

*Anthony Caro sculpture.*

THE BRITISH ART SHOW

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'The British Art Show' is the most important exhibition of our fine arts this decade. It has been touring the length of Britain and Scotland since opening in Birmingham last November, receiving nearly double the usual exhibiting time of art shows at each venue.

Launched in an impressively streamlined manner, the sheer volume of work - varied media by 82 artists - makes it worthy of attentive study. And the tour route is surprisingly democratic, encompassing centres previously shunned by major art attention (notably Birmingham and Sheffield), an initiative radically different to the major 1983 art survey which the Tate Gallery mounted in London. In sharp contrast, the Tate only selected from its own collection and refused to tour the show.

The British Art Show is a joint venture

between the Arts Council and other financing sources, the issue of private sponsorship being quietly proposed. The fine arts presently exist in a suspicious cocoon, wary that the Thatcher pruning of state finance could accelerate again on an already well-trimmed arts support bill. Banking and petroleum companies, amongst others, have helped sponsor this show but the extent is not revealed, nor is the fact lauded. Rather, the underlying chord is that the fine arts are clearly being shifted into financial areas untypical of our recent experiences. Observers of all political shades thus have a magnetic interest in the British Art Show. The art works are not the only ideas being displayed here.

Turning to the art itself, a number of pertinent factors soon become evident. There is a quality of attention lavished on the paintings - especially their relative

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positioning to other media - leading instantly to suspicion that the selectors have played it very safe, choosing a conservative, populist show. Certainly at the prestigious opening venues - two major galleries in Birmingham - good pieces of sculpture were squandered by the poverty of planning. Prime exhibiting spaces were allocated to established painters such as Basil Beattie, John Walker and Gillian Ayres, whilst some rooms housed scatterings of barely related sculpture, reminiscent of junk shop interiors rather than art presentation.

By taking the show in sequence, much of the sculpture tends to be located at the very end of the long stream of art works. Perhaps it is thought modern sculpture is only for those hardened, enlightened, or merely plain silly enough to persevere to the finish of a contemporary art collection? This is a disturbing implication, encouraging the subtle ghettoisation of sculpture from which much popular prejudice and abuse stems. The selectors have here declined to oppose such manoeuvres.

The painters Gillian Ayres and Frank Auerbach are two of the 'old allegiances' of the catalogue catchphrase. Ayres represents the finest elite of a distinct trend in British art, that of romantic pain terliness. Highly fashionable (almost institutionalised for the half decade this show surveys), she works on large abstracted canvases, chequered with ribbons of drippy, bright paint, even selecting her picture titles - *A Belt of Straw and Ivy Buds*, *Ariadne on Naxos* - from a shopping list of suitably evocative phrases.

Beside Ayres stand the permanent sen-

tinels of paintings by Frank Auerbach. Diligently working from regular models - people he knows intimately, landscapes he has frequented for decades - Auerbach has produced an immense body of work since the 1950s, commanding respect on an international stage. The work of Auerbach fits well into this exhibition as a dependable landmark. But these paintings and drawings, for all their importance, could have been produced a decade ago, perhaps earlier. And the concerns that Ayres so colourfully addresses - the enjoyment of paint, the lightness of perception, the validity of romantic indulgence - are in many ways tied into art produced centuries ago.

Concentrating on sculpture - which is by no means easy to do, so slim is its profile in the British Art Show - a collection of packaged schools are offered to us. Anthony Caro, celebrated heir to the throne of Henry Moore, is represented by the predictable welded iron sculpture, neither questioning nor advancing his concerns, merely repeating a statement he has eloquently made for years. Richard Long spins out *30 Stones of Cornish Slate* across the floor, a healthy, direct statement, indicating a determined shift in certain sculptural schools towards the rawness of materials and purity of natural elements. A photograph by Long - of a shoreline - confirms the gulf between the stylistic convulsions of many paintings in the exhibition and the frankness, the trust in craft, of various sculptors at work today. Had they so chosen, the selectors could easily have emphasised this tendency, in

the process doing the popular image of sculpture a definite service.

The media beyond painting and sculpture represented in the exhibition is restricted and timidly selected. Popular conceptions that the finest photography and innovative film production are the domain of commercial advertisers are not challenged, the photographs in this exhibition flirting with mundane themes and the almost blanket shunning of video production is a sad surprise. The British Art Show stays very much on the side of what it has decided is 'real art' and ignores opportunities to explore new avenues.

The juice and quickness, the originality and tension shown in the best of British art over the past five years has been planed smooth in this exhibition. Occasionally a work does splinter this sheath, provoking a spillage of questions, arguments and ideas. The triptych *Oceania my dilemma II* by acclaimed painter John Walker is one example. Terrorised, diseased humanistic faces strain in a totally uncontrollable landscape, every part of the canvas affected by the multidimensional fissures and blights. It's not cheap melodrama either; an awful sadness drifts across this ghostly holocaust, only one monolithic form surviving the upheavals. Almost alone in this show, this one work feels positively related to 1985: a world wracked by alienation, pain and fearful forces, despite the good intentions of its population.

This creditable but ultimately disappointing show presents our art as an area separate from the radical changes afoot in our society. The catalogue catchphrase 'old allegiances, new directions' could, on this evidence, be easily reversed. It would help us immensely to identify and discuss the contradictions in our artistic production if organisers of such shows would go out on a limb, provoking debate. Works that could form cornerstones of arguments are here conspicuous by their absence.

Meanwhile the arts arena heaves and jerks, no 'new directions' of any definite substance last and in their absence old thrones continue to be preserved. Around the immediate production of work wider arguments rage about sponsorship, packaging and the very form of the fine arts today. This exhibition does record the situation (albeit sketchily), but stops short of taking any initiatives towards the questions we have to face. It's not simply a sideline problem for artists; the cultural production of our society involves us all.

