

## OBSERVER REVIEW

## In search of Sleeping Beauty

ALREADY the fourth Hayward Annual, selected this time by John Hoyland, is being loosely referred to as the Abstract Show. But you could equally well call it a landscape show—abstract expressionist in nature—or, even more glibly, a Hoyland show, since it's his view as to what's best in current British art.

There is a noticeable predilection for locality titles ('Yarrow Braes,' 'Cyprus Sea,' 'Ultima Thule') and a general harking after the face of nature, the fleeting scene, weathered terrain, harvest abundance. The romantic predicament of the artist confronting elemental forces in the execution of his work, imposing his will by sheer nerve and sleight of hand, is also invoked. This is painting presented as heroic effort.

Every canvas is meant to be regarded as something between a quest and a trophy, wrested from chaos, from the instinctual subconscious. The painter is the Prince, pushing through wellnigh impenetrable undergrowth in search of Sleeping Beauty; or what Hoyland's back-up adviser, Tim Hilton, variously describes in his bit of the catalogue as 'serious painting,' 'good painting,' 'genuine painting,' 'genuinely strong painting,' 'ambitious abstract painting' and 'high fine art.'

Hoyland too comes out of his corner ducking and feinting and full of fighting talk: 'Real art evades easy description, discourages amusing anecdotes, confronts glamour and camp with a stony, unblinking eye, and is not wel-

## Art

## WILLIAM FEVER on the Hayward Annual.

come in colour supplement land.' He mentions too 'the failure of many influential critics to really "believe" in British Art.' Though which comes first, Cult or Country, he doesn't make altogether clear.

And so to the art. Regarded stonily, with unblinking eye, the preliminary section of the exhibition, given over to examples of the work of established artists whom Hoyland admires, is no more than a set of guest appearances: Auerbach, Hodgkin, Caulfield, Walker, Matthew Smith and a St Ives School posse, Frost, Heron, Lanyon and Roger Hilton (no relation). The sculptors Tim Scott, William Tucker and Anthony Caro are also included out of a sense of solidarity. Caro in particular is represented as a painter's sculptor.

The rest of the exhibitors have been given enough space to show several paintings each. Among them are relative veterans like Anthony Whishaw and Albert Irvin, several habitués of the Stockwell Depot, that stronghold of gut-issue painting and sculpture, and, out of 34 artists, just two women, Mali Morris and Gillian Ayres.

A quick tour of inspection reveals that most of these painters delight in the skirmish approach, with bits of each picture alternately roughed up and pacified,

veiled over, attacked with splutters, toned down, skidded to a halt. The endeavour here (as indeed in virtually every sort of painting) is to bring about an overall richness or ripeness, a sense of resolution and, it can be claimed, revealed 'truth.'

Those that fall short, that fail to achieve lift-off, tend to be incoherent: large, over-amplified works, thrashing around like nobody's business. Some are too pat, filled with window-cleaner wipes and smears. Others appear force-fed. The aim often seems to be to convert each rectangular canvas into an area of amorphous broken ground, either to flummox or conceal, as in camouflage.

Happily, though, Hoyland's Annual contains many spanking successes. John McLean's lightsome, soakaway stains in faint acid-drop hues float across canvas in ethereal harmony. Terry Setch, who, in the field of painting, is about as unassertive as a Heavy Metal lead guitarist getting his rocks off, scores hit after hit with his 'Beachscape Car Wreck' triptych, in muddied spoilheap impasto, and 'Pollution' Nos 1 & 2, hangings choked up with matted pigment, scarlet, sour blues, scurvy white and verdigris, against which skeletal forms just about hold their own, like last-ditch graffiti.

Gillian Ayres's four huge paintings have a big band blare and a most agreeable smell: you don't often get the pungent whiff of fresh oil paint in galleries these days, least of all in the Hayward. 'Ultima Thule' is the most powerful and replete of them, a multicoloured, crowd-scenic mulch. Albert Irvin's

expansive combinations of downthrust and sidle, of solid colour rolled across thin colourwashes, are the only competition here in terms of head-on flamboyance.

Michael Moon's method of compounding the abstract and the actual is to take literal impressions of his surroundings: walls, furniture, floors. He applies fabric, like sticky loose covers to the chosen surfaces, then peels it off, paint, splinters, superficial wear and tear marks and all, thus providing himself with a kind of monoprint, heavily embossed and textured, which he then fixes up into a formal composition.

His transfigured Marley tiles, desk drawers and skirting boards are both attractive raw material and ghostly remains. The technique is ingenious, the outcome all his own, though there are built-in hints of Johns, Oldenburg, Schwitters and many more, going right back to the leftovers of ancient Pompeii.

Romanticism hangs in the air at every turn: in Anthony Whishaw's panoramic stretches of ground and void dotted with pinpoint highlights and punctuated with trackmarkings. Clyde Hopkins goes in for fine turgid cloudschemes, full of cosmic intimations, like Turner's late, 'unfinished,' Apocalypses. Michael Bennett has veered back from the wholly non-figurative to a half-way stage, painting sunset seas, in choppy brushstrokes, with streamers licking across them in ragged counterpoint.

Bennett and several others, among them Mali Morris and Geoff Rigden, are the most promising element in the Annual. They establish them-

selves here as distinctive and inventive painters, drawing on recent tradition rather than wallowing in it.

Most of the paintings in the main section of the exhibition could only have been done in the past 20 years or so. They are products of the acrylic era, quick-drying, gel-bound. They are large-scale extensions of watercolour practices: the wash, the sketchy flurry, opaque puddling, calligraphic brushwork. The enlargement involved, from note-pad to man-size, even wall-size, canvas, helped generate inflated claims and pretensions. Since the late Fifties, bigness has all too often been mistaken for greatness and the indecipherable autographic touch for essential freedom of expression.

The weaknesses of this Annual are glaring. They stem not so much from the individual empty gestures, the plunging on and on and on in streaks and trickles, as from the chaste, formal presentation. Everyone is given a fair chance—a good showing—with the result that the failings are more immediately apparent than the rare qualities of controlled nerve and sustained vitality, of startling, fully-achieved purpose.

But then this is almost bound to be so. Longueurs have to be tolerated for the sake of the transcendent moments. Installed in echoing galleries, in sort of temple conditions, the grandiloquent flourish. It takes time to see through some, to find others wanting, and then to get round to experiencing the remainder—the Ultima Thules—properly.