

Letter From London

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LETTER FROM LONDON

In the past few years there has been a steady increase in the number of photography galleries opening up in London. In addition to this the more established galleries have turned to dealing in photography with the realization that there is a growing interest in this area of collecting. British art collectors are, however, slow to rush into buying photographs, unlike their counterparts in North America and Europe.

In September Marlborough Fine Art held an exhibition of photographs by Brassai called "The Artists of My Life" to coincide with the publication of a book of the same name by Thames and Hudson. The last major exhibition of Brassai's work was held at the Photographers Gallery in Covent Garden. "The Artists of my Life" showed photographs of Brassai's friends and fellow artists over four decades. Brassai's involvement with the Surrealist group of artists meant that he could photograph Dali, Breton, Éluard in addition to other artists living in Paris, such as Giacometti, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Dufy and many others. All the great artists who seemed to have any connection with Paris and France were represented in this exhibition at which Brassai had agreed to be present.

Contrasts Gallery in Dover Street opened in December 1980 with Helen Srakocic as director, who previously worked at the Photographers Gallery. Contrasts represents photographers such as Imogen Cunningham, André Kertész, Bill Brandt, Edward Weston as well as British photographers such as John Blakemore, Paul Hill, Brian Griffin and George Rodger. Recent exhibitions have included work by European and American photographers and in late 1982 work by the photographer David Bailey, better known in the commercial fashion world.

Although there are many other photographic galleries in London such as Kodak, Olympus Creative Camera, Beehive, the British public are slow to take to buying photography and especially contemporary photography, not that they were ever great buyers of contemporary painting and sculpture either. Unlike Europe and North America where sales in photography are booming, Britain as usual takes its time. The British art collector has always been a safe investor rather than an innovative collector. Now that more established art galleries such as Redfern and Marlborough are dealing in photography this may well change.

Apart from photography the New Image figurative painting has swept across Britain as in Europe and North America. It is quite a shock change to see disturbed colourful figurative paintings full of depth and inner feeling after years of quiet abstracts and at times turgid derivative

mathematical equations. In many ways it is a refreshing welcome change showing that abstract painting in England at least had reached its burn out point. Galleries showing examples of this new image painting in London are Nicola Jacobs (Ken Kiff) Nigel Greenwood (Christopher Le Brun), Anthony D'Offay (Bruce McLean), Blond Fine Art (Eileen Cooper) and Waddingtons (Braco Dimitrijevic).

Eileen Cooper, a young artist from the north of England, showed work in the summer at Blond Fine Art Gallery. The colours were disturbing, refreshing, thought provoking, sensual and original in every way. Eileen Cooper's work should show interesting developments over the next few years as she is still at a very early stage of development in her career.

In more established circles the opening of the Barbican Arts Centre in Central London has caused many an argument. The art gallery was badly designed and it appears that this was due to lack of communication between architects, city librarians and administrators and partly due to the British habit of pushing art last after theatre, music and books. The first exhibition, "Aftermath—Images of Man", was a major historical French art show and the next, of Indian performers, was suitably circus-like in its make-up and had the misfortune to open during the British rail strike and only half the exhibition material arrived in time. It is quite clear that the Barbican, with its magnificent theatre, cinemas, conference centres, concert halls and library, is not going to be a gallery space of any significance, which does seem a dreadful mistake.

1982 was the year of Indian exhibitions, festivals, music and general cultural events. The Hayward Gallery exhibition, although spectacular in its vast coverage of 2000 years of Indian painting and sculpture, was upstaged by the Victoria and Albert Museum's "The Indian Heritage—Country Life and Arts under Mughal Rule". The latter was spectacular in design and held your interest at every spangling corner. There were costumes, jewellery, recreations of palace rooms, thrones, pottery, paintings and historical facts about their splendid wealthy period of rule. The event that held most interest for the public, however, was the curse laid on the exhibition by a visitor of Indian birth who objected to the display of religious objects in a secular context. Following this curse an employee sprained his ankle badly and then a poor unsuspecting visitor disappeared through the floor of the exhibition, luckily living to tell the tale.

In Spring '82 Australian contemporary art made a change from historical India with exhibitions and events at the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Serpentine Gallery. This was an exciting display for the British public, who still believe

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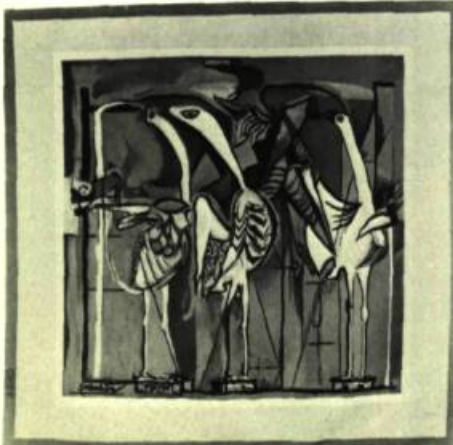


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that Australians are more interested in Fosters lager and surfing than the finer things of life. The Sydney Biennale and the Adelaide Arts Festival have brought many overseas artists to Australia and the word has been spread that things worth watching are happening out in Australia. Video and performance at the ICA showed work by Mike Parr, Kevin Mortensen, Jill Orr, Frank Bendinelli and Robert Randall. The Serpentine Gallery showed the more static work with photographs by Wesley Stacey, paintings by Imants Tillers, New Image garish nightmare paintings by Peter Booth and Earthworks Poster Collective as well as Tom Arthur's disturbing skeletal sculpture pieces.

In late 1982 and early spring 1983 links between Britain and the USA are to be strengthened with the ICA holding a month of New York performance and media. In New York in April/May 1983, "Britain Salutes New York" takes over the five boroughs of New York with British art, arts events, British products being promoted in a major arts festival and fringe festival. Henry Moore and Constable's England are at the Metropolitan, the Royal Ballet at the Lincoln Center, British cinema at the Museum of Modern Art, British art from the Guggenheim Collection at the Guggenheim and many exhibitions of work by contemporary British artists throughout New York's galleries. New York will be saturated with British arts events covering dance, theatre, music, art, video, multi-media, cinema, poetry in every available venue. It promises to be a unique

gathering of contemporary British arts occurrences.

During the last year there have been several unusual exhibitions in London. The Paton Gallery, a new gallery in Covent Garden, held "The Alternative Tate" exhibition of works selected by three artists and three critics. Graham Paton, the gallery owner, was trying to point out that the Tate Gallery ignores a whole variety of artists when considering adding to its collection. Ironically, plans have now been revealed that the Tate will be expanding its gallery space to include a collection of work by British artists under 45, so perhaps it was successful in some ways.

Waterloo Gallery, an artists' cooperative in South East London, held two days of "Live Art" with performance and multi-media events. Artists included Marty St. James and Anne Wilson, Richard Layzell (who recently toured Canada and the USA) and Max Eastley and Company as well as other live artists. Sadly, this exhibition marked the closure of the space for studios and gallery events, as the building is due to be demolished in the near future. The third area is an expanding one for artists who have recently left art school and realize that there is an ever-growing audience for multi-media events. Richard Layzell works in video and performance, and Marty St. James and Anne Wilson use ideas from contemporary everyday life such as romance and relationships.

The Tate Gallery held a major exhibition of Graham Sutherland's work in May 1982. His

paintings are drawn from landscape and nature as well as some remarkable portraits of Somerset Maugham, Helena Rubinstein and the famous Churchill portrait that was destroyed. Sutherland's work as a war artist in World War II made an ironic but interesting comparison with that of the Falkland Islands war artist Linda Kitson's. The Falkland Islands War came as quite a shock to those of us who had never experienced a war in our lifetime, albeit a war thousands of miles away. As I write this, two car bombs have exploded in London, killing several and injuring many. IRA unrest is upon London again, marking what unsettled times we live in.

To end on a softer note, the painting of the Scottish artist Elizabeth Blackadder was shown at the Royal Academy in July. Her work, lyrical in tone and singing with tonal colour, content and light, shows us objects floating in space with Japanese and Asian influence carefully chosen for shape and colour. Cats, fish, flowers, patterned boxes, all float in delicate watercolour tones of blue, grey, yellow, orange, apricot and green. Her oil paintings of Greece, Scotland and France are stronger in design and colour. Somehow she reached the appropriate design and colour as when a composer hits the right musical composition. Her figures, although rare in appearance in this exhibition, looked ill at ease as though wandering through a foreign landscape of the mind.

Heather WADDELL



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