

LELAND BELL

Paint, Precision, and Placement

A Centennial Exhibition

SEPTEMBER 9 — OCTOBER 23, 2022

RECEPTION: SEPTEMBER 17, 2022, 6-8PM



Leland Bell, *Family Group with Butterfly*, 1986-90, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 108 inches.
Estate of the artist. Image courtesy of Bookstein Projects, New York.

The New York Studio School is pleased to present *Leland Bell: Paint, Precision, and Placement. A Centennial Exhibition*, curated by Steven Harvey, on view September 9 – October 23, 2022. This solo exhibition of large-scale paintings of figure groups and self-portraits by Leland Bell commemorates the 100th anniversary of the artist's birth. A reception will be held on Saturday, September 17 from 6-8pm.

Bell approached figuration through the lens of abstract painting in his use of bold outlines and striking fields of color. Jed Perl observes that “the excitement [in Bell's work] is in the dissonance, in the tension between Bell's strongly shaped figures and his flat planes of high-keyed color.”¹ Bell's exuberant scenes of daily life possess a theatrical quality, with statuesque figures posed in expressive gestures frozen in time like tableaux vivants. Jennifer Samet writes that “Bell was compelled to penetrate nature by achieving an ultimate realization of forms and their integration.”² His self-portraits are equally dynamic, characterized by strong lines and psychological intensity. R.B. Kitaj describes Bell's work as “a world-view of daily existence at the level of myth.”³

Leland Bell (1922–1991) was born in Cambridge, Maryland, to Russian-Jewish parents. He began a largely self-taught art education at The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., where he encountered artist Karl Knaths. After traveling to Provincetown, Massachusetts, to study with Knaths, Bell relocated to New York and embedded himself in the city's vibrant art scene. He met Icelandic painter Louisa Matthíasdóttir, who had studied with Hans Hoffman, at a party thrown by fellow artist Nell Blaine, and the two wed in 1944; they had one daughter, the painter Temma Bell.

Bell's early abstract paintings demonstrate the influence of early twentieth-century abstractionists like Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, and Jean Arp, though he soon turned to figuration in earnest. The gestural impulse of his 1950s' self-portraits reflect the influence of Giacometti, while the sleek aesthetic of his later paintings signals his interest in Jean Hélion's and Fernand Léger's work. Indeed, around 1944, Bell gained employment as a superintendent in Hélion's building upon learning the artist's Hudson Street address. Looking for custodial services, Hélion knocked on Bell's door and was shocked by the younger artist's extensive knowledge of his work. Bell was also a voluble advocate of André Derain's later work.

Bell's first one-man show was held at the Hansa Gallery in 1955. He was a founding teacher at the New York Studio School from 1968 to 1977, after which he and Paul Resika formed and directed the graduate program at Parsons School of Design. From 1964 to 1990, he exhibited regularly at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, and Salander-O'Reilly Galleries thereafter. The Phillips Collection organized a retrospective of his paintings and drawings in 1987.

NYSS will present a virtual panel exploring the life and work of Bell on **Wednesday, September 28, 2022**, moderated by Steven Harvey, with Bruce Gagnier, Stanley Lewis, Paul Resika, and words by Martica Sawin. To register, please visit nyss.org.

Organized and moderated by artist Michael Amendolara, NYSS will host gallery talks by friends and former students of Bell's on Instagram Live throughout October:

Wednesday, October 5, 1:00pm ET: John Goodrich, Ying Li, and Alice Zinnes

Wednesday, October 12, 1:00pm ET: Stephanie Franks, Mitchell Johnson, and Paula Stark

Wednesday, October 19, 1:00pm ET: Mark LaRiviere, Maria Pia Marrella, and Jesse McCloskey

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue produced by Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects, featuring texts by Will Heinrich, R. B. Kitaj, Albert Kresch, and Jennifer Samet.

Generous support for this exhibition is provided by Jonathan Becker, Temma Bell, Brice Brown and Don Joint, Vincent Casey, Center for Figurative Painting, the Estate of Leland Bell, the Estate of Louisa Matthíasdóttir, Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects, Elizabeth Kresch, Richard T. Spurzem, private collectors, individuals, and anonymous patrons of the arts.

¹ Jed Perl, "The pictures and passions of Leland Bell," *The New Criterion* (April 1987).

² Jennifer Samet, "Painterly Representation in New York: 1945—1975," (PhD diss, The City University of New York, 2010).

³ R.B. Kitaj, introduction to *Leland Bell: Paintings* (London: Theo Waddington, 1980).