

ART

Preview

Japan's camera obscure

SARAH KENT ON
BEYOND JAPAN:
A PHOTO THEATRE

The press release describes this exhibition of postwar Japanese art as aspiring to 'a universal culture... where East and West are no longer fundamental divisions and Japan is no longer an exotic archipelago on the other side of the globe.' It depends where you stand, whom you perceive to be 'on the other side' — it would be

the Barbican has got it right, for once, and mounted a show, curated by Mark Holborn, that makes perfect thematic sense.

Each section is presented as a piece of theatre, which seems right: postwar Japanese art focuses on a plethora of surface information — style rather than structure.

It begins with the devastation of the war: moving photographs by Kikuji Kawada of crumbling, blood-splattered walls and ceilings and the portrait of a young soldier; and Ryuji Miyamoto's tangled vistas of ruined theatres. Next comes 'The Theatre of the Body' — dramatically abstracted nudes by Eikoh Hosoe which embody a distinctly Japanese admixture of eroticism and cruelty. 'Embrace #42' shows a man's hand aggressively squeezing a breast. 'Man and Woman' shows a woman about to kiss an elbow shoved in her face like a huge phallus. Hosoe's montage sequence 'Killed by Roses' (1963) is a strange, erotic discourse on death that seems, above all, to embody fear of the feminine and features the death-obsessed writer Mishima, who committed suicide seven years later.

'The Theatre of Revolt' includes 'Power Now', a fabulous photograph by Noriaki Yokosuka of a body bent double to form a fist; a ridiculous video by Tadanovi Yokoo of Lisa Lyon posing



Australian Aboriginal Art

BARBICAN

There doesn't seem to be much more to say about Aboriginal Art. We've talked about the tradition — the use of sand painting to pass on the 'Dreaming' (Creation and other myths) to the younger generation; the history — setting up

snake that has killed all but two members of a family. To delineate the tale he uses the traditional colours — ochre, earth red, green and white; and the familiar signs — footsteps, handprints, concentric circles, arcs, eggs and bands with tassled ends.

But Possum's handling of the paint is much finer and his articulation of space so much more complex that, whereas

point the idea of a universal culture is appalling. Who wants uniformity, when diversity is so much more exciting?

Judging by this exhibition, Japan has failed in its attempts to be less strange or exotic. Thank God! This is the weirdest, most disconcerting and most wonderful exhibition imaginable. Not because the layout is confusing —

EIKO ISHIOKA



naked outdoors surrounded, like Brünhilde, by a ring of fire; and a video of Tatsumi Hijikata performing his extraordinary, two-hour ritual dance 'Revolt of the Flesh'. He jerks, stomps and pirouettes, whirls like a Dervish, dresses as a woman, wears a gilded phallus and sacrifices a chicken. One thinks of Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty', of New York Happenings and Hermann Nitsch, but none are as narcissistically extreme. Shuji Terayama summed up its ethos with the dictum 'Theatre is chaos'.

'The Theatre of the Street' includes photographs of Tokyo by the American, William Klein. In the superb catalogue (published by Jonathan Cape at £19.99), his photographs are described as embodying 'the language of chaos'. In comparison with the Oriental vision they seem ordered, clear and rational and offer the relief of a familiar sensibility.

Masahisa Fukase presents a performance in a helicopter; Kikuji Kawada shows a woman lying naked in a park at night — an image on a fallen poster. You don't know where you are. Certainties melt; visual hierarchies disappear; perspectives and priorities shift; focuses change. Everything is dispersed, levelled and layered. There is no terra firma: vertigo.

Nor do hierarchies exist within the arts. Comme Des Garçons presents a ritualised installation, Issey Miyake exhibits his clothes like abstract paintings and Eiko Ishioka rounds off the exhibition with a slide show of her opera, film, exhibition and graphic designs.

Most are active in several different art forms; everyone collaborates with everyone else. The catalogue describes Terayama as a 'poet, dramatist, film-maker and creative genius'. The phrase sums up most of them. Awesome.

Beyond Japan is at the Barbican until September 22.

communities in the Western Desert where the Dreamings are recreated in acrylic paint on canvas to be sold to whites; the business — the promotion of the pictures in Australia and abroad and, finally, the decline — as the old artists die, no one is interested in carrying on the tradition. What this show reveals, though, is how enormously the quality of the work varies. Clifford Possum is in a different league from the rest. His 'Rainbow Snake Dreaming at Mount Dennison' uses the common dot technique. It tells the story of the hunt for a

some of the pictures seem little more than repeating patterns, his work repays close attention. Also included in this diverse show are black and white prints by Jimmy Pike featuring birds, butterflies, snakes, figures and even aeroplanes; painted burial poles from Bathurst Island and a series of extraordinary photographs of Aborigines by Richard Garimara. If you go after 4pm the rhythmic intensity of the paintings is enhanced by Cyruung's mesmeric playing of a didgeridoo.

Sarah Kent

Russian Constructivism and Suprematism 1914-1930

ANNELY JUDA

Constructivism reaches the parts other-isms cannot reach... 'Only modern art', wrote Olga Rozanova (officially a futurist but, frankly, the -isms are indistinguishable), 'has advocated the full and serious importance of such principles as pictorial dynamism, volume and equilibrium, weight...' and so on for another nine items. These artists were an earnest lot — understandably so. Malevich is one about whom you feel that, if he hadn't existed, you'd have to invent him: the essence of modernism.

As usual at Annelly Juda's, this is an intelligent selection: 'it's what we could get', Juda says laconically. There are about 50 exhibits, if you include the magazines and ceramics, and 15 artists. Alongside work by Malevich, Rodchenko, Tatlin, El Lissitzky, Popova and Gabo, are pieces by the likes of Ermilov, Matiushin and Alexandra Exter, who are less well known. Much constructivism was about plans for Utopia, although paintings were also made for their own sake. The standard constructivist trope is the depiction of translucent interlocking planes, and there are some powerful Popovas in this vein. The sophisticated and spiritualised development of this can be seen in the simplification of painting — Suetin's delicious 'White Cross' is an exercise in shades of white. Impossible, surely, for anyone not to like the show.

David Lillington

