

During one of our many research meetings, Marj Bond casually mentioned that she had run her own gallery in Perth.

How the Fair Maid's House Gallery (FMHG) came about was down to chance. Her friend, Eva MacDonald, had a stylish gift shop on the ground floor of the medieval house made famous by Sir Walter Scott. The space above was empty and when Eva suggested to Marj to open it as a gallery, she did not hesitate.

The house, now home to the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, had great character and was, as it still is, at the cultural heart of Perth, next to the Museum and Art Gallery which today rubs shoulders with the new millennium Concert Hall. The upper floor, accessed via a spiral staircase, consisted of two rooms with wooden floor and panelled walls and plenty natural light.

Bond had all the credentials and connections to run an art gallery. A graduate of Glasgow School of Art (GSA), she had been living in Perth for nearly twenty years. She showed her work in Edinburgh and with the local Perthshire Art Association, serving as their President from 1983 to 1986. Since being elected to the Scottish Society of Women Artists in 1975, she had been exhibiting at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh and knew many prominent artists.

She taught at Perth College of Further Education, in particular students preparing for entry into art school, among them Derrick Guild now a Royal Scottish Academician. She was also in touch with recent graduates. This was the early 1980s, before the rise of the entrepreneurial artists of YBAs fame and Bond knew how difficult it was for young artists to show their work. This made her determined, in her own words, "to show emerging young artists together with big hitters like Elizabeth Blackadder, John Houston and John Bellany."

I contacted a few people Marj had exhibited, Derrick Guild, Gary Anderson, Morag Muir and Dianne Murphy, all now renowned practising artists. They were very quick to reply and I found their consistent accounts and deeply felt appreciation of Marj's support, after all these years, quite moving and telling of the closed attitude of the art establishment at the time. Anderson and Murphy have even kept mementoes from their exhibition.

Guild remembers that Marj “was a huge help to me getting into art school” and that she “was one of the few people willing to look at young artists’ work”, a sentiment shared by Anderson who had just graduated and “owe[s] her a huge THANK you”. Muir says “she gave me my first show after leaving college, always a giant leap into the ‘real world’” and adds that Marj “also gave me advice on being a working artist which has helped me throughout the years so far”. Murphy acknowledges that her “early interest was crucial and afforded me a very strong start to build the c.v. upon.”

Two recently rediscovered visitors’ books that span the seven years of the gallery’s existence, illustrate Bond’s professional approach with an almost complete sequence of exhibition cards and notices carefully placed among pages after pages of comments.

The gallery opened in September 1981 with a mixed exhibition by the Glasgow Group, a punchy choice indicative of her intent since the group, formed in 1958, originally consisted of GSA graduates frustrated by the lack of opportunities open to them. They provided Bond with a dream list of exhibitors, among them Bet Low, Philip Reeves and founding members Anda Paterson, James Spence, James Watt and William Birnie.

There are no photographs to show how Bond managed to exhibit so many in such a tight space. *Multum in parvo* or ‘much in a small space’ wrote art critic Edward Gage of another FMHG exhibition in *The Scotsman* in 1984. She certainly made the most of it, pitting cutting edge art against age-old features.

This first exhibition was a hit judging by the hundreds of favourable comments jotted down by visitors from around the world, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Brazil, the USA, and more. Such an extraordinary footfall might be credited to the appeal and privileged location of the gallery, but the fact is that unless you have something exciting and engaging to show, people will quickly leave without taking the trouble to write down their personal details and comments.

Here and there, some names jump out of the page, Emilio Coia, the celebrated caricaturist and the artist and promoter Richard Demarco.

Demarco is well-known for his association with Joseph Beuys and his lifelong anti-establishment stance so it is no surprise to find him giving support to this innovative and independent gallery outside the safe boundaries of Scotland's Central Belt. He became a regular visitor to the FMHG, even sketching the house with characteristic linear precision. His appreciation for Bond's pioneering spirit and endeavour came through again recently in his foreword for the book *MARJ BOND* where he describes her as "that rare type of artist whose creative energy takes responsibility for the lives and careers of her fellow artists".

The FMHG went from strength to strength and earned the accolade of some financial support from the Scottish Arts Council. Bond exhibited not only Blackadder, Houston and Bellany but also Barbara Rae, David Donaldson, Robin Philipson, Alberto Morrocco and many more. It gained critical approval from Edward Gage mentioned earlier, and from Clare Henry of *The Glasgow Herald*. In her foreword, also for the book *MARJ BOND*, Henry praises Marj's "enlightened programme of exhibitions for other artists" and her "generosity of spirit", a tribute reflected in Dianne Murphy's other comment "She was never hierarchical or self aggrandising, even though she was in the perfect position to be so." Bond was indeed always reluctant to show her paintings in the FMHG.

In the end, after seven productive years, it was Bond's own work that claimed its due and she no longer had the time to run the FMHG. Its closure coincided with Bond's journey to India which, as the book reveals, changed her life.

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*MARJ BOND* by Martine Foltier Pugh, pub. Sansom & Co (ISBN: 978-1-908326-92-8) was launched on 1 April 2017 with an accompanying exhibition at the Open Eye Gallery, Edinburgh.