

THE GROUP OF FOUR

ATROSHENKO

MARTYN BREWSTER

SHEILA GIRLING

DONNAGH McKENNA

THE GROUP OF FOUR

Warwick Arts Trust
33 Warwick Square
St. George's Drive, London SW1V 2AQ
Telephone 01-834 7856

22 May — 22 June 1986
Closed 24, 25, 26 May
Open Wednesday — Sunday 10 — 5

INTRODUCTION

The Warwick Arts Trust, with this exhibition of works by four abstract expressionist painters practising in London, is continuing its inspired role of championing the cause of a current of painting which is emerging as a growing tendency in British art today. All four have had recent one-man shows here. Their present paintings continue the level of achievement manifest in their earlier exhibitions.

Their work shares a common interest in painterly qualities and a heightened understanding of the power of colour, which sets them apart from the present pre-occupation with the return to figuration which has been hailed as the main feature of the 1980s. All of them have a very strong sense of their debt to the work of the New York School of abstract expressionism, but they are rapidly developing and expanding the discoveries of their predecessors. They have a freedom of conception and execution, a sense of daring and exploration that is very much their own. They exploit the lyrical qualities of pure colour. Their concentration of form and colour on the surface of canvas or board has led them into new territories which both celebrate the power of their medium and make their work a vehicle for feeling and emotion which breaks free from the individual and the subjective and draws the viewer into their work.

Abstraction in painting may be called a turn inwards 'away from subject matter or common experience', as Clement Greenberg put it in 1959, a turn inwards upon the medium of the artist's own craft. The 'turn inwards' of these painters is not to some ivory tower or aesthetic elitism. They seek to give an outward, visual expression of the 'in itself', of the process of painting itself, of human creativity. In this process, the most abstract painting becomes the most concrete in its depiction of human emotion.

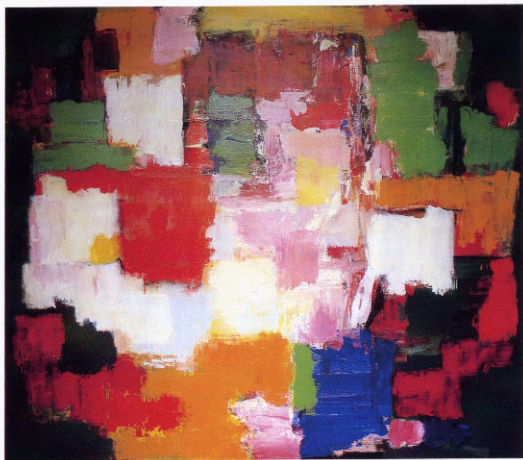
Aristotle said that music—the most 'abstract' of the arts—was the most imitative and vivid of all arts. Abstract expressionism, as has so often been noted, most closely aspires to the condition

of music of all forms of painting. Greenberg was correct in observing that 'abstract' or 'non-objective' art concerned itself predominantly with aesthetic values and that these became the subject matter of art and literature. But he was wrong in the conclusions that he drew from this. Sheila Girling, Atroshenko, Donnagh McKenna and Martyn Brewster have indeed turned towards the very fundamentals of painterly language, to the elements of colour and form. They are first and foremost lyrical artists. They are living in a world of crisis, convulsion, a brutal economic reality and the most unashamed commercialisation of art itself.

Artists working at other times—in ancient Greece for example, or in Italy during the Renaissance—could take their inspiration from the social world around them and express beauty. No lyrical painter could do that today. So these painters seek to overcome the isolation of the individual by working through artistic forms. But contradictorily their turn inwards enables them to express very profound feelings and gives them an expressive power of great intensity. The 'bare bones' or 'empty formalism' of colour, light, form are thus revealed to be full of content and an integral part of human existence, and the barrier between man and his natural environment is broken down.

Corinna Lotz, *Arts Critic Newsline*

¹ Clement Greenberg: *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, reproduced in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. by Francis Francina, Harper & Row, London, 1985.



DONNAGH McKENNA

Donnagh McKenna's work has a classic severity and sense of structure which is created entirely through areas of colour. His artistic vision and poetic allusion are always counter-balanced by the immediacy of the application of paint, the brushstroke, the movement of the palette knife over canvas or card. The discipline of using sometimes only a few colours in one painting, the concentration on vertical and horizontal shapes focus the attention on the qualities of the colours and their relations to each other. Colours arouse feelings, but in McKenna they are deliberate, in control, specific. He is able to construct his colours so that they gain an intensity and a life of their own, which shines or glows out of the painting, as the evening glow of a marble column appears to reflect back light absorbed during the day.

Each painting has a strong tension, a controlled dynamic derived from the necessary relation of each block of colour to another and to the painting as a whole. Nothing can be changed without altering the orchestration of the work as a whole. The actual structure of the form must come out of the painting itself. It cannot be applied from without. 'You cannot draw a structure, and then colour it in,' McKenna says. It must be, and is, he believes, a structure produced by a process of painting and not some intellectual decision. **Blue Mantle**, for example, has the strong sonorous tones of stained glass when strong sunlight activates it and allows the colours to flow out towards you.

McKenna's work changes dramatically under the effects of different kinds of light, or light coming from different angles. The logic of his composition comes out of the structural requirements created by the colours themselves. 'They have a life of their own,' he says about his paintings. 'You must allow them to paint themselves. Sometimes they won't behave themselves. Sometimes you have to decide to take over. Sometimes a terrible mess needs to be put into order, and sometimes you can paint straight on to the canvas with very few changes.'

Haidhausen (Munich) 1985

Acrylic on canvas
96 X 84 ins

His paintings relate to specific experiences—a recent sensation, a journey, a memory of childhood, or an experience with another painting. They are concerned with feelings about things after an event. This temporal distance is then invoked by the painting itself, although its immediate concern appears to be only the interplay of colours and their sensations.

Some of McKenna's most recent works are in his more sombre range of colours, such as **Blue Mantle** and **Red Windsap**. Most of them concentrate on a primary range of reds, yellows and blues. **Red Windsap** makes use of a deep burgundy maroon. **Blue Mantle** has a large area of colour which comes forward and recedes simultaneously. The centre of spectrum blue takes you into a physical and mental space of both concreteness and imagination. It is surrounded by smaller areas of yellows, oranges, greens and reds with a delicate play of green staccato drops over red, which provides a visual counterpoint to the larger planes and the spatiality of the blue. The red/green contrast in the lower right is a kind of visual echo of the yellow streaked with black/green at the opposite end of the canvas. The backdrop to this drama is a very deep red at the edges which gives the other colours a Rothkoesque floating quality.

McKenna has the ability to construct with colour in such a way as to play on the viewer's sensibilities directly and simply. As with his historical forefathers in the New York school—Hans Hofmann and Franz Kline especially—each stroke of colour makes a connection, hits a note, goes to the heart. He has achieved with these paintings that ambition of eschewing the false, the literary, the super-imposed. Each one has a life and radiates outwards a sense of joy and ordered tension and festive celebration. It is this which he shares with the others in the present exhibition and which can be called the classicism of colour abstraction.

DONNAGH McKENNA

Biography

Born in Manchester of Dublin parents

Studied at Manchester College of Arts, at the Extra-Mural Department of Manchester University, and at the Slade School of Fine art, London

Taught in art schools in London from 1962 to 1970.

Before 1980, work exhibited at

Peterloo Gallery, Manchester; *John Moores Exhibition*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; AIA Gallery, *Young Contemporaries*, and the National Theatre, London; *Irish Art in the 'Seventies*, a Caldwell Gallery exhibition touring in Ireland

Since 1980, work exhibited at

The International Connection, The Round House, London (part of the 1980 Festival 'A Sense of Ireland')

Contemporary Artists in Camden, Camden Arts Centre, London 1981

English Expressionism, Warwick Arts Trust, London 1984

Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Monaghan, Ireland 1984 & 1985

The Joy of Paint, Warwick Arts Trust, London, and Bede Gallery, Jarrow 1985

Warwick Arts Trust, London 1986

Represented in the following collections in London

Arts Council of Great Britain

Camden Council

St Thomas' Hospital

Tate Gallery

Warwick Arts Trust

British Rail

Charles Barker Group

Deutsche Bank

European and Arabic Bank

Irish Export Board

and the embassies of Denmark, Finland and Ireland

also represented in

the Irish Arts Council and Annaghmakerrig Collections, Ireland, and in the E. J. Power Collection, the Hammer Collection, and other private collections in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden and the U.S.A.

ATROSHENKO

The Andalucia Series

La Herradura 1986

Acrylic on canvas
72 × 100 ins

Competa 1986

Acrylic on card
40 × 60 ins

Olvera 1986

Acrylic on card
40 × 30 ins

Zahara 1986

Acrylic on card
40 × 30 ins

Canillas 1986

Acrylic on card
30 × 40 ins

Arcos 1986

Acrylic on card
30 × 40 ins

MARTYN BREWSTER

Deep Down 1986

Oil on canvas
68.75 × 89.5 ins

New Day 1986

Acrylic on card
45 × 36 ins

Landscape 1986

Acrylic on paper
44 × 32 ins

Heart of Darkness 1986

Acrylic on card
60 × 40 ins

River Run 1986

Acrylic on paper
45 × 30 ins

Thunder and Rain 1986

Acrylic on card
46 × 36 ins

SHEILA GIRLING

China Sea 1981

Acrylic on canvas
69.5 × 81.5 ins

Rose Gold 1986

Acrylic on card
40 × 60 ins

Moon Bound 1986

Acrylic on card
40 × 60 ins

Pamplemousse 1986

Acrylic on card
40 × 60 ins

Silver Platter 1986

Acrylic on card
40 × 58 ins

Flying Worth 1986

Acrylic on card
30 × 40 ins

DONNAGH McKENNA

Haidhausen (Munich) 1985

Acrylic on canvas
96 × 84 ins

Ballinteer 1986

Acrylic on card
60 × 40 ins

Sweetmount 1986

Acrylic on card
60 × 40 ins

Red Winsap 1986

Acrylic on card
48 × 40 ins

Abbey News 1986

Acrylic on card
48 × 40 ins

Blue Mantel 1986

Acrylic on card
48 × 40 ins