

Creating commercial gold

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Cutting edge art or an advert for dentistry? Collage del Raspall by Antoni Tapies (2001) ()

Antoni Tàpies at the Waddington Galleries, W1

Feted in the four corners of the world, winner of numerous awards and the subject of scores of retrospectives in important galleries, Antoni Tàpies, now 80 years old, has long been Spain's most eminent artist.

Regarding himself as something akin to an alchemist, he has, for almost half a century, created rough, abstract, mixed-media paintings that combine painterly marks with rough textured surfaces, man-made objects and a smattering of cryptic symbols that are intended to endow them all with transformative, mysterious and magical auras.

Looking at the 14 paintings on show, however, it is clear that the only successful alchemy here is that of the art dealer in turning such base material into the gold of hard currency. All executed within the last four years, the paintings suffer from a fatal lack of finesse. As is his wont,

Tàpies has littered the works with his initials and cross motifs, mostly drawn by finger into the sandy surfaces he has slapped on to half the canvases, where they look absurdly selfconscious and anything but magical. The applied textures do little to liven up the proceedings, but worst of all are the silly things that Tàpies has incorporated into some of his pieces.

The largest painting on show, *Collage Sobre Materia*, for example, would have been quite nice with its internal interplay between various forms and textures, had Tàpies not stuck a small blank canvas on to the lower left-hand side of the work, a gesture worthy of a foundation course student. Far more embarrassing is *Raspall*, which consists of 10 brush-heads that have been inexplicably but cruelly separated from their broom handles and planted, bristles facing outwards, into the work's sandy background, each one above a crude eye-shape drawn in black paint. While in the most figurative work, *Collage del Raspall*, illustrated here, a wire brush seems to serve as a mobile signifier for the importance of oral hygiene.

That Tàpies's late work should fail to impress should not surprise. Like many venerable contemporary artists he is trapped by the limited nature of his previous practice. When figuration held sway and art practice was largely skill based, passing age naturally implied greater proficiency since practice made perfect.

When your artistic activity, however, is a combination of deliberately crude mark-making, assemblage and emitting an aura, it's hard to see how practice can help.

Until 26 April. Information: 02078512200. ■