

# Graduates of the central school of art

Trend-spotters may be disappointed at the Whitechapel Open, but it shows the middle ground doing very nicely

THIS YEAR'S Whitechapel Open is the biggest ever, with hundreds of exhibits filling both the Whitechapel Gallery itself and the wide spaces of the Atlantis building. There are more artists in east London than in any comparable area in Europe, and as usual they have responded fully to their local biannual. Apart from the show itself, an open-studios scheme is in operation. For the next seven weekends a number of studio blocks will receive visitors. Anyone who goes to them all can see the work of more than 800 artists.

It's always said that in the Open the latest trends are on view. Maybe that was so in the past, but this year I didn't find anything particularly advanced, or fashionable, or genuinely new. Instead we get a very good view of the middle ground of art. This is what we should

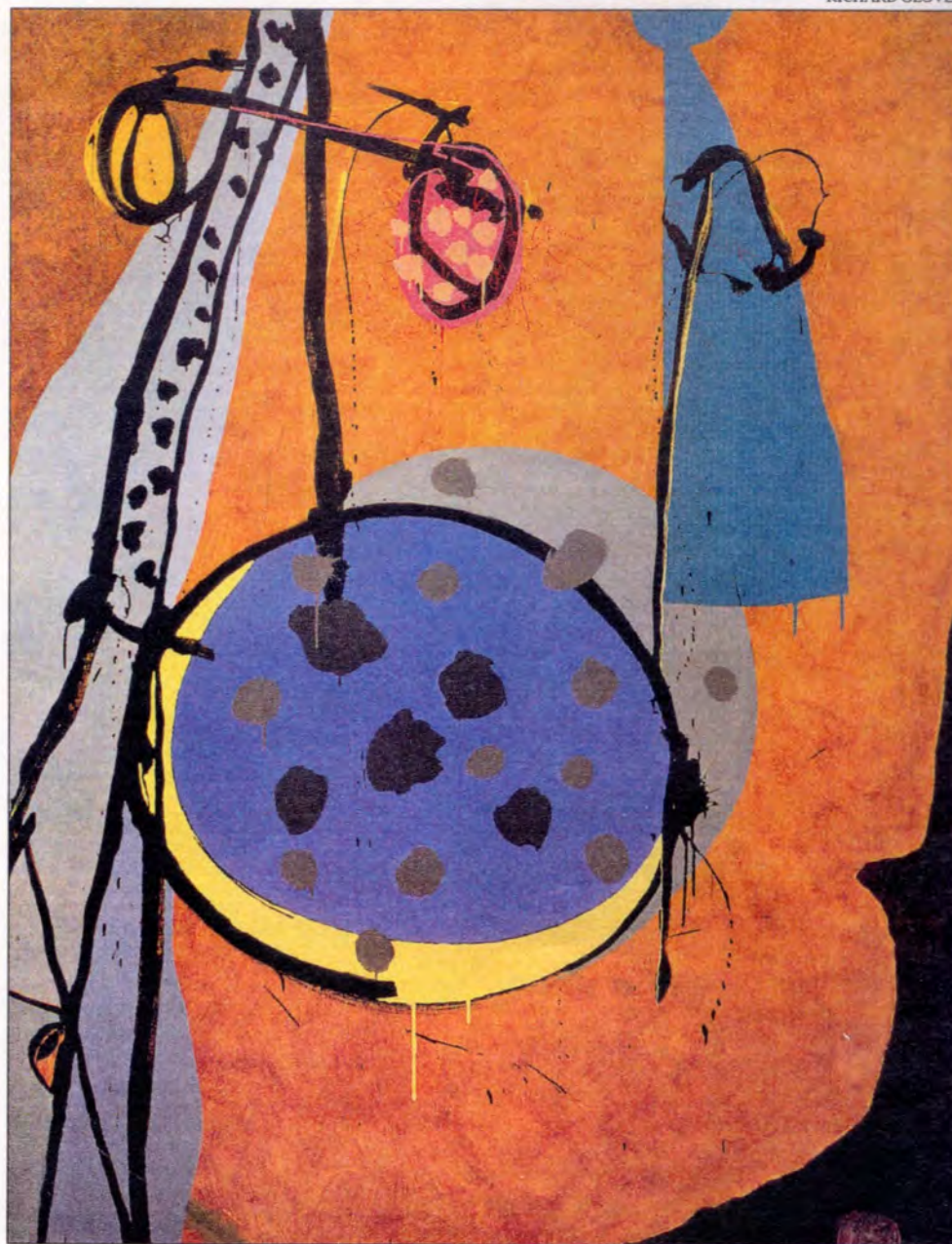
## EXHIBITIONS

By TIM HILTON

expect. Most practising artists — in fact the very great majority — do belong to the middle ground: not especially radical, not conscious of being part of any avant-garde, just getting on with their own work, exhibiting when they can, managing a sale or two every year or so, and enjoying a reputation that scarcely reaches beyond their fellow artists and a few art-world professionals. That's the nature of life, in the artist class. My point is that within this class we find much of the health of contemporary art.

Just how good the middle ground can be is demonstrated by numerous paintings in the Whitechapel — and, I dare say, in paintings by people who weren't accepted, for I note a number of surprising omissions. An excellent canvas is contributed by Kevin O'Brien, whose public career has been rather quiet since he was the National Gallery's artist-in-residence a decade ago. In those days O'Brien was a figurative painter, with perhaps a shade too much lyrical symbolism in his manner. His present and mature style is abstract, though it has references to architecture and organic life. The beautiful *Spanish Chapel III* is made from bold outlined shapes in muted charcoal colours. To the right are seed-like ellipses, to the left a nice piece of scabbled-over brown-black gunge, in its own way a passage of virtuoso handling.

There are no prizes this year. No doubt every penny had to go to the costs of such an enormous exhibition. If there had been awards, O'Brien's painting would surely have competed with Clyde Hopkins's *Crossing the Coast — August 1940* — not that one can contrast them



Open champion: 'Crossing the Coast — August 1940', by un-English Englishman Clyde Hopkins

high-keyed colour. There's more to it than that, for Hopkins at his best has a unique combination of ebullience and underlying tragedy.

Rather a lot of wall space is taken up by the abstract painters loosely associated with the studios in Greenwich. It may be that they appear in such force because one of the selectors

was Sheila Girling (Lady Caro), herself a painter with similar concerns. In any case these artists look very well in the Atlantis. Geoff Hollow, Paul Tonkin, Kay Saunders and Mali Morris all present paintings of considerable subtlety and all show a commitment to colour that is quite absent in today's figurative art. I also enjoyed paintings by Sean Cummins, Colin McCallum and David Gittings, while Fred Pollock's *Highlander* is a terrific canvas, its stressful yellows, crimsons and deep greens forced to work together by an effort of aesthetic will.

In big mixed shows such as the Open, sculpture tends to look like a secondary activity, and I grieve that the installation hasn't managed to be kinder to three-dimensional art. Smaller works by such artists as Elizabeth Wright and Jo Stockham can't really compete with the Atlantis environment. Perhaps the most effective sculptures are the largest, Iain Edwards' grandiose *Carriage No 4* in the Whitechapel and Andrew Sabin's open-wire construction, *Sea Wall*, in the Atlantis. The most thoughtful sculpture is Stephen Lewis's *Juke*, but it seems to be so preoccupied with its own nature that it's shy of company. This is partly because Lewis has painted his welded steel in so many colours, evidently influenced by his friends among the Greenwich painters. I think he has three colours too many, but grant that the piece might look quite different in a smaller gallery.

Apparently, not many photographers sent their work for selection. Emma Rushton's amusing series, *My Ideal Man*, showing four women clutching puppet-sized bourgeois gentlemen, is the best photographic work on display. Photography is to the fore in another exhibition on the other side of London. The Camden Arts Centre is hosting the latest in the series of "BT New Contemporaries". It's better than last year's compilation, but not by much. The photographers look good because they seem to know what they're doing. Ruth Farrington's pictures of her parents strolling through ecological disasters may be derivative, but they are firmly constructed and make a firm point.

Most of the rest of the show is regurgitated neo-conceptualism and is pointless. As usual, the selectors offer us no real painting. I suppose they're trying to avoid the middle ground. But the fact is that our art schools are still sending dozens of good painters into the world and the New Contemporaries project is not truly representing the scene if they are ignored.

□ *Whitechapel Open*: Whitechapel Gallery, E1 (071-377 0107) and Atlantis Upper, E1 (071-377 8855) to 26 June. *BT New Contemporaries*: Camden Arts, NW3 (071-435 2643) to 12 June.