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Jeanette Blair, a friend of famed local painter Charles Burchfield, is joined by her son Bruce at the opening of an exhibit of her paintings at the Benjaman Gallery on Friday.

Harry Scull Jr. /Buffalo News

A tribute long overdue

Watercolorist Blair painted Holland scenes

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Jeanette Blair sat patiently Friday evening in the Benjaman Gallery on Elmwood Avenue as a tribute was read in her honor.

It was long overdue for the 90-year-old Town of Holland watercolor painter, who along with her late husband, Robert Noel Blair, were both contemporaries and friends of visionary artist Charles E. Burchfield.

"As a watercolorist, Jeanette was inspired to paint a lot of environmental pieces based upon her family home in Holland, N.Y.," said Sandra Jardine, who also is a local artist. "I, personally, after meeting her family [believe] she has not been acknowledged enough. Her work has been featured in galleries throughout the United States, and she has been in a number of Buffalo art societies, but in terms of giving her a tribute, that has absolutely never, ever been done."

Jeanette Blair's relatively unsung contributions to the local art scene were rendered loud and clear Friday during a reception to celebrate an exhibition of her nature scenes and landscapes. The exhibit runs through June 15.

Emily Tucker, the gallery director, said that while she was familiar with the abstract paintings of Robert Noel Blair, she had not seen much of his wife's work.

"I was very familiar with Robert Blair's paintings, just because I'd seen them in museums and other galleries. Then I met Bruce, his son, and realized there was a whole body of work. And when I went to look at Robert's paintings, I said 'That one's a little different, a little brighter. Is that his?' And [Bruce] said: 'That is my mother's, who is also a painter,'" said Tucker. "The more I got to know her work, the more I realized I never saw enough of it around and I felt like she really needed a tribute, as well," said Tucker.

Jeanette and Robert Blair, who were both students of the Buffalo Art Institute along with Burchfield, also raised three children.

Bruce, the youngest, and a well-known abstract painter in his own right, accompanied his mother to Friday's reception. Bruce Blair said his mother had to give up her passion when her eyesight started failing nearly a decade ago, shortly after her husband died.

"I noticed she couldn't see colors as well, and she couldn't see detail," he said. "About a year, or a year and a half before that, I noticed that when she was sketching out West, she couldn't see the details when she was sketching the butes and cliffs in Arizona," he added.

It's frustrating, Jeanette Blair acknowledged, but as a lifelong environmentalist and peace activist, she is not lacking for passions.

"Through these various movement, the Blairs joined forces and developed a [collegial friendship] with the [late Buffalo documentary photographer] Milton [Rovogin] and [his late wife] Anne, because they shared similar values and causes," Jardine said.

Today Jeanette Blair pours her energies into caring for her cats and feeding the birds outside her Holland home.

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