

The Visible Invisible Women

Jerwood Pointing Prize
Lethaby Galleries, Central St Martin's
London
30 September - 18 October 1997

Overheard recently in a blue chip West End Gallery:

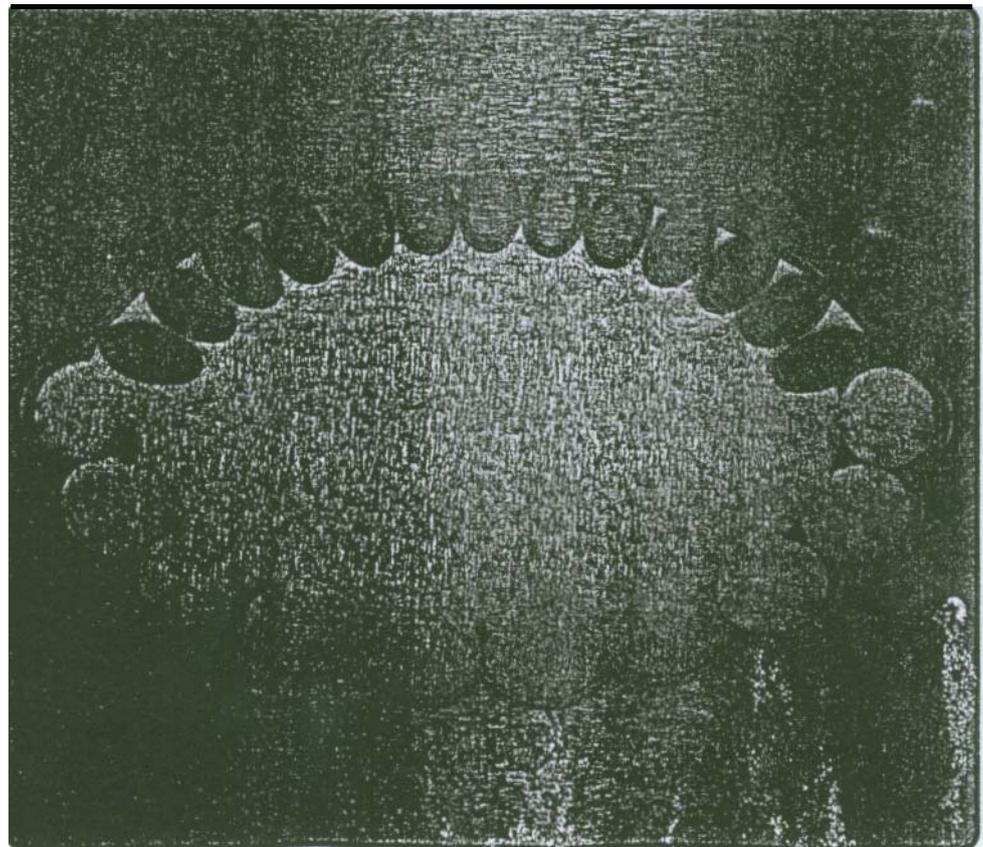
American collector: "Do you have any painting by contemporary British women?"

Gallery saleswoman: "Well you know it's quite strange, there are a lot of female sculptors and video artists around at the moment but no painters."

The Jerwood Foundation's annual painting prize has undergone a change of heart. Originally promoted as a kind of anti-Turner Prize by the magazine *Modern Painters*, (with whom it appeared to have close links) last year's all-male short list felt rather out of touch. This year, however, the selectors have up-dated it with what appears to be a blindingly obvious yet seldom used tactic; the

exhibited 2 women in a show featuring 18 artists; and more recently *About Vision* organised by MOMA in Oxford - and touring - included 3 women painters in a survey show of 19 contemporary artists.' In this sense the Jerwood is a triumph. Although shown in the rather dowdy Lethaby galleries, there is a genuine sense that this exhibition does something other than parade all the usual suspects.

Work by Rose Wylie is probably the exhibition's biggest surprise. These are paintings with a very un-nineties feel, not cool and not ironic. Expressionistic, heartfelt, spontaneous, ugly even and not in a hip kind of 'bad pointing' way. Often inspired by domestic observations, it is the paintings' awkwardness that shocks and reminds one of the homogeneity of the current British art scene. Madeleine Strindberg's paintings are also *very* direct. *Gun* is a simple line drawing of a pistol with a phallic nozzle. *You* features an odd shape which looks as if it is derived from a person's shadow; both are painted block onto a white ground. Strindberg has found a way of distilling complex ideas into simple,



inclusion of a large proportion (two-thirds) of women painters. This is a departure from recent painting shows: From *Here* organised by Waddingtons and Karsten Schubert in 1985,

almost brutish, images. The visual clarity of *You* belies its psychology. The shadow looms close, close enough to be addressed. A subtle blurring occurs between subject and object; is the author engaged in a soliloquy.



talking to her own shadow? Or is this the presence of a loved one, one physically intimate yet emotionally claustrophobic?

Louise Hopkins references the subconscious in a very different way. She uses paint to trace the floral patterns of furnishing fabric stretched like canvas onto a frame. Some of the pattern is untouched and the viewer becomes aware of the artist's labour through the intricate and delicate brush work that slavishly follows the printed pattern. In the larger paintings particularly this keeps the eye occupied and the mind free to wander. The works have the fascination that wallpaper retains for the childish imagination. These are repositories, blank screens for subconscious visions. These works evoke another childhood fantasy, the notion of the inanimate 'coming to life', an explicit interchange between representation and reality. Although Hopkins has 'fleshed out' these flowers with the fervour of a Dutch still life painter, she has eschewed glorious technicolor in favour of sepia. These flowers look dead, aged like tobacco-stained wallpaper. The tragedy of vanitas becomes the vain hope of the artist to represent, as the representation of these flowers remains essentially decorative.

The paintings by Maria Lalic and Jane Harris require a sustained view; these are works that also reveal themselves slowly. Both artists share a desire to investigate the material nature of painting. Lalic's three square, red

paintings from the History series are made within a fairly rigid conceptual framework. The titles reference different historical periods (Egyptian, Greek, Italian etc) and the works are formed through layers of transparent paint that have been made using pigments derived from each era. This analysis of paint as material smartly questions notions of colour as neutral by ascribing each a context, a location and a date. However, more remarkable is that this cool, insistence on materialism does not contain their meaning. The transparent layers evenly applied form seductive surfaces, and emotional resonances are derived from the colour.

Jane Harris, for me, would have been a strong contender for the Jerwood prize (which, incidentally went predictably but not undeservedly, to Gary Hume). Harris's paintings were last seen in *About Vision* where they were badly lit and almost eclipsed by surrounding works of a very different tempo. Here, the strength and intellectual vigour of her work becomes apparent. These works lose much in reproduction, where they become static and singular. Stand in front of them and they appear in a constant state of flux. As the viewer changes position, the light shifts and the paintings 'move' through a series of subtle transformations.

These are deceptively simple works, essentially composed from fluted ellipses which are depicted in different tonal monochromes using a variety of systematic brush strokes. These

paintings carefully balance an interest in process and surface with an investigation of image. The ellipse becomes a void in the centre (there is an unsettling almost-symmetry at work) which absorbs the viewer's gaze. In *Minty Hint* the canvas acts like an ornate mirror, but its reflection disturbs. A non-reflective pool which erases the viewer who stares vainly into its blank surface. This painting appears to offer the possibility of recession and escape yet contradicts it with its insistence of another material plane only fractionally below the outer surface. The viewer's desires are complicated further as the swirling traces of the paintbrush used to create this plane systematically are 'detailed' and require our attention. These paintings are fascinatingly discursive in their questioning of illusion.

These artists, with the other runners-up Joanna Price, Jason Martin, and James Reilly show that the Jerwood Prize is on track. And women painters? It is worth noting that all the male artists and none of the women in this exhibition are represented in *Sensation*. the show of the moment. Let's hope their time is yet to come.

1 The women featured in *From Here were Fiona Rae and Bridget Riley; and Jane Harris, Lisa Milroy and Fiona Roe were included in About Vision.*

Rebecca Fortnum is an artist and a senior lecturer in painting at Norwich School of Art and Design