

Painting out of a corner

Artists and galleries are fighting the slump. David Langsam tours the front line

Art gallery directors have developed a range of responses to this long, deep recession. They include price-cutting, gimmickry, scandal, closure and, in extreme cases, suicide. Some owners and directors have an air of desperation for publicity, any publicity; of desperation for a sale, any sale.

One director said buying was a "habit" people could lose. So galleries are trying harder to attract customers. A range of ideas is being employed: Rebecca Hossack claimed a victory over the recession with an exhibition of cheap and cheerful at her Windmill Street gallery in London. It sold 20 pictures described as "small and affordable works" at an opening, chiefly of Australian Aboriginal dot paintings and, surprisingly, a number of difficult abstract landscapes.

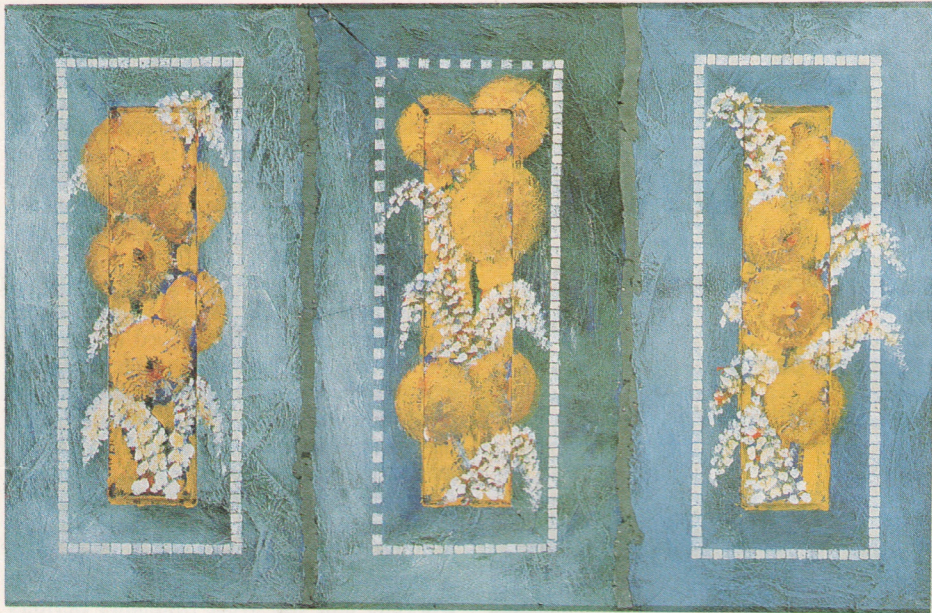
With prices around £200-£300, Hossack said customers were primarily students and artists normally priced out of the market. She opened her second gallery in Piccadilly in October 1991 and has somehow weathered the storm. Many others, including the prestigious Fisher Fine Art, have closed their doors.

In Camden, north London, Gillian Jason Gallery in Camden has held a series of nine one-week exhibitions entitled "Artistic Associations" showing the work of related artists. The gallery is happy to confess that the idea is a ploy to encourage visitors. Over in Finsbury Park, John Jones' picture-framing business has subsidised the launch of his large, well-curated gallery. To encourage sales, Jones has cut artists' fees by 20 per cent and reduced prices to include frames and VAT.

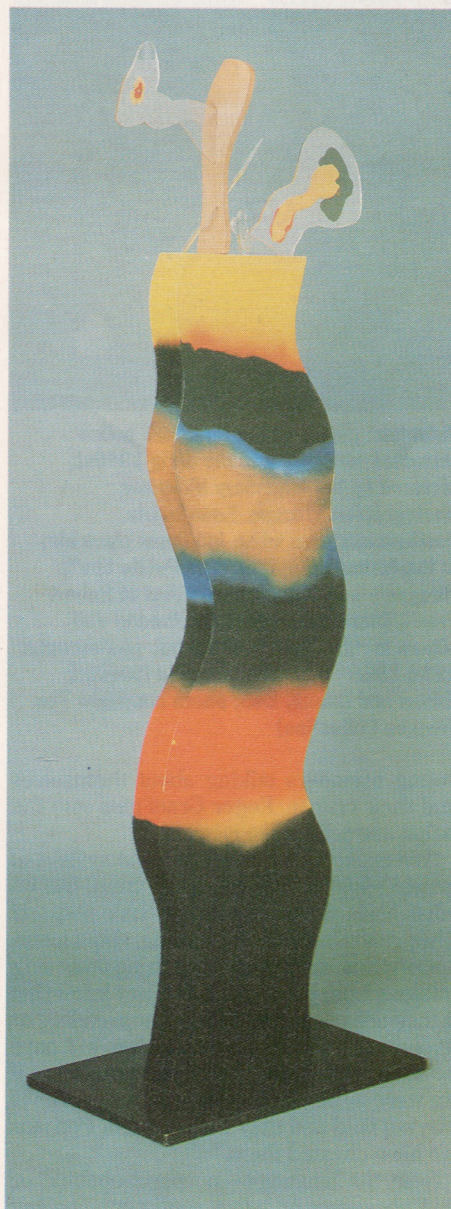
Chili Hawes, director of the October Gallery in Bloomsbury, says corporate sponsorship has been her gallery's salvation. Companies and banks with interests in Trinidad and Tobago assisted an autumn show of contemporary paintings from there. "I'm not doing anything unless it's sponsored up front. The costs of the exhibition have to be covered," she comments.

The loss of Greater London Arts funding has placed constraints on the gallery's operation and means the financial risk-taking of the past would not be repeated. Hawes sold one painting at the opening, and three more subsequently, all in the "lower price range" of £500 to £1,200.

At the Union Street Gallery in south London, owned and operated by artists, Daniel



On offer in Cork Street: above, Ray Gillespie's "Orange Blue"; below, Allen Jones' "The Third Man"



Sturgis decried exhibition sponsorship as a corruption of art. His cooperative is attempting to beat the recession with short, fortnight-long exhibitions. It has had some excellent shows, including a memorable series on identity by Janette Parris. The gallery itself is sponsored by The Coffee Compass.

At Anthony D'Offay, the "Strange Developments" exhibition could be accused of using sex to sell pictures, but few of the controversial works were for sale. Besides, where does one put a man copulating with a barrel?

The 19 galleries of Cork Street in the West End decided to hold an open weekend before Christmas, which attracted fair to large crowds. It was not overwhelming (though certainly not underwhelming), and an inspiration for a more leisurely return visit. The concept of opening galleries at times when people can visit them isn't exactly the most radical in the history of art, but runs counter to the arrogant complacency of many London venues, whose staff sometimes act as if they don't want to sell pictures to ordinary people.

A new Cork Street director, Patrick Corbally Stourton—who specialises in Australian Aboriginal paintings—said the recession was a lesson for galleries that regard the public with disdain. He is ambitious, and has forced his way into the art business. His gallery is always open until late afternoon on Saturdays, whereas most others close at 1 or 2pm. While most dealers do have groups of important clients, Corbally Stourton comments that today's lower prices for contemporary art have meant an upturn in sales to non-collectors.

But David Solomon, of East West Gallery in Notting Hill, comments that the days of impulse buying are long gone. "In the boom, £1,000 impulse purchases were common," he says. "Even successful galleries will admit in private that they are supported by a very small number . . . four or five . . . collectors who buy on a regular basis." One gallery earns half its income from a single source.

At the Cologne Gallery, director Winfried Reckermann believes that this recession is

merely a return to normal conditions. "Everyone gets stars in their eyes when they talk of 1989," he says. "But the market was overinflated and the gallery closures indicate that things are back to normal rather than in a tailspin." He has survived worse times, specifically the 1970s oil crisis.

The Tate Gallery's director, Nicholas Serota, agrees with Reckermann. The late 1980s contemporary art boom was fuelled by people earning "a lot of money" from property, advertising and finance, who have been hit hard by recession. Many have had their fingers burnt, expecting easy profits in the run-up to the crash, and the speculation is no longer taking place.

Serota says that some very good artists don't work for the art market, but life was "much more difficult" for those who do attempt to live from their work. Although the Tate has ambitious plans to split its British and modern foreign collections and move the latter to a new site, the gallery's frozen purchase grant of £1.8 million this year compares to £2 million back in 1982. In Paris, the Pompidou Centre has £3 million a year to spend on 20th-century artists alone.

Apart from the failure of the economy, Serota also blames government education policies, as cuts have wiped out precious part-time teaching positions. "There are fewer part-time posts than was the case 10 or 20 years ago and that has made it much more difficult for artists . . . to supplement their earnings from selling work by earning teaching income."

The good news is that it is an art buyer's market, although prices might fall further. Serota says that the Tate is now able to act without the pressure of the late 1980s and consider which works it wants. The flow of offers from dealers has resumed.

Artists themselves are keen to sell works privately, with a £200 real sale considered more valuable than a £1,000 price tag on an unsold work on a gallery wall. Offers have been made at openings within metres of the gallery director. But even sales don't necessarily mean a living. One artist sold five paintings at an exhibition and was told he still owed the gallery money for framing and expenses.

Despite the manifold approaches to beating the slump, one thing gallery directors don't seem to be doing is exhibiting representations of the recession. With images of suffering a constant theme in art, the absence of works depicting the failure of both western and eastern economic systems is curious.

Landscapes, the body and abstracts all abound, but there are few works reflecting the hard times that artists and now gallery owners, like the rest of us, are suffering and seeing on our televisions. Perhaps contemplating VAT demands, interest rates and the uniform business rate is hard enough without having to sit in a room of unsold images of despair.

Art 93, the annual fair of new work for sale, is at the Business Design Centre, Islington, London N1, from 21 to 24 January