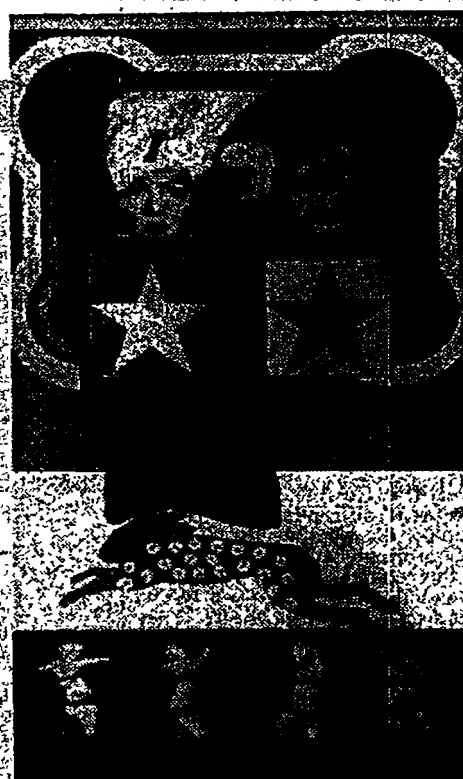


Legends drawn from the bric-a-brac of mass media." Left: paintings by Derek Boshier in a corner of the Pop Art section of the Young Contemporaries exhibition. Right: "For Men Only," starring M.M. and B.B., by Peter Phillips.



BY JOHN BERGER

ONCE more we can judge the younger generation. Paintings and sculpture by art students from all over the country are now assembled in the Young Contemporaries exhibition at the F.B.A. Galleries off Trafalgar Square. Examiners, critics, talent scouts, dealers, can now look over the parapet of their security and study those who are scaling the wall below. Let us review their efforts and applaud the promising.

Yet would it not be more logical to do the opposite? The quantity of inherited talent stays roughly constant; what happens to a generation of artists depends upon the ethos and environment in which they can develop. It is the condition of our society that we should be reviewing—on evidence supplied by the young.

Art students, unlike many at Oxbridge, live comparatively unprotected lives. They have few illusions about becoming an elite.

Abstract works

Roughly speaking the works can be divided into three categories. Each category represents a different way of reacting to a crisis.

First is the group of geometric abstract works. They are concerned with exploiting new materials, with breaking down the division between the media—in many cases they make painted three-dimensional constructions—and with expressing an industrial machine aesthetic. Historically they derive from the Constructivists in Russia, Mondrian, and de Stijl.

Their work is clean, shapely, ingenious, and sometimes gay. None of it would look out of place in a properly designed modern city. But are these objects more than decorative architectural details? Have they enough content to give them wings to fly in our imaginations? I doubt it, with the possible exception of Michael Beagle's arrow.

The trouble is that whereas forty years ago the machine automatically captured the hopes of millions it can no longer do so to-day. The symbol has become a mere component part. If you regard these works as more than decoration they become like signs for a code that has been lost—a code that was lost with the death of the hope that modern technology was in itself a solution to world problems.

The second group consists of paintings now generally referred to as "pop art," because their legends come from science-fiction, comics, film, magazines, posters, and the casual bric-a-brac of the mass media. In formal terms the use of collage and the odd juxtaposition of images is often highly skilful—Peter Phillips and David Hockney, for instance.

Pop art is an art of social comment, both satirical and poetic. It rejects the whole tradition of fine art as useless sugar-coating a bitter pill. It is anti-authoritarian, anti-military, anti-snob. It affirms the individual un-noticed imagination which can transform the commercial pulp fed to it. A film is dismissed as trash by the pundits, but the couples who watch it in the dark put it to uses never considered by the experts. Bardot may be surrounded by nonsense, but she is not killed by it as Botticelli's Venus has been.

Blunt brushstrokes

Pop art is distilled from the life of city crowds, and for that very reason it is also an art about loneliness, the loneliness of the passively governed who are never consulted about what really matters. Its weakness is that its impact depends upon the implied contrast with fine art; it is not in fact an art for the crowds; it is highly sophisticated and is in grave danger of only appealing as "charming," exotic, "strange" to the very milieu it detests.

At first glance the third group seems more traditional—paintings of nudes, landscapes, still-lives. Five students are here outstanding: Ken Brazier, Roger Cook, Anthony Donaldson, Patrick Proctor, and Tony Roberts. But on closer examination these painters too, with their blunt, searching brushstrokes and intransigent surfaces, are also specifically of the sixties. Stylistically they represent a return to painting what is in front of the easel, after Picasso, the Cubists, etc.

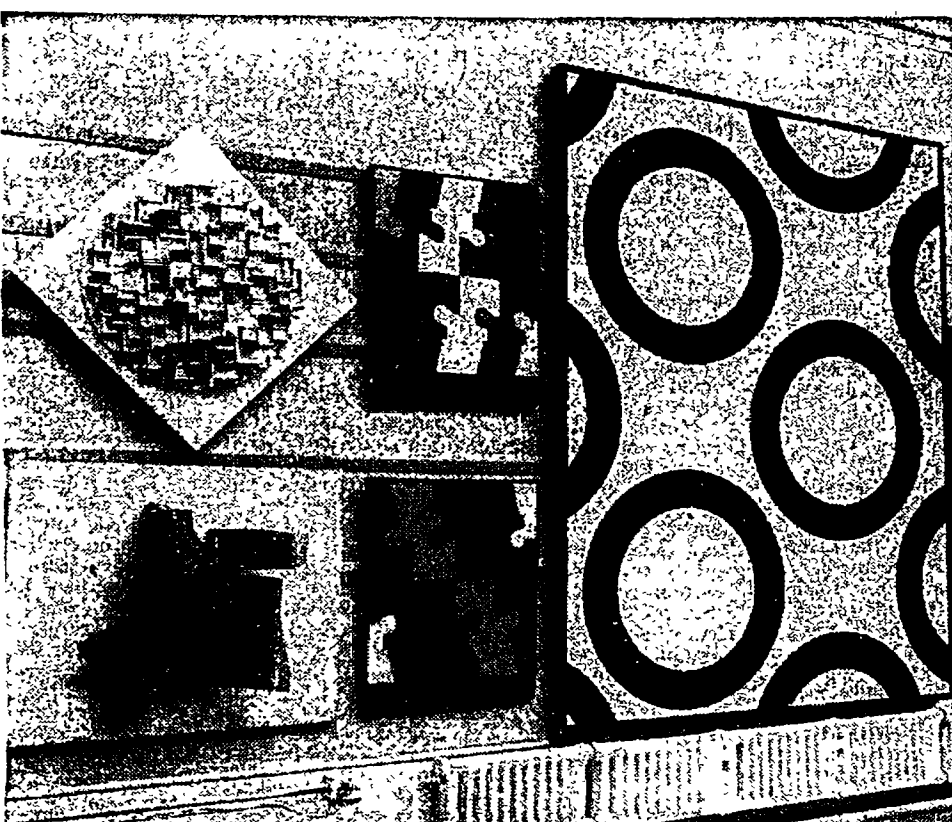
But what is more important is their attitude. They trust nothing except their own experience of the subject. Their paintings are about personal integrity. Their starting-point is a sensation. Their aim is to give this sensation permanence, objectivity. One can deduce considerable intelligence from these pictures, but the pictures themselves never deal with ideas or make cultural references.

It is as if the whole edifice of art had broken down and a few young men were beginning from scratch, were building up again from the very earth. They can count on nothing but the tension between themselves and the forms they perceive. The space in their paintings is never a promise of freedom; it is only the arena in which the fight takes place.

Outdated faith

I want to emphasise that what I have said about each group is true only generally. Individuals vary, and there are some works which do not fit neatly into a category at all. There are some paintings, for example, about the sensation of riding a motor-bike, by Michael Vaughan, in attitude these belong to the third group but stylistically they owe a lot to action painting. I also want to emphasise that I am not criticising from above. I am trying to describe a harsh predicament. What is this predicament? What is the crisis to which all these young artists are reacting? I believe that our society denies them *themes* for their art. The subject-matter of the visual arts has, of course, always been limited—landscapes, portraits, figures. But how do we look at a man to-day? In the age of Hiroshima what is tragic? Is man master of nature or a sport? Who are the heroes? What is dignity? Is happiness a possibility? Such are the questions which a culture normally answers, but which ours does not.

The abstract painters, apparently the most modern, actually take refuge in an outdated, oversimplified faith. The pop artists try vainly to find answers in the inarticulate responses of those who have no cultural expectations whatsoever. The figurative painters are driven desperately back into their own elemental perceptions. Some of the artists I have mentioned may yet triumph over the colossal disadvantage which is not of their making, but historical. The human will to learn is inexhaustible. Meanwhile it is we who should apply ourselves to the problem these artists cannot solve by themselves.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER KEEN

Above: Male Nude, by Roger Cook, one of the more traditional paintings. Left, some of the geometric abstract works—"Signs for a lost code."