

Art Review

'PIONEERS OF ABSTRACTION' 1956-1966

BY CISSIE LODGE

'New Vision 56-66' until March 23 and 'Sheila Girling: Recent Paintings' until March 9; Warwick Arts Trust, Pimlico, London SW1; Wednesdays to Sundays 10a.m. to 5p.m. Admission Free.

'NEW Vision 56-66' is a collection of paintings shown at a London art gallery between 1956 and 1966.

The New Vision Centre Gallery, near Marble Arch, was founded in 1956 by three painters, Denis Bowen, Halima Nalecz and Frank Avray Wilson.

It soon distinguished itself by exhibiting work that ran against the grain of what was generally considered as 'good art' in Britain.

As the excellent commentary by Margaret Garlake (£1, on sale at the exhibition) points out, in 1956 abstract art in Britain was 'new, incomprehensible and quasi-scandalous'.

Abstract

ironically, highly acceptable in the American art world and even exported as a form of 'cultural imperialism' by the United States, in Britain it produced the opposite reaction.

The deep-going hostility to all forms of abstraction in the visual arts has long historical roots in Britain.

Garlake says that behind all the hostile judgements of the critics 'lay a fear of alienating their public, a fear fuelled by the curious but widespread tendency to equate abstraction with Communism'.

Adventurous

But this fear is not as curious as she thinks. Both the 'constructivist' or geometric tendency and the more spontaneous, expressionist tendency in non-figurative painting have arisen out of specific historic conditions in which the artists have used these forms to explore new territory.

This new artistic arena also involved in one way or another a rejection of the values, philosophy and way of life imposed by capitalist society, and often the pro-



AUBREY WILLIAMS

The works on show at the Warwick Arts Trust are

particularly spectacular or daring today.

understanding of the new painterly language — the

was suffocating and paralyzing artists in Britain

matist painters and the Bauhaus in Germany, abstract or 'non-figurative' painting and sculpture had been widely recognised, accepted and to varying degrees incorporated into architecture and design.

Whereas abstract expressionism (as in the work of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock) had become,

dominates in Britain, due to the long drawn-out development of capitalism.

It was for this reason that the adventurous policy of the NVCG is so interesting and important.

In the ten years of its existence, approximately 220 artists were shown of whom more than half were from abroad.

those years.

The determined internationalism of the New Vision Centre Gallery included artists from Italy, Turkey, Holland, Israel, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Australia and New Zealand, to name but a few.

The three rooms of paintings at the Warwick Arts Trust do not appear parti-

cular abstract expressionism is absent.

Physical

In some, Jackson Pollock's use of dripping paint has become a cliché, without his demonic energy and passion, and there are a few works which look dated.

But most show a real

emphasises the existence of the painting as a physical object in space.

This is contrasted with a thinner application of paint providing both a physical background and the illusion of space and depth.

The '56-66' painters were not concerned with obtaining a cheap thrill. Nor were they cashing in on the success of their predecessors elsewhere.

They were coming to terms with a new painterly language in a period that opened up with the Suez crisis, Krushchev's speech and the Hungarian uprising.

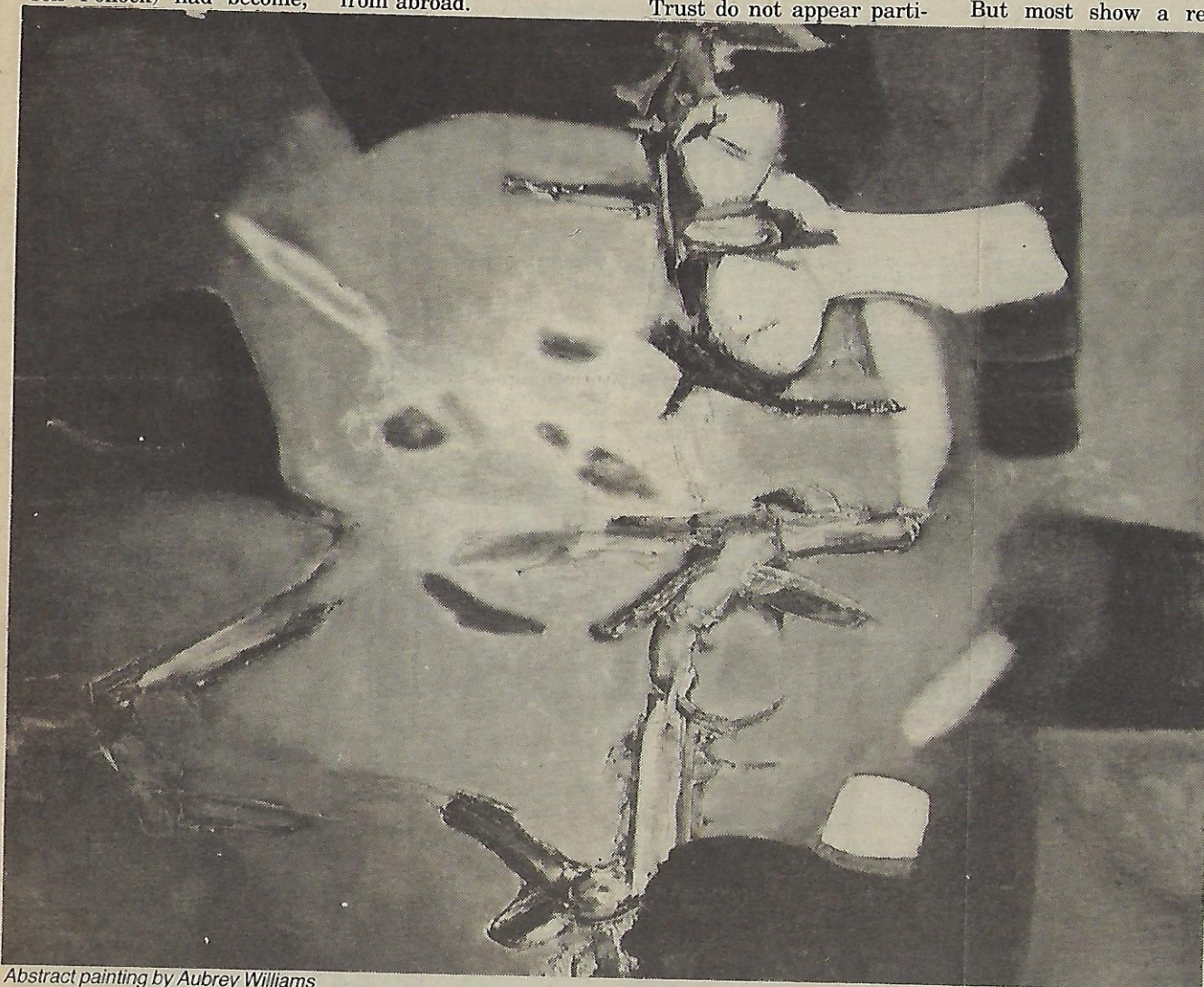
It became clear that the narrow parochialism of private and official patrons

Paintings', also on view at the gallery, are just one example of the deep influence of the 1950s and 1960s abstractions on a later generation of painters in Britain.

Pioneering

Girling's work is an assertion of undisguised pleasure in the handling of paint and colour. She has the ability to make colours sing.

But her ease and self-confidence, which she shares with a number of other contemporary British painters and sculptors, would not have been possible without the pioneering spirit of the earlier period.



Abstract painting by Aubrey Williams

Letters to the Editor

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