

EDWIN MULLINS ON ART IN LONDON

Art Before the Horse

THE history of the arts, so the Times Literary Supplement would have us believe (Dec. 17), is very like that of the horse. Its function in the world was once assured: today it survives entirely as a luxury.

Probably I am biased by the feeling that the horse is among the duller of God's creations, but the more I thought about this comparison the more it seemed nothing but a smart piece of intellectual cynicism. If one must argue in words like "luxury" then since it has never been a function of the arts to drag a plough or procreate, they always have been a luxury. What is the difference between Athenians flocking to the theatre of Dionysus 2300 years ago and Londoners to the Old Vic today?

What the writer was really working up to was the favourite chestnut about the arts being "made redundant by technological progress." Applied to the theatre or to music I should have thought the word "redundant" was plain idiotic. It would also be a curious adjective to describe, say, a Picasso exhibition at the Tate which drew 464,000 visitors. Nonetheless, applied to modern painting and sculpture in general, the anonymous writer of that article did have a point.

It is incontestable that the combination of photography, printing, advertising, television, travel facilities, literacy and agnosticism has bled art of its more obvious descriptive functions. These functions, where they still exist, have either become fossilised into academic art, or cheapened into the kind of ideological propaganda that the Nazi and Soviet authorities have demanded of their artists.

With what can be termed the mainstream of creative activity, any direct visual connection between art and life by and large ceased to exist. What worries me deeply is that although occasionally a Picasso or a Moore emerges to remind us that the human passions are still the concern of the artist, the majority of serious artists grow increasingly content to explore paths as narrow in outlook, and as remote from the general experience, as a minor religious sect.

There could be no more apt example of this specialist mentality than Edward Avedisian, who is now showing at the Kasmin Gallery (until Feb. 13). He is one of a group of young American painters whose concern is the formal arrangement of coloured shapes on acres of monochrome canvas. Stripes are set within circles within a rectangular canvas to create a series of subtle rhythms; and a cunning juxtaposition of colours induces a mild vibration before the eyes. And that is it.

They are delicate, attractive and very "cool." But their quality is not the point. No one seriously denies Mondrian's quality either, nor that of a cowrie shell. It is the obsessive narrowness of outlook—the minor-religious-sect feeling again—which impresses itself on the mind and makes me wonder in exhibitions of this kind towards what beautiful and insignificant star art is travelling, and if it really matters all that much anyway. Hasn't painting become a rather minor art-form?

The purgative reliefs of Camargo (Signals Gallery until Jan. 28) have the same impersonal monotony—like watching a cloud formation or a field of snow. At the same time they are infinitely more sensitive. Made of fragments of wooden rods, arranged in slightly-varied patterns, they suggest an attempt to achieve in sculpture something of the discipline and freedom of musical composition.

Adrian Stokes is a man who



Bruce Lacey with his cyclops figure called "The Politician," one of his constructions now at the Marlborough New London Gallery.

Photograph: Tony Evans

paints in a whisper. In the 30 years spanned by his exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art (until Feb. 6), there has been scarcely a change in his pallid landscapes and still-lives that have grown out of Bonnard and the later Monet.

His fascination is for colours whose true subtlety is revealed only at the moment before they disappear into grey. The final series of still-lives shows him rearranging his bottles and jugs with the care of a chess-master, taking a long and careful look after each move. Showing with him is Lawrence Gowing who has gone unconvincingly abstract.

Over the road the New London Gallery (until Jan. 29) is enjoying one of its fits of ghoulish insanity.

in the form of robot figures by Bruce Lacey. His creations are like a goon's version of "Brave New World." Human figures are reduced to dolls and electrically-operated machines who work when you insert a penny, are fed milk through plastic piping, or lie wedded in gas-masks.

There is one chilling or comic idea behind every figure: birth, marriage, the bomb, old-age and so on. Each piece is designed to make you feel you are participating in one of Lacey's experiences of life. Upon these single ideas are built fantastically ingenious contraptions of junk that add very little. For like all professional funny-men, Lacey is both over-elaborate and at heart over-serious.

LONDRES

Em Londres está montada a exposição que nos interessa particularmente: a Galeria Nals London apresenta desde le dezembro, devendo prolongar-se até 28 do corrente, uma posição dos relevos de Sérgio Camargo. É a primeira exposição individual que nosso artem promove na Europa. O cargo, que o escultor nos envia, o currículo completo de atividades artísticas.

S. N. Lacey

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One-man show of sculpture by the Brazilian artist Sergio de Camargo extended until February 27—Signals, 39, Wigmore Street, W.1.

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