

PERIPHERAL STATES

'Never make anything you can't fit into a taxi'

Was it Andre Breton who gave this light-hearted advice to artists? The idea seems especially apt in these recession-hit days. Modesty is more suited to the moment than flamboyance or pomposity.

The London artworld is undergoing a sea change. As the centre trembles, the margins blossom. Artists are finding alternative venues to show their work - disused swimming pools, banks, betting shops, warehouses, factories, pumping stations and generating plants.

But thanks to the generosity of the Benjamin Rhodes Gallery, I have been able to lure four artists into the West End - three of whom brought their work by taxi! I admire their work because I read in it the courage to pursue a chosen line of enquiry, regardless of fame or fortune - though a little of either wouldn't go amiss. To a certain extent artists always remain on the margins. But the periphery can be a position of power: a place where compromises need not be made.

I wonder what advice Breton would have given to curators? The same ethos applies to us. This is not the moment to elaborate pompous theories or to pretend clairvoyant powers. Things are changing too rapidly, and in divergent directions. I have made no attempt to identify trend or name a movement; I have simply responded to keen intelligence, clarity of purpose and lightness of load (lack of inherited baggage). These add up to an ability to share perceptions gleaned and nourished on the periphery - ideas that may seem askew, because the approach is fresh. Gentle irony, a clear head, a light touch and the rejection of everything pompous are just some of the qualities that make these artists special.

NICKY HIRST

The non-intrusive subtlety of Nicky Hirst's work is a mixture of morality and pragmatism - recession aesthetics. It seemed appropriate that her recent installation at the Dash Gallery, situated in a local authority building, Isle of Dogs, where people come to complain about leaking roofs, should cost only £200 to make. Her concern is to alter perceptions not produce expensive objects. And stealth can be more effective than confrontation, a whisper more persuasive than a shout. Hirst lives and works in two small rooms. Her environment is like an installation: every detail considered, every solution intelligent. One floor is painted black, the other white. Two Acro props hold up the ceiling where a dividing wall has been taken down. Fairy lights hang over the bedroll, a bicycle basket is attached to a chair, nuts and bolts are stored in jars hung in a cluster beneath a shelf, their lids screwed to the underside.

The same clarity and elegance informs her artwork. The idiosyncracies of a space - its history and usage and design decisions that have affected it - provide the stimulus for an oblique visual poetry. People cross the Dash Gallery on the way to the offices, so Hirst made a piece that read differently from the two directions. The duck/rabbit head - used by Ernst Gombrich to illustrate the complexities of perception - was cut in strips from paper printed with wood-grain that echoed the doors through which people passed. One way you saw ducks, the other way rabbits.

Drawings of hands clapping were inspired by the unusual acoustics of the circular room. A box which concealed an electrical junction was cloned. An exit sign was multiplied into a ladder of shelves that resembled a Donald Judd wall sculpture. Its geometry was modified to accommodate a fire extinguisher - thereby transforming the appliance into a Duchampian ready-made.

At the time of writing, Hirst is still planning her intervention for Benjamin Rhodes. A series of cartoons, drawn by her father for The Crawley Advertiser, have been printed onto parchment paper without their captions. Hung with their faces to the wall, they will pay ghostly homage to her own origins and to the many images that have hung on these walls. A sensitive response to the givens of a situation rather than the imposition of an ego, Hirst's work demonstrates the triumph of subtlety, wit and intelligence: a model of humane action, a moral tale.

TACITA DEAN

'The Story of Beard' is an authoritative fiction. The narrator of the short film discovers a shop specialising in historic beards, such as those grown by Saints Affligée, Starosta and Wilgerfort to escape the advance of their suitors and the facial hair of Pythia, a Delphic oracle, grown as a portent of impending disaster. When the narrator returns, the shop has closed down and the beards (and the power which they embodied) have been lost to womanhood.

Part 2 is in a recreation of Manet's 'Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe' featuring a bearded woman and clean-shaven men. Part 3 harks back to the early days of photography and shows pipe-smoking, bearded women posing for a group portrait. This wonderfully absurdist film is both plausible and subversive - a feminist tale told as a surrealist thriller.

Tacita Dean next turned her documentary skills to the grisly fate of St. Agatha, a Sicilian saint whose breasts were sliced off before the unfortunate was grilled alive. In Tiepolo's painting of the event, the martyr's breasts are placed on a platter like two jellies. The Cathedral door in Catania, where Agatha was born, is decorated with carvings of her