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# Twelve Painters

## Mary Turner

AYRTON : BURY : DA FRANCIA : GREAVES : HERMAN : KORN  
MIDDLEDITCH : MISKIN : RICHARDS : ROBERTS : TURNER : ZULAWSKI

THIS first exhibition of paintings at the Partisan Coffee House calls for some note of explanation although eventually all explanation is irrelevant to the paintings. The reproductions and the poem from the catalogue show what these artists are on about.

The occasion for these shows was the shock felt by a few painters at the exhibition AIA25 shown at the RBA Galleries, London, in spring, 1958. This exhibition was to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Artists' International Association, a society which, to quote Andrew Forge's part of the preface, "was started as a movement towards social responsibility. It recognised, as no similar movement among artists had done before, that the first need was for them to act as political men." Unfortunately these artists saw their political activity externally as an attachment to the big causes while in their work they accepted anything from mannered drawings of O.K. subjects, hunger marchers and workers in factories, to abstraction which was supposed to be keeping the universal qualities of art inviolate until society was ready to make use of them. But in spite of these confusions, there was a body of painters interested as men in more than a private game and feeling connected to the rest of the world. After the war the AIA had its internal battles which echo the positions taken up in left wing politics generally; the extreme left wanted to send ambulances to a Spanish war that had been lost and the rest in fighting so hard against an unreal politic, drew the teeth of the organisation and ended

up with a cosy lending library and a belief that the Arts Council reflected the nation's awareness of its social responsibility towards the arts. In this atmosphere Adrian Heath, the chairman, had to organise a 25th anniversary exhibition. He did the only thing an abstract painter could do, he filled the main room of the gallery with large non-objective paintings and made the statement that these artists no longer feel that their rights and status as artists are threatened and that to reflect this change of feeling the organisation has lost its political characteristics. So in the face of the enormous amount of space that these large empty paintings took, and a statement which accepted the present isolation of the artists as satisfactory, it seemed more urgent than ever that artists who had an intelligent interest in life as well as a serious concern for painting should have somewhere to hold exhibitions and place their work and views before a public. The Partisan offers this space and the *U.L.R.* magazine gives room to talk about it.

In spite of all that, which after all only upset one or two people, these shows are conceived positively. They can be considered as an attempt to thaw the "Cold War" of art which has been forced on us to some extent by the gossip column critics who divide art into social realist and American influenced non-objective to the bedevilment of most art talks—see Eric Newton at St. Pancras Town Hall, Realist versus Abstract; prize fight?—and the irritation of all

serious artists. It forces them to line up on one side or the other instead of co-operating and discussing how one man can include more ideas in his work or how another can refine his technique in order to make a more precise statement of his idea. Of course there are extremists on both sides who benefit from this split; for an artist who cannot draw—and through drawing one seizes upon the idea—the illustrational subject or the abstract doodle are equally easy ways out. It just depends which club you wish to join. Now these painters at the Partisan are serious; it's the only general statement they won't argue about, for painters are suspicious of words, they have had them used on them too often. They would like each work to be faced unprejudiced by labels which usually hinder perception; they want you to see what they have seen and what every one could see if their eyes were not so blinded with the commercially debased forms on every poster hoarding, bad education, bad information and publicity about art, and a way of life that makes minds work ahead of bodies—time is money therefore constant rush. What these artists have looked at varies enormously from a simple exultation at seeing a bunch of flowers (Halin Korn) to the complicated awareness of a sick baby being held in frail human hands (Ceri Richards); then there is the critical painting such as the satirical portrait of a rich spineless intellectual who composes his face before he dare advance across a room towards people (Ken Turner) and the comic view of an artist who sees the Coronation as a circus (Lionel Miskin). All very different but all positing a value, saying this is worthwhile or this is a waste of time, each trying to communicate this awareness to you.

And you, the public, have a most important part to play in all this. These artists wish to communicate to you and if you don't try to see the paintings, talk about them, buy them, and even more important commission them, they will feel that they might as well amuse themselves in the game of extremism.

This first exhibition has been open a few days now and the main criticism has been the high prices. These prices are not the conceit of the artist they represent what a dealer can get for the picture. A dealer works on commission so he wants the highest price and after working an artist up to a good figure he will naturally be displeased if the artist should undersell him. As the dealers represent the only way an artist can sell his work, the Arts Council merely re-endorses what goes on at the galleries, you can't expect the painters to sell at socialist prices. It's as simple as that.

But if you make a socialist policy for the arts, decentralize patronage to every town council in England, the artists won't wait outside the museums; in like manner give them walls to paint and they won't submit easel paintings. So you see your position as individuals and as a planning left wing is very important, for it's on your attitude to his work that he believes in your promises for the future. To the artist, a philistine left is a reactionary left, whatever is economics.