and provide autobiographical context.

Bishop's father, George, was a talented historian



above: *The Sadist in the White Coat*, late 1950s



right: *See the Nude Woman, Nothing Sacred, Walk Up*, c. 1958, Adamson Collection / American Visionary Art Museum

– specialising in the religion and folklore of Russia – as well as a reverend of the Anglican church in the family’s home village of Cardington, Shropshire. In 1918, he was killed in action at the battle of Aisne, in France, having felt impelled to join the army despite, as a member of the clergy, being granted exemption. His daughter was just four years old.

Through oral history from artist Adamson and the artist’s own fragmented written accounts, it would appear that Bishop’s mother was so overwhelmed by the bereavement that it affected her ability to parent her daughter with patience and compassion. She began to take young Bishop to Euston Station in London to see coffins and wounded soldiers returning from the

front in Europe – to ensure that the child “grieved properly”. Such adverse childhood experiences seem to have reverberated throughout Bishop’s adult life. Her father’s body was never recovered and, despite his being memorialised by several group monuments, this may have contributed to the open-ended intensity of his wife’s grief. Young Bishop was brought up in a household where death and loss loomed large and her own emotional life was policed by her mother.

A series of fly paintings reflects her self-perception as having been an annoyance, with words written on the reverse of one work revealing: “Mother says I am a bluebottle.” On the back of another she expresses her feelings of claustrophobia: “I am a dead bluebottle,



Mindless Fury, 1969, poster paint and pencil on paper, 11.5 x 18 in. / 29 x 45.5 cm



Untitled, 1970

I can move neither forwards or backwards." She writes of childhood as a time when "all was gloom", and in several works she depicts herself during that period. Each of these is saturated in a sense of the artist being, by her very nature, inadequate or inappropriate, with one verso bearing an annotation that reads: "Mother said I was a dirty girl." Sadly, it seems that Bishop did not receive consolation or acceptance from her peer group either. Numerous self-portraits depicting girlhood bear witness to her being bombarded with jibes and insults; again the subject of unwelcome, bullying attention.

Adamson held that this negative self-perception pursued Bishop into adulthood, becoming attached to her sexual life. He said she had expressed the belief that she had been abnormally promiscuous in her life before Netherne and that, at one point, had been convinced that she had given birth to babies all over the world, a belief unevincenced by consensus-based reality. During World War II, as part of the women's war effort, Bishop worked at a radar station, and family anecdote has it that she was engaged to four airmen stationed there, all of whom were killed in action. However – while such relationships might have been common amongst those living in close proximity to death, when a heightened sense of precarity drives rapid romantic attachments – Bishop herself makes no reference to

these betrothals in her painting or writing. Her relationship to men, however, *is* expressed as having been complex and troubled. One work bears the legend "A girl with no sensuous feelings, not even hair", while another shows several grimacing women dancing with aggressive-looking men in the recreation hall at Netherne where such events regularly took place.

Other works describe her experience of decades-long institutionalisation within the psychiatric system, appearing to form both a critique of it and a heartfelt plea for more compassionate treatment. One of these is the harrowing painting *See the Nude Woman, Nothing Sacred, Walk Up* (c. 1958), in which multiple besuited men turn their pitiless gaze on a vulnerable female figure standing in the doorway of a circus-like tent. A striking series named "The Robot Doctors" – including the late-1950s artwork *The Sadist in the White Coat* – sees a balletic, blonde female being subjected to physical chastisements, such as stabbings and whippings, inflicted by square-headed tormentors in medical attire.

Within Bishop's extensive body of work are also pieces that make more elliptical reference to incidents from hospital life and are explained only by the words that she wrote on the reverse. A skull buried up to the eyebrows in silt at the bottom of the sea proves to have been a representation of artist Adamson, identified



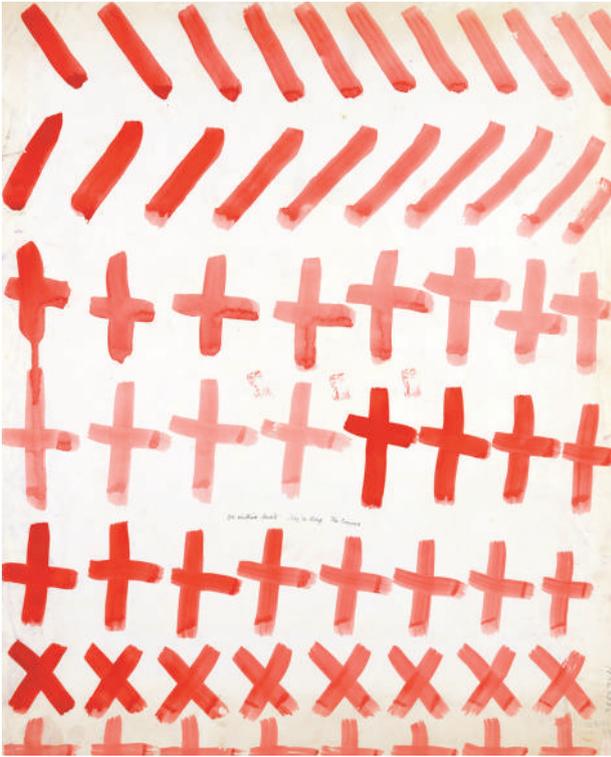
above: *I Am a Dead Bluebottle, I Can Neither Move Forwards or Backwards (About 4 Years)*, 1967
 above, top, left and right: *Trying to Draw Myself About 10: Not Any Good*, 1967

I Accuse Myself. Rosa Jackson Keeps "Picking" on Me and I Am Furious but I Accuse Myself, 1969, 13.5 x 17 in. / 34 x 43 cm



My Head Is Going Round and Round, 1963

Two Personalities, 1969, 15 x 20 in. / 38 x 51 cm



30 Million Dead, 1976



Praying Hands, 1967

by the sentence: "Complete despair at the death of Dr Yates, followed by the unkindness of Mr Adamson."

This incident aside, Bishop seems to have enjoyed and valued Adamson's support. She was discharged from Netherne in about 1982, eight years before she died, and a letter from her cousin informing Adamson of her death expresses a positive understanding of their relationship and thanks him for having facilitated Bishop's art making. Her artistic activity apparently ceased after Netherne – without the studio or accessible materials, any residual compulsion to create that she may have felt did not find an outlet.

The works Bishop produced from the mid 1970s up until she left the hospital become less obviously expressive and infinitely less narrative. Various kinds of self-portraiture give way, in large part, to abstraction. She reduced her palette to crimson and royal purple; colours which previously had featured heavily now took up sole occupancy of the page. She covered multiple sheets with crosses and lattices, sometimes creating two apparently separate works on one piece of paper. Bodily elements such as pendulous breasts, eyes, mouths and vaginal shapes still sometimes appeared.

These later works represent a shift, but it is impossible to ascertain whether it resulted from a sort of streamlining of Bishop's artistic language – down to a minimalist essence – or from a tiredness, a sensation of having said all that she had to say, the abatement of a decades-long expurgation. The work does still reveal a preoccupation with her early life, her father's death

and her craving for her mother's love. Deaths in the Somme are mentioned, clarifying the mark-making as a kind of tally or accounting. Celtic knotwork and crosses turn out to be a direct representation of the memorial in the churchyard in her home village of Cardington, which commemorates the local war dead – including her father – and is located in the grounds of the very church where he was reverend.

Bishop's works are inextricably interwoven with autobiography and yet the knowable elements of her art – represented both by what she depicts and her written clarifications – remain riddled with lacunae, elements of the unknowable. The segments of her autobiography to which no-one has access represent an impossibility for we who arrive at her work from another time and place. The sense of niggling enigma is furthered by the fact that no photograph of Bishop is currently known to exist; the sole glimpse we have is the soft curve of her cheek and neat, blonde hairstyle briefly caught on camera in the BBC documentary *The Hurt Mind*, filmed at Netherne in 1955. She sits and draws, only identifiable by the work in progress on the paper in front of her, an emerging figure, unmistakably a creation of hers.

While Bishop's life might not be documented in photography, she has left a rich and profoundly affecting body of work for future generations to discover. Her creative output is a document of an existence inexorably altered by war, grief and suffering, and represents an irreplaceable insight into life in



above: *Drowning*, 1970, poster paint and pencil on paper

below: Film-still from *The Hurt Mind*, 1955, of Bishop at work

a twentieth-century mental hospital, and a life lived through daily art practice.

Mary Bishop's paintings are evocative, electrifying communications which speak directly to current, fundamental and unchanging human experiences: childhood, bereavement, unhappiness, the need for love, acceptance and care. Disturbing and consoling in equal measure, with an emotional power which far outstrips the elements of historical document, these paintings will carry on communicating their deeply felt resonances and the unarguable truth that they are the product of an incredible talent.



Rose Ruane is an artist and writer and is currently working on a PhD on Adamson Collection.
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Almost all of Mary Bishop's 700 surviving works are held by Wellcome and can be seen in an online catalogue at wellcomecollection.org

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WINTER 2022/23

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PUBLISHED by Raw Vision Ltd
Letchmore Heath WD25 8LN, UK
tel +44 (0)1923 853175
email info@rawvision.com
website www.rawvision.com

ISSN 0955-1182

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Grant Wallace,
Rebirth on Earth (detail), between 1919 and 1925,

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Raw Vision (ISSN 0955-1182) December 2022, is published quarterly (March, June, September, December) by Raw Vision Ltd, PO Box 44, Watford WD25 8LN, and distributed in the USA by ePost Global, 18 Central Boulevard, South Hackensack NJ 07606. Periodicals postage paid at South Hackensack NJ. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Raw Vision c/o 18 Central Blvd, South Hackensack NJ 07076

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