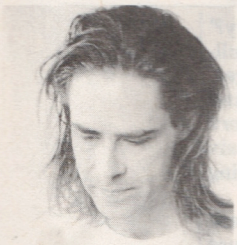
ART

New reviews edited by Sarah Kent



DAVID LILLINGTON

On Academicism

In order to define their own position, British Modernists needed enemies. Here they are: the Royal Academicians. 'The Edwardians and After, the Royal Academy 1900-1950' is an attempt to set a record straight. The record is that the Academy is stodgy. This exhibition is intended as proof that it is more liberal and interesting than has been supposed.

William Strang's 1910 'Portrait Group' has a quality noticeable in many of the show's good paintings: a muted sumptuousness of colour — here purples, greens, reds, ochres and a typical juxtaposition of a silvery white with black. 'Portrait Group's' six characters are interesting, and its composition fascinating. There are many other impressive paintings. John Singer Sargent's interior, for example, which describes light beautifully; and Sickert's picture of Venice, which reinvents it. Sickert resigned from the Academy when it failed to stand up for sculptor Jacob Epstein. 'What is the Academy for?' he complained. Stanley Spencer is also here, being brilliantly weird. Spencer, too, resigned, although he went back 15 years later.

There are a lot of images of women, and quite a bit of muffled eroticism. The only poignant study of female sexuality is Harold Knight's 'Ethel Bartlett'. In this, the sexuality is not the painter's or the viewer's, it is Ethel Bartlett's. Frank Cowper's 'Vanity' of 1907 is essence of the Victorian: beautifully painted with crisp, separated colours and gloriously artificial. What is this petulant High School girl doing in medieval finery? It is seductive, certainly, but faintly ridiculous. Sculptor William Johns's bronze 'Elf' is a squatting female nude. She is gorgeous. But that's what's so irritating. Johns wants to convince us of his admiration for a beauty at once innocent, classical and pagan. What he really wants is to sleep with her. It makes you feel like saying: 'Go for it Sir William, she can only say no.' On the other hand, there's James Shannon's delightful picture of his daughter, 'Silver and Black', which has some of the qualities of Strang's painting. And Herbert Gunn's highly polished 'Pauline Waiting', a study of elegance in black and green.

Particularly interesting landscape painters include Reginald Brundrit, Rodney Burn and Charles Gere. Their styles are completely different, but all are English to the core. Brundrit's painting is aggressive but atmospheric; Burn applies colours as if they were jewels; Gere's romanticism is at least related to the landscape, unlike the romanticism of Alfred Parsons' 'Orange Lilies, Broadway', which seems somehow to be a picture of a woman disguised as a picture of a garden. It makes you thank God for Monet. Would Monet have got into the Academy? And if so, when? In the main catalogue essay it is noted as significant that in 1940 Pierre Bonnard was elected an honorary member. But *1940*, for goodness' sake.

There is a second catalogue essay by Lawrence Gowing. It is perceptive and measured, but written as if he were one of the boys. He talks about a painting by George Harcourt. 'George Harcourt's violinist daughter', he says, 'is a vivid reminder of the appalling recitals of one's childhood at which the lady violinist infallibly wore a hat.' A reminder of *what*? Whose childhood? And there she is, another High School girl, all smug and pretty. There are some excellent and lovely things here. But I'm not sure the Academy is worth writing a manifesto for. Let's face it, something bourgeois runs through it like the writing that runs through a stick of rock.

'The Edwardians and After: the Royal Academy 1900-1950' is at the Royal Academy until October 21.

CRITICS' CHOICE

1. Seven Obsessions
Whitechapel

A fascinating show of seven innovators; the work includes a nine-ton globe covered with toy trains, a drawing machine, a beeswax house for 60,000 bees and framed autobiographical stories. The artists 'obsessions' are psychological and sociological. Cool but haunting work.

2. Futurism in Flight
Accademia Italiana delle Arti

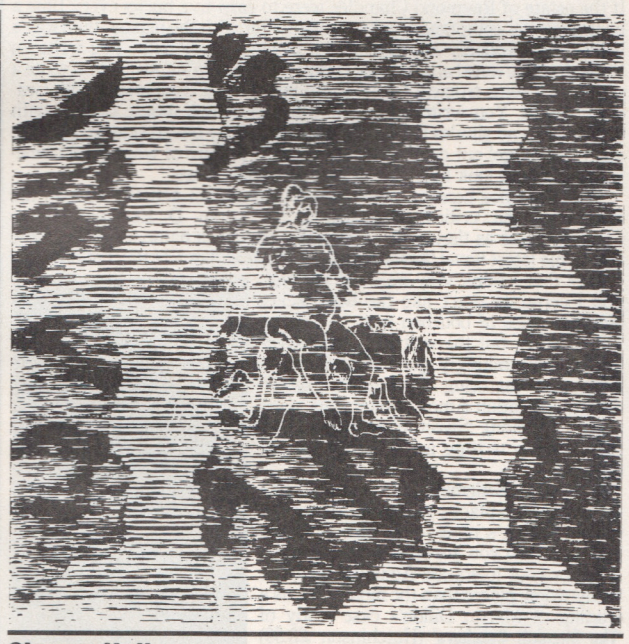
Celebrating man's conquest of the air was the sort of thing the Futurists were really good at, and this extensive collection of 'Aeropittura' paintings, by all the most famous Futurists, is an impressive demonstration of their energy.

3. Naum Gabo
Annely Juda

Annely Juda opens her beautiful new gallery in Dering Street with a splendid, centenary exhibition of sculpture, drawings and paintings by Naum Gabo, who was born in 1890.

4. Courtauld Collection
Somerset House

Quite the most wonderful collection of paintings in the country — its relatively small scale makes it less overpowering than the National Gallery — moves to the restored rooms of Somerset House where its splendour can be fully savoured.



Sharon Hall

Rebecca Hossack

Sharon Hall won the Rome Award this year, and judging by her recent work, showing here, it was for sheer intelligence. Hall makes her viewers work hard. Her 'Reversible World IV' has an image (haystack chases horse) purloined from Breughel, drawn in paint and superimposed on an image (wife beats man) from a sixteenth-century German playing-card. The wife-beats-man image is set sideways. The whole is extremely difficult to read clearly; it's interesting enough however to inspire the effort. Smaller paintings quote sixteenth- and seventeenth-century primers and catalogues; a quartered, crosshatched canvas has, for example, images of trousers, a cradle, a drum and a basket of flowers.

Political issues are raised in her work, particularly that of the social position of women — but the ideas which communicate most are about the language of art. Hall speaks of presenting her images as 'signs open to new narrative readings'. This isn't as esoteric as it sounds: in the paintings you are well aware of looking at an old visual language translated into a new one — sixteenth-century alphabet pictures meet abstraction. Many of the engravings Hall uses as sources were very much a visual 'language', sometimes almost literally translatable into words. Modern art is committed to the language of ambiguity. Hall says her work is optimistic, and it does *look* optimistic, but it also makes you wonder where art goes next.

David Lillington

William Latham

Natural History Museum

Can art be made on computers? Of course it can, but people expert on these machines have a tendency to show off. William Latham programmes a computer to make complex 'organic' forms, reproduced here as cibachromes. Some of them resemble textile sculptures, some of them plastic — not even real plastic, but an ersatz plastic, if you can imagine such a thing. Spirals abound, and strange protuberances, all based on natural forms. Then there's a video of a trip through the centre of a ram's horn shape; it's like journeying through a floodlit intestine made of plasticine.

There are some genuine natural objects here: seashells, a turtle shell, dried red seaweed. These really are beautiful. And real. This show claims among other things to demonstrate nature's beauty. It fails in this. No one looks at nature any more, only pictures of nature, but its complexities are appreciated only if you spend time with it, actually *look* at it. Give the show a miss, go to the countryside.

David Lillington