



TOILER OF THE DEEP, 1989

CANVASSING OPINION

GETTING WALL SPACE AT A LONDON GALLERY IS QUITE AN ART

by David Brittain

Photograph by Clive Boursnell

TO "MAKE IT"

on the London contemporary art scene, a painter must first crack the gallery code. Whether he or she is fresh out of art college, in search of that first critical show, or a professional with a good reputation, a show in Cork Street or Portobello Road can be more than the chance to enhance the c.v. For a start, the capital's galleries are well-connected with the most important critics and the wealthiest patrons, in this country and abroad. In addition, artists who belong to a "stable" are well looked after. The gallery will relieve them of the day-to-day grind of administration, groom their reputations, represent them abroad, and even offer the security of a regular income offset against the sales of works.

Take Peter Wilson, 49, a talented Scottish-born painter and printmaker who works in rural Leicestershire. Despite a career dotted with awards and glowing reviews, Peter has so far failed to make it in London. He won the kudos of the 1982 Arts Council of Great Britain Major Award, and has had work purchased by prestigious collections like the Contemporary Art Society and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. Peter's art is the visual equivalent of jazz improvisation. His brush takes fantastic people and beasts for colourful meanders across canvas. *Time Out's* art critic, Sarah Kent, has written: "Peter Wilson is able to touch on some fundamental aspects of being alive."

From a list of all the London galleries I picked 10 that I thought would be sympathetic to his work and contacted them to

discover who might offer this provincial outsider an opening. (This autumn was not the best time to approach galleries, it transpired, because the market has been nervous due to high interest rates. Few gallery directors are prepared to take on new artists in this climate.)

London has over 250 venues for visual art, according to a recent list published in the magazine *Arts Review*. But there are probably less than 70 places that will consider showing and selling innovative contemporary art, once you've eliminated subsidised institutions like the National Gallery; galleries devoted to showing only craft, design or photography; galleries owned by foreign institutes, and what are known in the trade as the "Duke Street galleries" which deal exclusively in antique oil paintings.

Edinburgh is the nearest rival to London with only 32 galleries – of which three are major institutions and just under half of which show contemporary art.

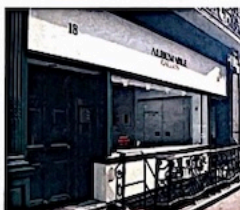
As I found out while choosing the galleries I wanted to approach, "contemporary" is more likely to describe a recent painting of a bowl of fruit than anything surprising. The trick is to go for the galleries that already have an audience for the work: at the end of the day, art is a commodity subject to market forces.

Armed with a presentation package of 20 slides – I was told no painting should be too big for a bank-vault – favourable press clippings and a curriculum vitae, I went ahead, confident that this mature artist would be considered a far safer gamble than the most promising beginner. And surely the current popularity of Scottish art would be to our advantage (an early

20th-century painting by the Scottish master, Peploe, recently fetched over £500,000 in auction).

I found out the names of key people on my shortlist that I would be meeting, and wore my photography critic's hat when I phoned them to make appointments. Gallery administrators will talk to the press when they will fob off anyone else. So far as the galleries were concerned, I was acting as Peter Wilson's agent: I even had a card printed.

ALBEMARLE GALLERY



A mainstream contemporary art gallery, which tends to show artists such as Melissa Scott Miller. Within minutes of taking the slides, Lisa Guild, the administrator, broke the bad news: "This gallery – or its directors – are too conservative for this 'funky' work. Just look at the walls." The current show was of safe, established British masters like John Piper. Helpfully, she advised me to try the Vanessa Devereux and the Berkeley Square galleries. Unlike most gallery administrators, Guild clearly felt duty-bound to meet artists. "It's ten times better to go to a place than to send in slides. If you send in slides they end up on the wrong desk." Of galleries that never

see artists she said: "They run the risk of letting the next Picasso slip through their fingers."

18 Albemarle Street, W1

MARLBOROUGH FINE ART



Founded in 1946, this gallery deals in people with proven track records such as Francis Bacon. Despite its reputation for being snotty, I walked in off the street and asked if anyone was available to look at Peter's portfolio. I was told by one of the staff I met at reception: "Artists don't choose us – we choose them." When I asked what interested them about the 25-year-old Scot, Stephen Conroy, whose exhibition was currently on the walls, I was told it was the press attention surrounding the squabble over his contract with another London gallery. Persistence earned me an introduction to a smart young Frenchman seated at a desk built for looking at balance sheets, not art. Politely, though without conviction, Laurent Delaye looked through the slides, then said at last: "We never exhibit an artist we don't represent."

6 Albemarle Street, W1





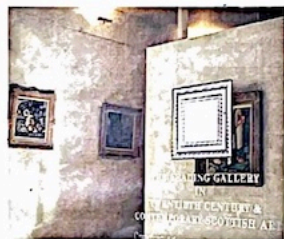
A commercial gallery with a stable of 15 artists including Sheila Girling and John McLean. A polite but firm receptionist said: "We don't see artists but you can send in slides with a self-addressed envelope." This turned out to be common practice. 17-18 Great Sutton Street, EC1

ANDERSON O'DAY



A highly respected gallery for young British artists. Prue O'Day agreed to see me without any fuss. She has the kind of laugh common among gallery people: nervous and short, as if it has to be rationed. She kept a poker face while looking at the work. The walls were booked for three years, she said. Having decided she didn't like the canvases, she asked me to resubmit Peter's prints later in the year as she was currently re-stocking her print holding. A lot of galleries deal in prints - editions, lithographs, etchings, screen-prints - as they are cheaper and consequently easier to move than paintings. 255 Portobello Road, W11

THE SCOTTISH GALLERY

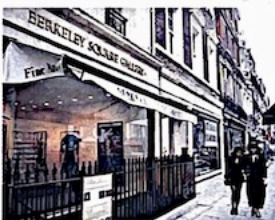


Specialists in established, Scottish painters such as William Crozier. At the end of a turgid 10-minute silence, during which he flicked through the images again and again, their dealer Geoffrey Bertram said: "They do start to grow on you." Finally he suggested I call back in two months. When I did I was told apologetically that the gallery for showing new work was to close. Maybe in a year's time... 28 Cork Street, W1



One of the newish galleries around Portobello Road. I made contact with the ebullient Vanessa Devereux herself by using the name of *Artline* magazine, for which I have written. She told me she usually never sees artists. ("If we spent half an hour with everyone who came in we'd never do anything else.") Devereux made no effort to conceal her enthusiasm and I thought I could feel my first bite. First she wanted to know what my "interest" was - an agent's commission adds as much as 15 per cent to the price of a painting. Surprisingly she had reservations about the fact that Peter was Scots. "There has been so much hullabaloo about Scottish artists you sometimes feel like going the other way." After half an hour she decided to keep a set of slides and promised to contact me in a week to arrange a visit to Peter's studio in Leicestershire. Devereux telephoned three weeks later to say she couldn't take him on. Ironically, one of the reasons was that she had committed herself to a major show by artists from a Scottish print workshop. 11 Blenheim Crescent, W11

BERKELEY SQUARE GALLERY



Like many galleries, this one subsidises new contemporary art - for which it is known - by also selling "blue chip", established 20th-century masters. David MacIlwaine asked me the usual questions: What's your interest? (Was I an agent?); Who else have you seen? (Who can I canvass to find out what they thought of it?); How old is he? (Will he expect a lot of money?); Did he study with Bruce McLean? (We know all about Scottish art). When I told him the Albemarle had rejected the work because it was "too whacky" he was impressed. "It's nice to feel you've got something that's a bit odder than people seem to accept." After carefully inspecting the package, MacIlwaine announced that the gallery might exhibit the drawings - but only in the context of a group show. His colleague Amanda Jeffrey works in the corporate section, selling art to big firms. A tough-talking Australian, she quickly got to the

topic of money. When I told her that Peter expected to earn £750 from the sale of a monotype (one-off print) she turned pale. That just wasn't realistic, she said, when a canvas by an unknown can retail for the same price (calculated after adding 60 per cent gallery commission). "With the greatest respect, I'm sure Bruce McLean's monotypes are cheaper. That's an absolutely commercial, very unattractive way of dealing with it," she said unapologetically. She also echoed Vanessa Devereux by saying that Peter being a Scot could be a minus factor. Why? "Because the critics like to build things up to put them down again." Eventually MacIlwaine and Jeffrey said they would like to visit the artist (to talk money direct) providing he and I "could be honest" about his prices. When Peter heard that the gallery wanted to retail his monotypes for £750 he was incensed. And some weeks later a Cork Street gallery was selling Bruce McLean monotypes for just under £3000 each. 23a Bruton Street, W1

REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY



Contemporary art with an Australian bite. Rebecca Hossack looked through the work there and then while she was answering telephone queries. "Sorry we can't do anything," she concluded. "As you can see, we're going more... minimal." The current mixed show was desert paintings from Australia. Before I left, her assistant - no doubt imagining she was softening the blow - asked: "And where did you say your studio was?" 35 Windmill Street, W1

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS: THE ART OF SURVIVAL

As we go to press no one has made a firm commitment to exhibit Peter Wilson's paintings and prints. From my experience I can see why artists would rather not go around galleries personally. Some gallery people - though by no means all - are patronising, and artists may resent the fact that galleries view their work only as a commodity. On the other hand, many people in galleries feel artists approach them with a chip on their shoulder.

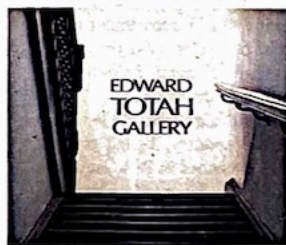
Private concerns like the Berkeley Square Gallery feel it is easier to talk business to an agent but, as everyone knows, an agent's existence is precarious. As soon as he puts the gallery in touch with his artist he risks getting cut out, for the sake of 15 per cent.

Presentation is important. Lisa Guild of the Albemarle Gallery assured me that I was doing



Opened in September 1988, this has a good reputation for breaking in new talent, such as Frank Creber and Peter Ellis. I contacted them because one of their staff had once expressed an interest in Wilson's pictures. A woman called Jane answered my call and told me that the person I wanted had left. Could anyone else remember seeing the work? Jane covered the receiver for a few seconds, then came back to tell me no one had heard of Peter Wilson. Nothing would persuade her to see me. But she agreed to give me her comments if I left the slides with them for three weeks. I decided not to comply with her suggestion, having learnt that slides may get put to the bottom of a large heap and kept for much longer than three weeks. 199-205 Richmond Road, E8

EDWARD TOTAH GALLERY



A gallery specialising in international contemporary art. Olivia Goodwin told me: "Try again in six or nine months. We've just been sending slides back to people." There's no arguing with that. First Floor, 13 Old Burlington Street, W1