Art

BATTLE-WORN BEAUTY

This extensive exhibition reveals a group of artists devoted to a cause bigger than themselves

Deborah Nash

CONSCIENCE AND CONFLICT: BRITISH ARTISTS AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

★★★★☆

To mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), Pallant House Gallery in Chichester has mounted this thoughtful exhibition. Paintings and drawings of refugees and war-torn landscapes, protest banners and posters urging action and aid, photographs and video footage together show how British artists responded to the conflict, and the clarity of the two sides drawn along ideological lines of fascist Right and socialist/communist Left.

The paintings of John Armstrong are my favourites. He depicts civilian homes as though they are wounded soldiers, their facades torn away, their roofs off, tattered wallpaper fragments shaped like dying doves floating to the ground. These are no battlegrounds, these are ruined domestic settings cunningly anthropomorphised.

There's no escaping the fact that Picasso's Guernica has been the dominant memorial for the barbarity of the Spanish Civil War, and included here is its companion piece, Weeping Woman. Dora Maar, Picasso's mistress, is a portrait of suffering, her splintered, stained-glass face lacerated by tears, her hands stuffing a handkerchief into her mouth to stifle a scream. In such works, Picasso demonstrated to British artists that pain, grief and torment are better conveyed through the language of abstraction.

Several thousand volunteers from Great Britain went to Spain to fight on behalf of the Republicans; Laurie Lee was not alone in recognising this war's significance.

Poignantly, some never came back. Vanessa Bell urged her son, Julian, not to sign up to the International Brigade but her advice was ignored and Julian was killed driving an ambulance. Felicia Browne died before she could fulfil her artistic potential at the age of 32; Jason Gurney's career as a sculptor was ended when a bullet struck his hand.

These were artists who believed in a cause larger than themselves, their work an expression of an ideological position in relation to world events, and a willingness to defend their beliefs that extended even to direct action. It is not often found today.

◆ *Until 15 February at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester: 01243-774557, pallant.org.uk*

◆ *From 7 March to 7 June at Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne: 0191-232 7734, www.twmuseums.org.uk*

Picasso's Weeping Woman (1937)

...AND LAST CHANCE

REMBRANDT: THE LATE WORKS The exhibition (right) presents themes such as self-scrutiny, experimentation, light and observation of everyday life, all of which fascinated Rembrandt in his later years. Until 18 January. National Gallery, London WC2: **020-7747 2885, www.nationalgallery.org.uk**

JOAN DANNATT 90TH BIRTHDAY EXHIBITION The story of Joan Dannatt's extraordinary life and career is illustrated through this collection of works (centre), dating from 1933. Until 31 January. The Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery, Conway Street, London W1: **020-7436 4899, www.rebeccahossack.com**

AKRAM KHAN: ONE SIDE TO THE OTHER The second exhibition in the Performer As Curator series presents a personal selection of sculpture, painting, photography and film which has inspired Khan (above). Until 1 February. The Lowry, Salford Quays, Greater Manchester: **0843-208 6000, www.thelowry.com**

WHICH PLAY BEGINS...

'Would God no Argo e'er had winged the seas.'

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TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM; IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM; JOAN DANNATT; TATE LONDON, 2014