

Sickert the figurative father figure

Student of Whistler and friend of Degas, Walter Sickert (1860-1942) can, with some justification, be thought of as the father of Modern British figurative painting. Through his teaching, and the foundation of the Camden Town Group of artists, he became an influence to successive generations of British realist painters.

There's been growing talk in recent years of a so-called London School of artists, a loose group of painters who chose to side-step abstract and conceptual styles of art to concentrate on producing figurative representations of the world around them. Bomberg, Auerbach and Freud are among those included but at the head comes Sickert, and perhaps with this in mind, the Tate Gallery has decided to mount a rare showing of its entire Sickert collection.

The exhibition covers the last 50 years of the artist's life and though there are few of

his very best works, the display does contain examples of the main themes that inspired him, from the dingy suburban interiors and intimate nude studies to the music hall scenes and the more formal portraits.

There's a sense of understatement about all the works, most are small and Sickert's palette was loaded towards the muddy end of the spectrum, although a chalky brightness does occasionally appear. The intimate scale, and absence of flamboyant gesture and colour has led to some charges of dullness but if Sickert is considered an acquired taste, it's one well worth acquiring.

Arthur Berman



Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford, one of Sickert's early music hall scenes now on show at the Tate Gallery, Millbank SW1 Mon-Sat 10am-5.30pm, Sun 2-5.30pm

Hall of mirrors

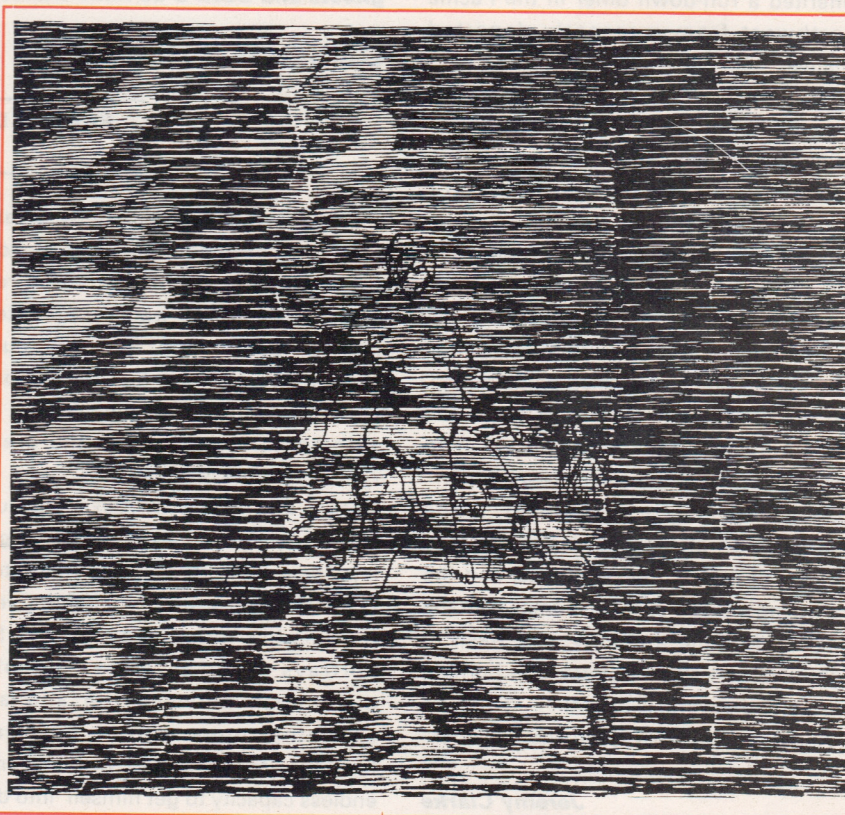
It's not always easy to look at the paintings of Sharon Hall.

A couple of works in her latest exhibition in particular are cause for severe squinting. With these, the lines of colour that she so meticulously applies to draw out her pictures, jar very awkwardly together.

Rather like gazing into the charts used to test for colour blindness, an awful lot of uncomfortable concentration is required just to separate out the shapes. But that's just the start, unravelling the moral in her narratives is just as teasing.

In contrast to the straightforward Sickert, Sharon Hall likes to play games and generally try to subvert artistic conventions.

Several of her works recycle images from 18th century woodcuts based on the theme of 'the world turned upside down'. In this vein she introduces a donkey riding a man and a sheep shearing a shepherd. But a painting that defies the viewer to look at it, is a droll, contemporary addition of her own.



Whichever Way You Look At It. A typically cryptic painting from Sharon Hall's exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 35 Windmill Street W1 071-409 3599. The show runs until September 22, Mon-Sat 11am-7pm