

Watch with Saatchi

Painting had its last, much-trumpeted revival in the early 1980s, with the Royal Academy exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting*, jointly curated by Nicholas Serota and Norman Rosenthal. In the two decades since, it hasn't been lost exactly, but it has sometimes been overlooked, especially during the heyday of the artists with whom Charles Saatchi was previously closely associated. The latest exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery, however, announces unequivocally the international survival - indeed, triumph - of paint.

Walking around the gallery, it becomes clear that surface, rough pigment and neo-expressionism are all back in fashion. You are immediately confronted by a big room of paintings by Peter Doig. It is exceptionally powerful, full of the mournful narrative of middle Canada, pine forests and snow and the memory of watery sunlight. The large rotunda room, which includes slightly tricky paintings by Martin Kippenberger and Jörg Immendorf, is less impressive. But this might be because their best work has been kept back to be installed in a corridor of old GLC committee rooms - not least Kippenberger's *Paris Bar Berlin*, a neo-Edward Hopper painting of the bar he had previously decorated and installed with his own works.

Marlene Dumas's work is rather cold and dispassionate: images of childhood and prepubescent sexuality that are deeply ambiguous in their intent. But Hermann Nitsch's paintings are unexpectedly exciting. He goes back to 1950s action painting: huge canvases violently attacked with red paint. Dealing with birth, death and violence, his work revives the idea of paint as a medium to move the emotions.

The final artist in the series is Luc Tuymans, who - like all the artists in the exhibition - is clearly interested in images not as a semblance of reality, but as they might be imagined. His works - including a cage at night and a sinister picture of youths dancing at a maypole - are half-remembered images, refracted through film and newsprint and then reproduced effervescently.

It is amazing to think that this is not a loan show, an exploration of current trends in European art in a public museum, but that every work belongs to Saatchi himself. We should watch with interest what Saatchi is collecting. This show captures one of those zeitgeist shifts, when the public mood changes: we are now witnessing a new generation of younger artists who are willing to experiment, once again, with painting. Not surprisingly, as director of the National Gallery, I am pleased by this shift.

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