

The Arts

Barren of ideas

EXHIBITION

Landscape: Part One
Saatchi Gallery, N1
Nick Hackworth

DESPITE its title, this exhibition has practically nothing to do with artistic engagements with the landscape. Of the nine artists included in this first part (more are promised in part two), only the two photographers have produced work that truly focuses on landscapes and human relationships with them.

The seven painters, by contrast, evidently couldn't care less about landscapes, urban or rural. Although there are some among their works, they are culled from the imagination and, more frequently and tellingly, from the pages of art history. What

they really seem interested in is the wilfully boring parodying and pastiche of past styles and genres, an impoverished "postmodern" tactic that passes for a comment on the oppressive weight of art history.

The photographers also produce the most engaging work. Hannah Starkey exhibits two large images that feature teenage girls set in the urban environment of Belfast. In *Butterfly Catchers*, two girls, one with a net and the other with a collecting jar, pick their way across a field of rubble. The background is of flatness articulated by the form of a long, low-rise, institutional brick building that gives way to two rather pathetically dumpy hills. It is an image whose quietness allows it to sidestep charges of being a laboured visual metaphor for the search for beauty in unlikely places.

Figures in a Landscape 1999, by American David Salle: visually, his work is no more than bad decoration, its content of even less substance



In the work of Craigie Horsfield, the other photographer and a former Turner Prize nominee, beauty is found in the urban landscape itself. His large-format images taken above Barcelona's roofline are classic depictions of the urban pastoral. Here, the artificial lights of the city and the regular forms of the

built environment stand in for sunlight and the organic forms of the rural landscape.

On the basis of the paintings here, one could be forgiven for thinking that today's painters have become nothing more than blowflies feeding on the corpse of the past. The artists featured include Glenn Brown, Tracey Emin,

Michael Ashcroft, Dexter Dalwood and David Salle; only Brown's work holds interest, and even then it is more for the issues raised than for the quality of the painting.

Salle, well known in the US, is typical of the rest. He has his art-historical reference — in the case of one piece here, a

Gainsborough. He collages images and styles and he paints only surface, using blocks of undifferentiated colour to frustrate pictorial depth. Visually it is no more than bad decoration, and its content is of even less consequence.

● **Until 30 June. Tel: 020 7336 7365**



Roberta Parkin

Croonsome kitsch: Barry Manilow doing it for the fans

Here's one for the blousy ladies

POP

Barry Manilow
Wembley Arena
Paul Clark

TAKE a moment to imagine what it must be like to be Baz. You look in the mirror of your Brooklyn home and the offspring of an aged Julian Clary and Pinnocchio stares back; you sing and nothing but schmaltz comes out and you can't seem to shake off the attentions of neatly permed, sensibly bloused women. To Manilow's credit, he has

turned this potentially tortuous existence to his financial advantage.

Bizarrely, a fusion of Underworld's Born Slippy and Fatboy Slim's Right Here, Right Now heralded his arrival on a scaffold stage set at Wembley on Friday. Sporting a royal-blue jacket, he resembled a bingo caller, which probably added an air of familiarity to the full house of mature ladies. His flamingo-thin legs carried him around the stage with a seasoned swagger and a flirtatious flash of teeth.

The opening bars of *Can't Smile Without You* prompted the appearance of hundreds of banners pleading for a chance to duet with their icon. Ignoring the desperate-sounding "Up For It", Manilow plumped for Barbara,

an Essex secretary so overcome she suffered temporary amnesia before attempting a "tongue sandwich".

For further fan satisfaction he relived the Seventies, an era in which he claimed he "looked like Britney Spears without the boobs", with croonsome renditions of Mandy and the Chopin-inspired *Could It Be Magic*. But it wasn't all nostalgic ballads, with his new musical, *Harmony* — a triumph of high camp over *Mein Kampf* in Thirties Germany — and his new "concept" album, *The Mayflower*, featuring strongly.

He was joined by a 32-strong choir for his grand exit to the euphoric gospel chants of "miracle". The miracle is Manilow's gift for turning cheese into money.

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Arboreal myth

OPERA

Daphne
Royal Opera House
Brian Hunt

GRADUALLY turning a soprano into a laurel tree while she sings on stage is a bit of a challenge for an opera producer. The practical difficulties of this transformation scene are often said to explain why Richard Strauss's *Daphne* is rarely performed. But the standard repertoire is full of such *coups de théâtre*, so does the excuse mask other weaknesses?

The Royal Opera has ducked the challenge of staging *Daphne*, but has mounted two concert performances this month (a Radio 3

recording is broadcast on Saturday). We can therefore hear that there really is nothing wrong with the opera, unless just under two hours of gorgeousness (there is no interval) is slightly too much to absorb.

At the centre of its Greek mythological plot are two conflicts: male rivalry for the withheld affections of the nymph *Daphne*; and deific rivalry for the soul of art between cerebral Apollo and earthy Dionysus. Surrounding all is a pastoral orchestral tone poem teeming with impressions of flourishing flora and fauna.

The swoops and flutters of the title role presented no difficulties to luminous German soprano Alexandra von der Weth, despite some gaspy phrasing. As

Apollo, the South African *Heldentenor* Johan Botha was utterly thrilling; Roberto Saccà's dapper performance of the other tenor role, the shepherd Leukippos, impressed in its own way. Alto Jane Henschel was sure, steady and engaging as Gaea, *Daphne's* mother.

In tune with the metamorphic theme, conductor Stefan Soltesz appeared to transform himself into a giant grasshopper. His decidedly audible landings on the rostrum did not detract from a reading that was intelligent and imaginative and distinguished by cultured playing from the ROH orchestra.

● **Repeated on Wednesday. Box office: 020 7304 4000.**

THE ROYAL BALLET

WORLD PREMIERE
Wheeldon ballet
Christopher Wheeldon
Supported (2002) by The Dalriada Trust

The Leaves are Fading
Antony Tudor

A Month in the Country
Frederick Ashton

Cast
WORLD PREMIERE
Wheeldon ballet — Darcey Bussell*, Jonathan Cope*
(18 | 20 | 24 | 25ve May)
Belinda Hatley*, Martin Harvey* (25mat May)

The Leaves are Fading
Alina Cojocaru, Johan Kobberg (18 | 20 | 24 | 25ve May)
Leanne Benjamin*, Iñaki Urlezaga (25mat May)

A Month in the Country
Sylvie Guillem, Jonathan Cope (18 | 20 | 24 | 25ve May)
Muriel Valtat, Ivan Putrov (25mat May)

*Debut in role with The Royal Ballet

Box Office 020 7304 4000
(Mon–Sat 10am–8pm)
www.royaloperahouse.org
Muriel Valtat as Natalia Petrovna and Ivan Putrov as Beliaev in *A Month in the Country* (Photograph: Bill Cooper)

ROYAL OPERA HOUSE
COVENT GARDEN

TRILOGY
18 | 25 May at 7pm
20 | 24 May at 7.30pm
25 May at 2pm