

MARSHA TRAEGER / Los Angeles Times



Thérèse Oulton: "My real looking comes from the 17th Century."

Masters of 'British Picture'

By CATHY CURTIS

Wizards with words, theatrical geniuses, brilliant planners of cathedrals and gardens, the British have never cut very dashing figures as painters. Even the combined virtues of Hogarth, Constable and Turner don't redeem centuries of fussy portraits and amiable landscapes.

Yet the British figurative legacy has nurtured a handful of fiercely distinctive 20th-Century talents: Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, R. B. Kitaj. And it has spawned a new generation of artists in their 30s and 40s who variously embrace tradition or waylay it with contemporary approaches.

Opening Friday at L.A. Louver
Please see 'PICTURE,' Page 4

'PICTURE': The Tradition, Passion of British Art

Continued from Page 1

gallery in Venice as part of UK/LA '88 Festival, "The British Picture" makes a case for the continuing vitality of work by the Old Guard as well as by such younger painters as Christopher LeBrun, Avis Newman, Bruce McLean, John Lessore, John Virtue, Tony Bevan, Thérèse Oulton and Charlotte Verity. The festival, which begins today, is a 3-month exploration of many aspects of British culture.

Tradition in Britain remains "extremely strong and extremely alive . . . and sometimes that hampers us," Observer art writer William Feaver said recently. (In his exhibit catalogue essay, he writes that "there remains a suspicion that internationalism is somehow a betrayal, and that movements in art are for others.")

And yet, "It is a mistake to think of the British as being cold and aloof. Some of the best British art is passionate in the Northern European tradition of [Edvard] Munch and Caspar David Friedrich. We commit suicide if we get upset, we don't kill somebody else. . . ."

Feaver laughed at the passionate terms of his comparison. "The best art comes out of that blowing off."

A great admirer of the older British artists and a believer in working privately and diligently in your own back yard, Feaver is concerned that the newer painters are being exposed to the limelight too early. He thinks the trouble began with Hockney, who is also represented in the exhibit. ("I reckon he'd be far more interesting if he hadn't been the darling of the media for the past 25 years.")

Verity and Oulton see the picture somewhat differently.

"The English public is very conservative and not very receptive to visual things generally, and that's a great problem with England," Verity said. "However, I think, frankly, that English artwork is tolerant to many different things, which makes a very rich atmosphere to work in."

Yet, that atmosphere can be counterproductive.

"Painting now has to be absolutely singular in intention and . . . it's very difficult to be singular in

one's intentions in England. There are so many attitudes and traditions and considerations that seem to get in the way."

A graduate of the Slade School, bastion of figurative painting, Verity has evolved during the past year from a cleanly reportorial style to a dreamier, brushier approach in which objects cede their identity to become meldings of unreadable forms. She believes she has gained a new perspective on her work during the year she has spent in Berlin, thanks to a grant awarded her husband, Christopher LeBrun.

"I've become less concerned with trying to describe things and I'm coming back much more to pure painting," she said. "It's hard to see what the traditions are until you're out of [the country]. . . . Now I see they are restrictions. In painting, as soon as you find something restricting, then it should go."

For Oulton, a 1983 graduate of the Royal College of Art whose career has blossomed in the past few years with large, richly colored, gently agitated canvases (she

was a finalist for the Tate Gallery's 1987 Turner Prize), tradition and an international outlook are both essential.

Based variously in Vienna, Prague, New York and Australia in recent years, she said she is very fond of Auerbach's painting "but most of my real looking comes from the 17th Century, I'm afraid."

Her current work makes sense only "by referring to the European high figurative tradition and all [its] richness or reverberations of memory," she said.

Scavenging Old Master paintings for usable ideas, she has found "enormous potential" in Rubens' use of space. Fascinated by the "miraculous" powers of oil paint to create texture but uninterested in reproducing objects, she likes the idea of borrowing Velasquez's manner of reproducing linen without referring at all to the apron or tablecloth the Spanish artist was portraying.

The all-but-eradicated images in her paintings are meant to be unclear. ("You may be scanning up the paint surface thinking it's a gorge but have serious doubts halfway up.")

It's an approach that might have baffled Constable, or even Turner.