



Above: David Hockney  
 "Tristan and Isolde No. VIII," 1987  
 Oil on canvas  
 Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Inc.

## UK/LA Festival

by Elenore Welles

Great Britain conjures visions of royalty, fog, London swinging with the invasion of rock n' roll, and a host of historical sites. A lively British art scene does not immediately come to mind. UK/LA Festival '88, a cultural celebration of British visual and performing arts, not only reveals a broad new spectrum of ideas and media, but the framework of British idiosyncrasies as well. Held in a host of Southern California cultural venues from February through April, the Festival is presented by the British Consulate General and the British Council in collaboration with a group of local arts organizations. The three-month Festival features over forty opera, theater, dance and visual art events.

Unlike the first L.A. Festival (which overlooked visual arts altogether last September), this festival features a visual arts component which consists of exhibits in

museums, universities and private galleries that cover historical as well as contemporary subjects. USC's Fisher Galleries presents classic British portraiture as represented by Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, and John Constable. The graphic art of William Hogarth appears at UCLA's Wight Gallery, and the Tobey C. Moss Gallery displays prints, drawings and sculpture by Sir Francis Seymour Haden, Augustus Edwin John and Henry Moore. Graphic art, design, photography, paintings, sculpture and crafts oriented shows are all included.

Support for the arts in Britain is today far from encouraging. Local patronage generally lags, with the one benefit that artists are relatively free of the pressure to create fashionable art for a particular audience. Whether this situation gives rise to an especially idiosyncratic British art, and indeed, if Festival artists

reflect cultural norms, are therefore central questions in evaluating the larger implications of this series of exhibitions. The spectrum runs from the charming and fey to the deeply intense. It is not surprising to find that certain links continue to be maintained, such as are rooted in romantic-poetic, mystical, or pastoral traditions. Anglo-Saxon conservatism is hardly dead in the water, maintaining at times a stronghold on what is considered to be the cutting edge. Although particular regions tend to revert to their own local temperaments, art is rarely confined to frontiers, so that foreign influence plays a role. While much of the vitality of British art is the result of cross-breeding, its regionality comes across as deep rooted stability, reflected in a tendency towards detached observation and understatement.

Not surprisingly, London hosts the largest concentration of British

art and artists within the United Kingdom. The Royal Academy serves as a platform for a healthy array of diversity. Although artists at present look to art historical precedents for inspiration, they rely more heavily on the world around them. The first phase of British Pop originated in England with a group of artists who were committed to social consciousness and a desire to alter established values. Their themes were strongly linked to technology, rather than the pastoral character of British neoromanticism. Influenced for the most part by American magazines, advertising and films, British Pop art explored American Zeitgeist through British sensibilities. Progenitors of 1950s Pop such as Peter Blake and R.B. Kitaj (an American who went to London as a student and stayed) appear in the Festival at L.A. Louver Gallery.

As he did in the 1960s, Blake continues to portray straightforward portraits of popular idols, albeit a 1980s variety. By the 1970s, Kitaj and second generation Pop artist David Hockney helped usher in a new British independence. Kitaj's composite images focused on the problems of communication with a variety of references that were intentionally ambiguous. Hockney represents the link to Los Angeles, which houses a substantial British community. Los Angeles County Museum has, for this occasion, organized a major Hockney retrospective that is the pivotal show of the Festival.

Hockney, reversing Kitaj, is a British-born resident of Los Angeles. Since the early 1960s, he has consistently explored new media and territories. Selected from public and private collections in the United States, Japan, South America, Australia, Asia and Europe, the exhibition checklist includes one hundred fifty paintings, sixty drawings and twenty photographs, as well as prints, illustrated books and examples of

Hockney's collaborative work in stage design.

Hockney is notable for his keen observations and his precision of line in drawings in pen and ink. From 60s Pop, he went on to develop a personal aesthetic that covers a variety of media. His subjects are infused with droll wit and an inimitable English charm that traces back to Rowlandson and Hogarth. His virtuosity and inventiveness encompass a broad spectrum of media that include painting, drawing, photography, stage settings, and even color xerox.

One of the second generation of Pop artists, Hockney studied at the Royal College of Art around 1960, at the same time as Kitaj, and was influenced by his ideas on mixing figurative and abstract elements in paintings. Hockney tried his hand at abstract expressionism, and Pollock, Bacon and Dubuffet exerted

an influence. After Kitaj suggested he should paint what interested him, his work turned autobiographical. When Hockney came to California, his work reflected his surroundings — deep blue swimming pools, palm trees and bored Beverly Hills housewives. These are quintessential California scenes, yet there is always the detached coolness of an outside observer.

From 1965 until the late 1970s, Hockney relied more and more on the camera, and emphasized figurative art. By the 1980s, his work embraced a liberating eclecticism, increasingly experimenting with new techniques as well as styles.

The new generation of British artists appear to have embraced a similar eclectic spirit, so it is no longer inconceivable to simultaneously embrace progressive and conservative values. Critic Lawrence Alloway contends that



Right: Henry Moore (1889-1986)  
*"Single Standing Figure", 1978*  
 Bronze, edition: 7  
 6 1/2 inches height  
 Courtesy of Tobey C. Moss Gallery



Left:  
Eric Scott  
"Purity", 1985  
Oil on canvas  
Courtesy of  
Merging One Gallery

Below:  
Lucian Freud  
"Guy Half Asleep"  
1981-82  
Oil on canvas  
Courtesy of  
L. A. Louver, Inc.

British artists tend to modify ideas and assimilate prudently. UK/LA offers support to the impression that the past may provide the push, but what is truly sought is a fresh twist. Eric Scott, in a solo exhibition at Merging One Gallery, acknowledges change in communications by veering away from the trashy consumerism found in the art of his predecessors. Using a precise realist style, he offers observations of the subversion of art images into cultural stereotypes. Depicting the omniscient presence of popular images in our daily lives becoming part of consciousness, Scott juxtaposes abstract images from art history with those that are realistically rendered. The shock comes in recognizing the distorted image to be more familiar than the real one.

Although British artists generally eschew organized movements, there are shared concerns subject to a collective evaluation. An interesting example is those who deal in their art with thoughts, knowledge and processing information. Form, they contend, can evolve from the examination of language. Or, contrarily, the manipulation of language can be defined by the linguistic structure of paintings. What remains constant is a loyalty to long-standing British literary traditions. The distinctive synthesizations of

image and language makes for interesting ambiguities.

"British Art: The Literate Link," at Asher/Faure Gallery, features a group of artists who recognize the influence of literature on British cul-

ture. Satire is one key to their strength, a visual tradition that goes back to the eighteenth century when Hogarth reflected the age of English satirical writing. The subversion of ordinary assumptions is



Right: Susan Hiller  
"Euston, Midnight", 1983  
C-type photograph  
Courtesy of Asher/Faure

another. The distinctive works of Susan Hiller are a case in point. Hiller is a multi-media artist whose subjects encompass language, gender, desire and death. Originally an anthropologist, she brings to her art a methodology. Projecting links to traditions evoked by nineteenth century artist and poet William Blake, Hiller relies heavily on mystical techniques and metaphor. She uses herself as the jumping off point for communication, finding a personalized language in the realm of automatism. The method has its roots in surrealism, but for Hiller, it takes a uniquely feminist angle. Viewers faced with eroding boundaries between dream and reality must make connections between visual images and language. It is an opportunity to rediscover memories and experience specific moments of intimacy. For Hiller, it is an attempt to recapture a lost female consciousness, and she notes that women who struggle with their own incoherence identify with her work.

In "Analytical Theater: New Art from Britain" (at CSU Long Beach's University Art Museum), a circle of artists whose roots lie with 1960s and 70s conceptual art bring fresh expression to the original movement. A total of thirty-four works by ten artists appropriate and reassemble images so as to explore the dependency of visual art on language, stressing theatricality and questioning art world hierarchy. Theatricality is certainly no new thing in British art. Historically, British portrait artists, such as those included in the USC show, evoked their subjects' character and station in life with the use of theatrical allegories, props and costumes. Co-curator Michael Newman explains in a catalogue essay, "Theatricality involves a vigorous revival of the critical, reflexive dimension of modernism . . . hence the word 'analytical' in the title of the exhibition."

While clearly related to American counterparts of the last two decades, the history is observed at a distance. John Wilkins, for example, enlarges photographs of a



reproduction of a painted landscape on a breakfast cereal box. Wilkins absorbs and then utilizes traditions of landscape painting, emphasizing the effects of consumerism on high art.

Another group to whom a collective psyche is attributable is represented by figurative painters Francis Bacon, R.B. Kitaj, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff and Lucian Freud (all on view at the L.A. Louver group show), and all deal in greater and lesser degrees with psychological ambiguities. As painters, the historical stability of the painting process is relished, the careful application of paint savored. Working with the slow evaluation of the painter's eye, they view their method as in opposition to media experience.

Irish-born Francis Bacon has been a seminal influence for three decades. Firmly recognized as one of the world's top painters, Bacon

stands for the subverting of a polite notion of existential detachment. His monstrous, deformed and physically diseased expressions of human energies unmask elements of the British psyche that were very carefully concealed in classical portraiture.

Auerbach and Freud followed in the wake of Bacon's post-World War II pessimism and nihilism. Freud penetrates the psychological intensities of his models without relying on allegories or props to project their character or mood. A furrowed brow, a glassy stare, resigned looks of arrogance and disdain — all convey with disturbing accuracy Freud's detached psychological observations. By capturing his subjects in unseemly moments, he places the viewer in voyeuristic and unsettling positions. Although Freud reflects an angst that is peculiarly German in origin, he is more concerned with recording his sub-



jects than with responding to their sensitivities.

Sculptors include Henry Moore at Tobey C. Moss Gallery, Tony Cragg and Edward Allington at CSU Long Beach, Michael Kenny at Koplín Gallery, Antony Gormley at Burnett Miller Gallery, and Allison Wilding and Boyd Webb at Asher/Faure Gallery. Webb is also featured in a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA).

The latest wave of British sculpture follows in the formidable wake of Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Moore combined major international influences with traditional British concern with forms of the natural world. But a new sculptural spirit in Britain concerns itself as much with process as it does with form. Gormley is regarded as one of the key figures to capture this new spirit. He relies on references inherent in the process, letting the materials and the forms convey the full meaning of the work. Using his own body as a tool to investigate man in physical space, Gormley analyzes inner space in relation to external being by casting his body in fiberglass and coating the mold with embossed plates of lead. The form thus realized transposes an individual into a generalized concept. Not concerned with identifiable

Left: Angelica Kaufmann (1741-1807) "Mrs. Anne Downman. Courtesy Fisher Gallery  
Right: Augustus John (1878-1961) "Self-Portrait" Etching. Courtesy Tobey C. Moss Gallery

types of behavior for these figures, he treats them as physical mirrors of the soul.

Festival publicity promises emphasis on youth and minorities, and a focus on the British cutting edge in the arts. In the visual arts, however, the general rule tends toward the tried and true. In searching for a singularly British ethos, individual concerns take precedence over collective efforts.

The compendium of styles responds to the needs of artist and subject, and foreign input has neither reinforced nor diminished local traditions. While there is an affinity to satire fantasy and narrative, the current generation of artists are fighting against an overriding provincialism. Not unlike their American counterparts, British artists reflect a general tendency towards postmodern pluralism. ■

#### Visual Arts Exhibitions Mid-March through April

- Presented by Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
"David Hockney: A Retrospective" February 4 - April 24
- Presented by University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach  
"The Analytical Theatre: New Art From Britain" February 4 - March 6
- Presented by The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA)  
"Boyd Webb"  
A touring exhibition organized by Whitechapel Gallery of London March 22 - June 19
- Presented by USC Fisher Gallery  
"British Portraiture: An Exhibition" March 16 - April 9
- Presented by the Long Beach Museum of Art  
"Mysterious Coincidences: New British Colour Photography"  
An exhibition of British color photography of the 1980s featuring works by eight artists/photographers  
March 13 - April 17
- "Michael Kenna"  
An exhibition of black and white photography by young British artist/photographer Michael Kenna  
March 13 - April 17
- Presented by Asher Faure Gallery  
"British Art: The Literate Link" Through March 19
- Presented by Koplín Gallery  
"The British Art Scene: 5 Artists" Through March 12
- Presented by the Burnett Miller Gallery  
"Antony Gormley: Recent Work" March 25 - April 30
- Presented by the Jan Turner Gallery  
"William Tillyer, Michael Heindroff, Ivor Abrahams" March 25 - April 30