

EAST INTERNATIONAL 2004 Norwich Gallery

5 July - 21 August

PAINTING IS AN ACTIVITY that is pronounced dead every five years or so, usually by Waldemar Januszczak, but it keeps turning up like a very bad penny. There is something so unbearably *echt* and physical about painting that it positively embarrasses people with its notion of manual labour. It is something our servants can do for us, after all. Just give them a ring.

And here it is, again, and what is more, in mostly figurative mode, in the current *EAST* exhibition, mostly via Leipzig, courtesy of this year's selectors, the artist Neo Rauch and the director of the Basel Gallery, Gerd Harry Lybke, but gathering its own affinities in a variety of other places.

Rauch is a Leipziger, through and through: he was born there, trained there, and now works there. The Leipzig School developed in the 1960s through the work of Bernhard Heisig, moving skilfully within the precincts of official DDR art, which demanded high-profile craftsmanship, allied to social analysis in the approved manner. The kind of thing this meant was displayed in England, in 1984, in an exhibition titled *Tradition and Renewal*, in styles derived from Otto Dix, George Grösz, Kathe Kollwitz, and Emil Nolde, often involving a heavy-handed, rather fussy, painterliness. More recently, in Berlin, there was the enormous show, *Kunst in der DDR*. A.R. Penck, Georg Baselitz and Gerhard Richter are all products of the old East Germany who made their reputations primarily in the West, and they too are guiding spirits of this exhibition, whose title, *EAST*, has never seemed more appropriate.

And a very good, eye-opening show it is too. The catalogue, which has individual articles by writers nominated by the specific artists, tries to draw rather laboured parallels between the colonial and postcolonial arts of East and West, and though the cir-



Susanne Kühn, *Mond*, 2004, pigment dispersion on canvas, 180 x 170 cm. Private Collection

cumstances are unlike and the analogies forced, there are, perhaps, certain similarities; particularly in the combination of high seriousness and irony. This is probably clearest in the British artist, Hurvin Anderson's painting, *Imperial Hotel* (2003), of a scene in Trinidad (Anderson himself is of Jamaican descent), but there is no sign that Anderson is any more representative of Caribbean post-colonial art than is David Hockney,

with whom he is compared in the text. The younger Leipzig artists, on the other hand, do clearly form some kind of coherent group, albeit with overlapping sensibilities, rather than a worked-out programme.

These sensibilities tend toward the narrative, often in surreal, literary, melancholy or ironic mode. This is the case with Christoph Ruckhäberle, whose complex, faintly faux-naïf representations of people in social and urban circumstances are a product of dreamlike alienation, with touches of

classify, but distinctly menacing activities. The drawing and painting, as in Ruckhäberle's work, is slightly childish, like a girl's dream of potent womanhood. The irony lies in the sly simplicity of the treatment. A mixture of Frida Kahlo (though without the self-referential pain), John Tenniel, Max Ernst and Charlotte Salomon, Loy too thrives on the evoking of other painterly languages and the avoidance of mainstreams.

An ex-Leipziger, Susanne Kühn is similar, though she works in a more consciously postmodern, eclectic manner. Young, faintly Chinese-looking women dash about or hesitate in forests and mountains depicted in a deliberately confusing range of visual languages. The reference is to Romanticism, but the language is in a state of decomposition. Kühn's postmodernism retains a humane and personal quality that seems antithetical to the usual Western models. At the heart of the language vacuum there is personal tragedy, if only we could find the person or locate the tragedy.

The humane quality is in evidence throughout the exhibition, and not just in the paintings. The photographs of Karen Brett show naked old people engaged in acts of love, Toril Brancher's seem like family snapshots but loom considerably larger and more sober-eyed while retaining affection, and Liz Nicol's black-and-white photographs of her late husband in his coffin are objects of refined, monumental, toughened tenderness.

Equally monumental and tender, the American artist, Jennifer Walters's video of her aged parents (depicted playing games, in conversation, or simply alone) attempts to build a *memento mori* of affectionate gestures without sentimentality. It's a very delicate procedure indeed, not without its moments of doubt (to what extent does self-effacement become self-

Beckmann, De Chirico and even Utrillo. The technique is also reminiscent of Kitaj, whose importance as a common point of reference is handily pointed up in the introduction.

This unlikely bundle of associations is oddly potent. And they reach their surreal peak in the marvellous, disturbing paintings of Rosa Loy, in which pairs of twinned women are shown engaged in a variety of hard-to-



Hurvin Anderson, *Imperial Hotel*, 2003, oil on canvas, 150 x 243 cm. Collection of the artist

display?) but extraordinarily moving in places. In a splendid juxtaposition, next to this there is a gorgeously funny video piece by Lela Budde presenting a nurse, who is half child-pretending, half-saucy Carry-On trooper, wandering among the corpses in clips from Clint Eastwood westerns, trying to tend to them. Although the attempt is ridiculous, there is an underlying sweetness and solemnity to the whole. And just so that the tenderness should not be entirely female, Eric Fong's video of an old boxer in a retirement home going through his paces, is both elegiac and cheery.

So much concern with age and death. In the case of English artist Justin Mortimer's (the winner of this year's EAST award) it is sickness among the great health resorts that forms the topos. Bodies topple, splay or lean unsteadily into a dark romantic medium. In the case of Janice McNab's paintings, it is aeroplane

seating rescued from movie warehouses that hints at loss and disaster. Beautifully painted (one of the rare examples of sheer non-ironic love of painterliness), they are reminiscent of Warhol's electric chairs but without the sensation or cuteness. Empty chairs: silent threats.

On the humorous side there are Alicia Paz's little female space-alien wearing glamour masks and kitsch jewellery, Jakub Dolejs's photographs of figures before painted landscapes in parodies of Romanticism and Victorian sentimentality, and Simon Collins' gross-out views of 1970s nostalgia and Essex life, not quite hyperrealism, not quite cartoon. And there is the splendid Rose Wylie too, lyrical and a touch swaggering, like early Rego on a pint of beer.

Maybe, as is strongly suggested, the 'feeling' aspect of the show is down to the majority of female artists. Maybe the great series of Photoshop images

evolving from systems to organisms, by Mikael Eriksson, is archetypally male. Perhaps it's the return of tenderness, of tending while being wary with brush or lens that sorts out the women from the boys. I am not sure if that is what Alicia Paz's figure

with the mangled hand is saying.

There are rumours that Saatchi is on the prowl in this area. He already owns a few Leipzig works. If the boy must have his toys, some of these at least are well worth looking at and thinking about.

George Szirtes

IN VIEW

MOMA AT EL MUSEO: LATIN AMERICAN & CARIBBEAN ART FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART El Museo del Barrio, New York

4 March - 25 July

AT THE MUSEUM OF Modern Art's old building on 53rd Street, Latin American painting was lobby art. Wilfredo Lam's monumental 1943 work, *The Jungle*, hung by the cloakroom. David Alfaro Siqueiros' brutal image of a child atop a

garbage heap, *Echo of a Scream* (1937), Rufino Tamayo's *Animales* (1943), depicting two snarling dogs, and Diego Rivera's poignant portrait of Zapata standing by his white horse hung in the large atrium space through which visitors passed as they rode up and