# *Leading Ladies*

By Nancy Honey

*Interviews by Hattie Garlick*

**Maggi Hambling:** *Painter and sculptor*

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| **1945** | **Born in Sudbury, Suffolk** |
| **1969** | **Left the Slade School of Fine Art, having previously studied at Camberwell, Ipswich and, before that, with Lett Haines and Cedric Morris in Suffolk** |
| **1980** | **Became the first Artist in Residence at the National Gallery, London** |
| **1983** | **Her exhibition, *Pictures of Max Wall*, was at the National Portrait Gallery** |
| **1987** | **An exhibition, *Maggi Hambling*, was held at the Serpentine Gallery, London** |
| **1995** | **Awarded the Jerwood Painting Prize (with Patrick Caulfield) and an OBE** |
| **1998** | **Her public sculpture, *A Conversation with Oscar Wilde*, was unveiled outside Charing Cross Station, London** |
| **2001** | **Her exhibition, *Henrietta Moraes*, ran at the Marlborough Fine Art Gallery** |
| **2003** | ***Scallop*, her sculpture for Benjamin Britten, was unveiled in Aldeburgh Beach (awarded the first Marsh Award for Excellence in Public Sculpture in 2005)** |
| **2010** | **Awarded a CBE; her celebrated and continuing series of North Sea paintings were first exhibited at the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge in 2010** |
| **2013** | **Her solo exhibition, *Wall of Water*, opened at The Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia; *War Requiem,* an installation appeared at SNAP during the Aldeburgh Festival; *The Winchester Tapestries*, Hambling's first, were unveiled and dedicated at Winchester Cathedral** |
| **Today** | **Her work is held in many public collections including, in the UK, the British Museum, Tate Collection, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, Scottish Gallery of Modern Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum** |

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**When I was young, I wanted to be...** a Wren Admiral, because I very much liked the uniform and I thought it was best to be the boss.

**When my mother came back from the hospital, she apologised to my nine-year-old brother that I was a girl**. He had so badly wanted a brother that he took no notice at all of the fact that I wasn't and brought me up as one. He taught me carpentry, how to wring chickens' necks and all that useful stuff.

**People are surprised at how practical artists have to be**. Actually, those skills have proved to be much more useful than the things girls are usually taught.

**I was once given a doll** and we immediately sawed its head off in the tool shed. I was never given another.

**My perversity was there from an early age**. I was very fond of my teddy bear, despite my treatment of the doll. I'd lusted over it for a long while in the toyshop because it was the only blue bear I'd ever seen. So, rather perversely, I called it 'Toffee.'

**I had to train my parents into who I was**. My mother said I was the most obstinate child she'd ever come across and, since she was a teacher, she'd met a lot.

**It's always been very important to me not to do what I'm told**, through later life as well.

**The great thing is to be yourself**. If you're really being yourself, you're not going to be told by anyone else who you are or what you are or what you should do.

**I found out who I really was through my work.** There were certain teachers at Camberwell art school in the sixties, for example, whose work I despised and I simply instructed them not to teach me for the three years I was there. You have to follow your own instincts.

**I've lived my life like that.** I was sitting in the Club at The Ivy one night and the sculptor Barry Flanagan came in, looked across the room and said, "Oh my God, there's the most difficult woman in London." Then he kissed me.

**I think I'm incredibly easy to deal with**, but other people don't always seem to agree. I behave entirely professionally, so I don't understand it. Maybe it's because I tell it like it is, but that strikes me as a good thing.

**I have to put mascara on, that's my war paint**. It's a defence. I'm really a tiny, shy little thing. I like to choose who eats me up rather than other people choosing to do it to me.

**I'm most alive when I'm in my studio working.** The real me is there and the rest is showbiz. Showbiz is exactly the opposite of being alone in the studio, trying to make something.

**All artists should be riddled with self-doubt**. I think there's something wrong with a creative person if they're not plagued by it more or less the whole time.

**It wasn't 'til I was fourteen that art really grabbed me by the short and curlies**. There was an art exam at school and I did nothing but flick paint at the teacher and generally draw attention to myself because the biology mistress was in charge, and I was deeply in love with her. Then I saw the clock, realised I only had ten minutes before I had to hand in a painting, so I did one. When the results came out, three weeks later, I was top of art.

**It was a total surprise to me.** I thought, *this is a very odd business, you don't have to try and you're good at it*. So I decided to take it seriously. And fourteen is such a crucial age in terms of puberty and everything else coming to the fore.

**My art is a filter between me and life**. Artists do have to stand back to make their response to what's around them, whether it's people or the sea or anything else.

**I've always been quite envious of people who've just lived**, like Henrietta Moraes who became my Muse. She just lived; she was an artist of life.

**Life dictates what I paint**. Somebody close to me dies, and I go on painting them for a couple of years or more. What happens to me in life dictates what I do in my work.

**"You must make your work your best friend,** so that you can go to it whatever you're feeling – whether that's bored, happy, randy, whatever. And have a conversation with your work." When I was sixteen and had begun to take art seriously; Lett-Haines, who was my mentor, told me that. And that is how I've lived my life.

**When someone you love dies, they go on being alive inside you**, whether you are an artist or not. I think that's where I'm lucky – I can practice this positive method of grieving. In the case of George Melly, my father, more recently Sebastian Horsley, I'm trying to make paintings with life to them even though the subject has died.

**I don't think about making people immortal through the painting**. Not at all. I'm driven to do them because of the way I feel about them.

**Because of his work, Oscar Wilde is still alive, not dead**. My sculpture of Wilde is called *A Conversation*. The whole point is that he's still alive, talking and laughing and smoking with whoever engages with the sculpture.

**I've no time to think about what they'll say about me after I'm dead**. If the North Sea doesn't come in over my sculpture on Aldeburgh beach I suppose there will be something left behind. But I'm totally involved in whatever I'm making at a particular moment, whether it's a portrait or a sculpture or a sea painting. When that's finished I'm into the thrills and spills of the next bundle of trouble.

**I'm very boring**; I hate even the idea of going on holiday. If I don't work even for one day I go pottier than I am already.

**You have to work a great many hours for one good hour**. I get up early every day to work, five or six o'clock in the morning 'til about two o'clock in the afternoon. It's what I do every day and it's what I am, *who* I am.

**I am my work, my work is me**. When you're really working, you completely lose yourself and that's part of the point of doing it. When the muse finally chooses to arrive you're doing something which is quite beyond yourself. But you have to carry on working, pouring out all the shit, for those moments to happen.

**Art is quite a masochistic business, really**. But the feeling when things go right is unlike any other. You learn to accept that there are good days and bad days. Sometimes I can spend six months on a painting and have to destroy it, and that is pretty depressing. But it has to be done so that that same painting can possibly happen in an hour and a half, probably the next day. It wouldn't happen if I hadn't been through all the rubbish first.

**The subject, whether a person or the sea or anything else, must be in charge of me**. I try to be a channel so that the truth of the subject passes through me and onto the canvas. I try to get all my baggage out of the way. It's quite a tricky business.

**Do I care what other people think about the work?** Not really, no. There's quite often been a bit of controversy about certain sculptures, for instance. But Oscar Wilde said, "When the critics are divided, the artist is at one with himself." I quite like that.

**In that 'showbiz' side of life, all that matters is column inches, anyway.** It's very odd, I can get three columns of abuse and the next week someone will say, "Oh, great piece in the *Standard*." They don't remember what they read, just that it was there.

**"You know if you're going to do this, criticism has to be water off a duck's back.**" At fourteen I took some paintings into school and laid them out. When the art teacher came in, I was in a corner on the point of tears. She came over to ask what the matter was and I said, "Well, I was up 'til two in the morning trying to make these paintings of the night sky and now everyone's laughing at them." She gave me a strict talking to: "Take no notice; you are your own critic."

**I continue to be amazed that anyone should be interested in me and my life.** Some of the 'showbiz' side of things I enjoy, some of it I don't. It's only the work that matters.

**My philosophy of life is** that I am deeply, deeply serious about my work and for the rest I like to have a few laughs.