

'right' and that which is 'wrong'.

As Mies van der Rohe, the great builder of our modern cathedrals, acutely observed, "God is in the details". □

SEVENTH MOSTYN OPEN

by Mel Gooding

Mostyn Open was as good an exhibition as you would expect to find at what has become one of the most interesting and adventurous provincial galleries in the British Isles. (Why is it galleries in places by the sea – Southampton, Swansea, South Shields, Eastbourne, Plymouth, Stromness, to name those that come immediately to mind – seem to have such bracing policies and lively programmes? – *must* have something to do with the air.) My use of the term 'provincial' here is entirely positive, intended to suggest the nature of its special distinction. For the strengths of Oriel Mostyn derive to a great extent from its very remoteness from the capital cities of Cardiff and London. Llandudno is handsome and



elegant, its natural setting spectacular, and the Gallery itself is beautiful: Edwardian terracotta outside, stylishly *beaux arts* inside, with top lights diffusing bright peninsular-marine light into two grand rooms. It has an enthusiastic audience drawn from a wide catchment area (North Wales, across to Liverpool in the east) whose loyalty (and magnitude)



grows in response to a programme of uncompromising quality at a national and international level, supported by lively connections into the local schools and colleges, and a publishing project that produces brilliant original books and catalogues. There is a quality of concentration to the whole operation: of its being its own thing in a particular place, not a satellite; a generative centre of energies.

A good situation, then; and a good exhibition. But before I consider the specific, a general question seems to demand an answer. What is the point of an 'open exhibition' anyway? In the first place, of course, it offers artists the opportunity to have work critically selected, and shown in a public exhibition that has a history and a reputation, and which is likely to be seen by a substantial number of interested (and disinterested) people, including critics and gallerists. This benefit extends to those beyond the many (good) artists for whom the seasonal 'open studios' (which are by definition semi-private and non-selective) provide the only certain platform for their work. Major reputations have been given a crucial boost, or been revived, by the timely winning of an Open prize, and there are many very good artists who have benefitted critically from a notable appearance, prize-winning or not, in one or other of the great Opens.

This important function of the annual Open has been emphasised in recent years at the Whitechapel, with the staging of the show in a variety of other venues beyond the Gallery itself, allowing far more artists to be selected from the enormous artist population in its catchment area, and creating what amounts to a spectacular *Artfest* in the East End of London. Two other annuals, the RA Summer show, open to Academicians and all-comers, painters, sculptors, architects and printmakers, and the recently revived John Moores at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, for painters, are in their different ways significant events in the art calendar. These major forums serve the public by presenting an unpredictably heterogeneous mix of contemporary work; they demonstrate in the most direct way the sheer diversity of contemporary practice, and give an alarming indication of the extraordinary number of artists there are working at a serious level.

The Mostyn Open has quietly entered the national lists, and has the potential to become a very important event, by virtue of an ingenious device which has allowed the Gallery to build up a public and a reputation gradually, increasing its commitment of resources as the Open has itself developed: each year since 1993 the prize money has increased by a thousand pounds. This year, the seventh of the Open, the prize, awarded to sculptor Andrew Sabin, was £5,000, next year it should be £6,000; it's a prize worth competing for (the more so since it is not a purchase prize), and it seems likely that the entry will include an ever-increasing number of nationally established artists. This year there were fifty-one exhibited works out of nearly two hundred

and fifty entries, mostly from younger artists, from all over the UK and Ireland, selected by Susan Daniel, the Mostyn Director, Penelope Curtis from the Henry Moore Institute, Mike Tooby, Director of the Tate St Ives and artist Lois Williams.

Clearing, Sabin's prize-winning sculpture, is at once lyrical and menacing. The title itself is oddly misleading: approaching the work, looking into and through it, is like an encounter with a thorn thicket. Its outer surface bristling with innumerable sharp points of steel wire, it is from this aspect intractable and unfriendly, an uncomfortable image, prickly, potentially violent. Retreat, and from a distance it re-



assumes another character altogether, creating the impression of a soft greyish transparent cloud, its outer edge diffused: in fact the piece is modular (its size can be changed accordingly), each component a sphere like a dandelion clock seedhead. It works, then, by oppositions of response, depending at first on your nearness or distance, and then on the contradiction between what you perceive and what you know: soft / hard, cloudy / spiky, charming / threatening, beautiful / dangerous. It is an extraordinary work.

There were several other object sculptures of real distinction in the show, each very different in mode and effect, and each employing humour, as

Right
Above
Lisa Milroy
Hair Dye, 1993
(from the *Tokyo Paintings*)
Oil on polyester, 21 x 26 cm

Below
House, 1993
(from the *Tokyo Paintings*)
Oil on polyester, 21 x 26 cm

Facing page
Rome Façade, 1994
Oil on canvas
52 x 63 cm

FACING PAGE
Masakatsu Kondo
Two Drakes, a Duck, 1995
Acrylic on canvas
103 x 137 cm

Charles Mason
Forms of Love No. 9, 1995
Wood, plaster & cellulose
26 x 92 x 49 cm

ABOVE
Andrew Sabin
Clearing, 1994
Steel
Dimensions variable
(each ball 18 in diameter)

Above photos Noel Brown

if the traditional gravitas of sculpture were no longer a viable option. Charles Mason's *Untitled (Forms of Love No 9)*, consists of two shiny red bean shapes enigmatically connected by a tubular arabesque: sexy, self-contained and deadpan, it made me want to see the others in the series. Tony Hayward's wall pieces, beautifully crafted out of domestic materials, ornaments and bits of carpet, combine landscape and still life in ironic tableaux, kitsch remembering high art on the living room wall. Jane Mulfinger's *Surface Reading – A Hair's Breadth* weighs against each other the seven volumes each of the braille editions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Crime and Punishment* in real scales, to find them almost evenly balanced: light and heavy reading perhaps having equal claims to our attention, each being concerned with inescapably important moral matters. The metaphorical solemnity of this presentation contrasted with the minimally light touch of Judith Dean's three sculptures, two of which consist of conical wax crayon shavings arranged into neat circles to resemble tiny collar ruffs. Each is entitled *Installation for a Chihuahua*, one red, white and blue, one white, subtitled respectively "*Rough patriotic version*" and "*Rough 17 century version*": the onomatopoeic link of title with the little dog's bark amplifies the quirky visual wit of these oddly affecting works.

Painting was also strongly represented, most notably by Dominic Shepherd's *Master of Reality*, a psychedelic fantasia featuring butterflies, fungi and a cosmic eye in a Peter Doig-like snowstorm. That sounds terrible, but in fact Shepherd's wonderfully absurd fiction is an exuberant assertion of the viability of any subject, and any mood, as a pretext for serious painting: its 'now you see it, now you don't' games play on the ironies implicit in the title. What can painting do, and what not? What reality is mastered by whom? Three other works stood out for me as demonstrating the marvellous range and freedom of painting at this time: the monochromatic grey shimmer of Edward Chell's beautiful abstraction, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, is as far from Shepherd's cinécolour extravagance as it is possible to get, yet the title hints at an underlying thematic connection; Masakatsu Kondo's *Two Drakes, a Duck*, mixes photographic effect with simple sign (three black ellipses) in a picture that convinces us of the reality of its subject even as it demonstrates the arbitrariness of the languages it employs; and Annette David's disciplined process, combining in one image the sheen of graphite with the matt of acrylic, issues in the iconic black simplicity of *Bagatelle V*, an object of contemplation that without irony or self-consciousness takes its place in a tradition of painting that goes back to its beginnings and shows no sign of ending. □

The Seventh Mostyn Open was at Oriel Mostyn, Llandudno, December 1995 – February 1996