

Clare Henry on the Scottish art that travels badly

# Northern Lowlights

When the 'first authoritative survey' of 'Scottish Art Since 1900', opened last June in Edinburgh, my heart sank. Then anger set in. This long-awaited exhibition could make or break Scotland's reputation. The timing was right. Scotland's international standing has been riding high for several years.

From the century's early decades, Scottish Colourist paintings have started fetching more than £0.5m, selling to America and Japan. And as for the present day, young Glasgow painters are at last able to make a living and receive widespread critical acclaim. The Scottish Renaissance is flourishing.

One look at the exhibition and my hopes crumbled. Tame, misleading, with serious omissions, it politely chronicles an enfeebled version of Scottish art. It lacks impact, excitement, punch. This is, in the main, conservative

**'This is conservative Edinburgh drawing-room art. It eschews dangerous topics. No vitriol; little passion'**

Edinburgh drawing-room art. It eschews dangerous topics. No vitriol; little passion.

News that the show is to be exhibited at London's Barbican Centre (**Scottish Art Since 1900, February 8 - April 16, 1990**) only deepened my disappointment.

Glasgow is representing Britain as European Capital of Culture for 1990, thus drawing immense attention to Scotland. While America and Germany have taken modern Scottish visual art to their hearts, the English, and London in particular, have regarded this hype with suspicion, fear and sometimes envy. All Scots are aware that they must live up to the promise. But with friends like the organisers of this exhibition, who needs enemies?

While the exhibition's pre-war period can just about get by, the contemporary section is a farce. There is nothing recent from the famous Glasgow Boys - Campbell, Howson, Currie, Wiszniewski. Young turks like these

develop apace and three years is a long time in the career of fast movers.

No new work from Ron O'Donnell and Calum Colvin, the two photographers now on the world circuit; nothing ambitious from star sculptor David Mach; nothing at all from Alison Watt, Beth Fisher, Joyce Cairns or any of the other women who are now giving the Scots macho image a run for its money. Indeed, out of 107 artists who make up this 'major survey' only 17 are women.

Why? Could it be because this exhibition was organised by the establishment Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art? And the catalogue sponsored by Baillie Gifford & Co, an old firm of investment managers whose byword is safety not experiment?

Yet over the past 30 years the Scottish National Gallery has spent many millions on its permanent collection. They have also been very lucky with bequests and gifts. And where gaps exist, pictures have been borrowed for this exhibition.

This is where the whole claim to be a 'survey' show falls down. Many of the most influential living artists (Jack Knox, Bruce McLean, Elizabeth Blackadder, Mark Boyle for instance) are merely represented by a token early work, often done when they were just out of college. Major artists are represented by minor works. Yet a simple telephone call could have secured a top-class example from each and every artist.

In some instances the lack of balance is scandalous. Essential Scots omitted, second-rate artists included for no apparent reason.

Where pictures have been borrowed, often from London dealers, the choices are so flawed that one can only assume they have been summoned, as in the case of abstracts from John McLean, to fit a misconceived premise. For instance, most would dispute the catalogue's claim that 'Scots looked to New York for inspiration in the 1960s'. This assumption



Scotland's new talent: 'Glasgow Boy' Peter Howson's *St George* (1989)

is made with little evidence and no research among those artists still alive - and there are many - who were around in the 1960s.

National identity has prompted extensive political and

cultural claims over recent years. It has seemed to me a false argument to try and force all Scots artists into the strait-jacket of group ideology, 'Scottishness', 'painterliness', or equally, into 'social

realism'.

What good Scottish artists have in common is their excellent training and superb basics: draughtsmanship, compositional skills and so on. A good old-fashioned art education system, now ironically in danger, has seen to that.

The diverse range of work was demonstrated in the 1987 Edinburgh Festival exhibition 'The Vigorous Imagination', when 17 very different artists put Scotland on the international map 'as a centre of prodigious activity'. That exhibition was later cited by American art critics as on a par with Berlin's 'Zeitgeist' and London's 'New Spirit in Painting' and placed the seal on the Scottish Revival.

Regionalists, however, do have grounds for complaint. The north-east is outrageously ignored, as though Scotland stopped at the Firth of Forth. Only one single Aberdonian, Ian McKenzie Smith, is included despite the fact that Aberdeen has been a lively creative centre for the past 20 years.

Until now it has been all too easy to equate 'Scottish' with 'figurative' art: with the urban deprivation or rural irony of Howson, Currie or Campbell. Although this has been true of the '80s, the 1990s already show signs of change, with a move toward abstraction and conceptualism.

Ironically, just as the great popularity of figurative art is peaking, Glasgow's Labour council has established a £3m fund to buy contemporary Scottish art for the city. Until now, as leader Pat Lally admits, the city has badly neglected contemporary art and their holdings are 'abysmal'.

Have the councillors developed a sense of loyalty - or perhaps just realised the investment potential? Whichever, it now means that Glasgow can easily outstrip Edinburgh's National Gallery acquisitions. So how about Glasgow putting on a truly marvellous representative exhibition of 'Scottish Art since 1945' in a few years' time - and setting the record straight?©