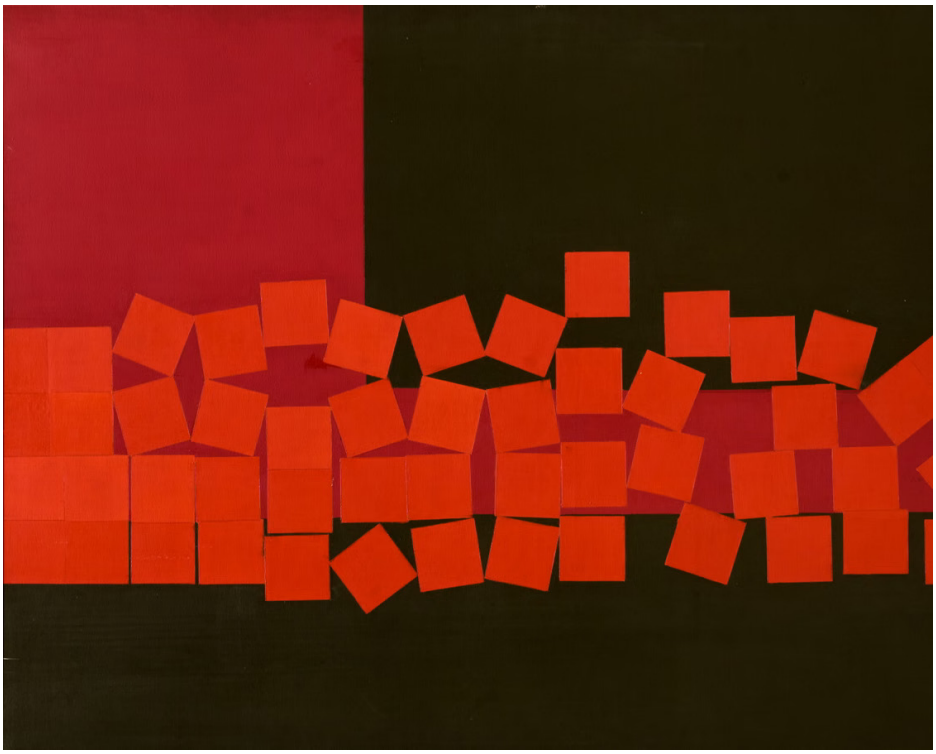
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Beaches, Beatles and a broken marriage: how Wilhelmina Barns-Graham became a radical art icon

The artist who was inspired by Swiss glaciers, the Vietnam war and her own divorce was sidelined from St Ives' art history – but finally has a major retrospective at Tate



'She's making the moves' ... Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's Protest, 1967. Photograph: © Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust



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At the centre of Tate St Ives' newly opened retrospective of the British modernist Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, her monumental altar-piece Glacier (Blue Cave) pulls viewers into its frozen tendons of turquoise and white. Its mouth is agape and the blue slit of its eye casts downwards to the rest of its body. The glacier *feels* human:

a vivisection of rock, ice and snow that brings to mind the fragmented facial features of Picasso's Weeping Woman.

Standing in front of this glassy colossus, the exhibition's curator, Katy Norris, talks about these "mangled" and "twisted" forms - so alive on the canvas. "Barns-Graham was so distinct in her approach," Norris says. "There are always questions of: what am I seeing? What is in front of me *really?* And how does that relate to what I feel inside?"



'Feels human' ... Glacier (Blue Cave), 1950. Photograph: © Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust

Glacier (Blue Cave) was painted not far from this gallery space in 1950 - only 10 years after the Scottish-born painter moved 500 miles south to the tiny fishing town of St Ives - but it goes some way to showing just how radical she was over the course of her eight-decade career. From her early 20s, Barns-Graham's quest for connection saw the self-described "lone wolf" become a key player in the St Ives school which congregated in and around the Cornish harbour during the second world war. She continued to experiment relentlessly with colour, geometry, kineticism and repetition until her death in 2004, aged 91.

Anne Barlow, director of Tate St Ives, points out this major retrospective - the first to span Barns-Graham's full career - is a "long-overdue celebration" of an expressive master. The art historian Virginia Button wrote that "Barns-Graham clearly felt that as a woman she had been unfairly sidelined from the history of St Ives" with its focus on Ben Nicholson, Peter Lanyon and Patrick Heron. She had a brief period of fame in the 1950s, but it waned in the 1960s as her landscape modernist work became increasingly "hard-edged" (as Rob Airey, director of the Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust, puts it) and more daring; less commercial and harder to categorise.



In Barns-Graham's beloved St Ives ... The Blue Studio, 1948. Photograph: © Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust. Courtesy of The Fleming Collection.

With her "blue eyes that flashed like knives" (so her husband, the writer David Lewis, remarked) and her delight in toying with gender stereotypes (she took great pleasure in the sexual ambiguity of her preferred nickname "Willie"), Barns-Graham ploughed her own furrow from the beginning. Born into an upper-class family in the seaside town of St Andrews in 1912, Barns-Graham's resistance was tested early when her stern father became hostile towards her plan to pursue artmaking as a profession.

Nonetheless, ignited by her love of Cézanne, at the age of 18 Barns-Graham started studying at Edinburgh College of Art. "She had a single-mindedness," Norris says. "She didn't see any limitations, she just saw the path ahead." It's a focus you can sense in her 1945 oil painting Froth and Seaweed. Painted in her beloved St Ives, the artist homes in on the spidery tendrils of algae and slithery copper rock. "It's almost as if she has no peripheral vision, she's just seeing beauty at her feet."



Barns-Graham in Cousins' A Sudden Glimpse to Deeper Things. Photograph: Publicity image

Film-maker Mark Cousins first encountered Barns-Graham's paintings in late-80s Edinburgh. Whether depicting the silvery shorelines of St Ives and St Andrews or the crystalline glaciers of Switzerland, he says, "she just leapt off the walls". He made a pilgrimage to her St Andrews house during lockdown, and in 2024 released A Sudden Glimpse to Deeper Things, which delves into the artist's distinctive gaze and synesthesia. Barns-Graham

associated colours with people, places, emotions and even letters of the alphabet - something she called a "total experience". "If we think of Turner's relationship to landscape, he saw a vortex. And Leonardo da Vinci saw a machine. She was like that as well; she saw a living thing," Cousins says.

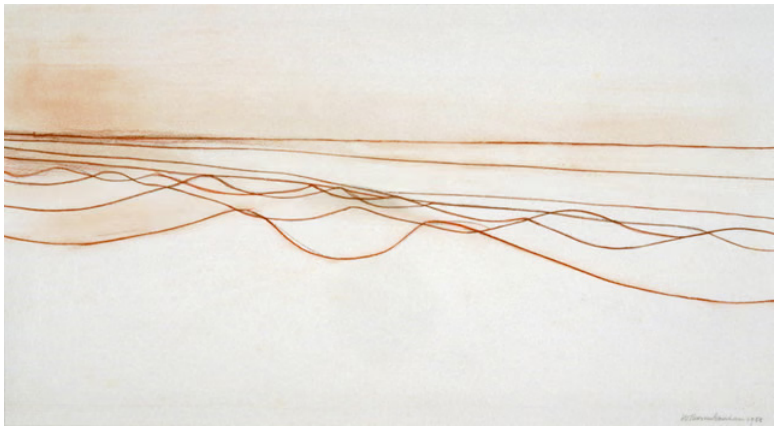


Glacier Knot, 1979. Photograph: © Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust

Her encounter with the Grindelwald glacier in Switzerland came in 1949. "That day was almost like a rebirth, a kind of rapture," Cousins says of her life-defining hike and the 60-odd paintings and drawings that followed over a three-year period documenting the glacier's "many moods". In a letter to the Tate in 1965, she wrote: "It seemed to breathe!" This wasn't an artist above the landscape, Norris says, but *of* the landscape. The glacier's interiority was her interiority - a close symbiosis that intensified for the rest of her life as she pushed further into abstraction, moving away from figurative landscape painting in favour of "systems, rhythm, repetition and spatial tension".

Yet the underlying presence of nature was still there: "bird flights, dancing diamonds on water, dots inside foxgloves, cell formations," Norris writes. For the curator, Barns-Graham's work in the 1960s-70s (titled Things of a Kind in Order and Disorder) is where she truly pioneered a new way of experiencing the world - "like chaos theory, really" - by laying out small cardboard squares in neat rows on her studio floor before randomly nudging them with her foot. On a stormy morning on the golden stretch of Porthmeor beach, I got to see this paint-splattered studio for myself; its floor-to-ceiling window looking out on to fast-moving clouds and ferocious waves.

Like Merce Cunningham's "choreography by chance", Barns-Graham was thinking about "how things hold together" - not least her marriage, which ended in divorce in 1963. Referring to her 1968 oil painting on board Olive Green Squares on Vermillion, she compared the erratic block of squares against a rage of red to "a broken marriage" - her own. Yet with Protest - another volatile blockwork which was made in 1967 as the Vietnam war raged and a year after the Beatles had released Revolver - "she was [also] thinking about participation and action and what you can do as an artist or viewer. She's making the moves, she's a part of it, she's no longer in awe of a natural phenomenon that's doing its own thing."



'Are they soundwaves?' ... Eight Lines, Porthmeor, 1986. Photograph: Tate Photography/© Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust

When the Beatles came along, “working-class men were cool and posh women weren’t,” says Cousins. “But she just kept going.” In the 1980s, Barns-Graham’s tumult of squares made way for the thumbprint pen-and-ink lines of her Small Energy Drawings. “Are they soundwaves? Is it the wind?” Norris ponders. “Sometimes she’d look out from the cathedral-esque window of her studio in St Ives and turn her back to it, playing music and drawing lines that replicated the sea.” Another “choreography by chance”: first you observe, then you listen, then you feel. That precision and intuition can exist in such harmony in these artworks speaks profoundly to Barns-Graham’s own particular genius.

“At my age there’s no time to be lost,” Barns-Graham said in the 1990s. “I say to myself: ‘Do it now, say it now, don’t be afraid.’” Drawn to the late works of Picasso and Joan Miró, and incensed by the environmentally ruinous decade in which she was living (“the most appalling time of abuse of living things,” she remarked), the octogenarian slapped colour on to the canvas with an energy that was both urgent and physical. “The St Ives narrative flattened her,” Cousins says of this late flourish. “It saw her as one of many. It is important to extract her from St Ives and see her as a singular imaginative person.”

Wilhemina Barns-Graham is at Tate St Ives until 3 May