

The Arts



North News Pictures

Suspended gongs by Catalan artist Jaume Plensa: "this spectacular installation wouldn't look out of place in the home of a James Bond villain, but — like the rest of the show — it is quickly forgotten"

OPENING at last after many delays, Baltic is the north of England's answer to Tate Modern: a £46 million conversion of the Baltic Flour Mills. The red and yellow brick 1950s grain warehouse, that until recently sat disused on the Gateshead bank of the River Tyne in Newcastle, now takes pride of place amid cranes and building sites which signal, it is hoped, economic regeneration. Inside, 3,000 square metres of floor space are divided into five large galleries on five floors.

Until October, these pristine spaces play host to the Baltic's dismally named opening show, B.Open. In a dull attempt to build brand recognition, the Baltic's marketers have prefixed all their titles and slogans with the letter B. Adverts for the gallery proclaim "B.there", while the bread rolls in my

EXHIBITION

B.Open

Baltic, Gateshead

Nick Hackworth

media pack had "B.read" stamped on them, which depressed me so much that I had to eat them.

Five internationally-recognised artists have each been given a gallery to fill. Unsurprisingly, they have responded with massive works. Belgian artist Carsten Höller presents two enormous light sculptures that attempt to play with your perception.

Jane and Louise Wilson, the Newcastle-born Turner Prize nominees, fill an entire gallery with *Dreamtime*, a video shot in Baikonur, Kazakstan, once the Russian equivalent of Cape Canaveral. Shots of astronauts and rocket launches are interwoven with melancholy images of empty buildings, a meditation on the differing scales of everyday human life and humanity's grand ambitions.

Meanwhile, displaying total disdain for

Grim up north

human scale, Julian Opie "fills" his gallery with two wall drawings and one floor drawing. From opposite walls, described in thick black lines, highly simplified male and female human forms

stare at each other. In the floor picture they appear to be copulating. Had sunlight not filled the room when I visited it, Opie's deliberate vacuity might have seemed less excusable.

A highlight of sorts is provided by Catalan artist Jaume Plensa: nine pairs of huge gongs hang opposite each other to create an aisle. This spectacular installation wouldn't look out of place in the home of a James Bond villain, but — like the rest of the show — it is achingly light and quickly forgotten.

Last and least comes the American Chris Burden, legendary for a series of extreme performances he did in the Seventies, including having himself shot in the arm. Now, inexplicably, he has taken to producing model bridges made from vast quantities of Meccano components. *Tyne Bridge*, the pièce de résistance, is a scale model of the real thing that is visible through the building's glass frontage.

Utterly without intellectual, aesthetic or emotional qualities, its only redeeming factor is that it was so large that the Baltic, at enormous and hilarious expense, had to knock down a wall to install it.

Overall, it's a B-minus for the Baltic.

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This display is a hit and miss affair

IN the 1970s, William Eggleston caused a stir when he began photographing the minutiae of everyday life in the deep South of the US: the space under a bed, the contents of a freezer, a car parked outside an innocuous suburban home. Until then, no one had considered such banalities to be appropriate subject matter for a photograph. This, and his use of colour film, make Eggleston an important pioneer.

Colour for him is both a compositional device and a faultless trigger of mood. His use of it encompasses the smooth pale yellow of a Bakelite phone in the evening sunlight, all warming mod-con comfort, to his famous image of an uneasy red ceiling, sticky with gloss and psychosis. Much of the work is like abstract painting, with a sensuous attention to shape, texture and pattern.

But this show is hit and miss. It begins well, with vividly moody distillations of suburban Mississippi in the Seventies.

EXHIBITION

William Eggleston

Hayward

Claire Bishop

But there are just so many inconsequential close-ups of cacti and diners. When presented within an endless enchilada of more than 200 images, the remarkable pictures get swallowed by the banal.

The curator's decision not to organise the work in any way is nothing short of disastrous. Eggleston comes over as scattershot, drifting from interiors to portraits to landscape to still life. What's needed is the imposition of order, to help us see how specific, creative, and influential Eggleston's eye has been. In his work lie the seeds of a multitude of



Mood altering: Eggleston uses colour well

contemporary artists: think of Wolfgang Tillmans, Jeff Wall, Martin Parr and David Lynch. Although he lobbied for what he calls "democratic" photography (in which all subjects are treated equally), it's not a successful model for hanging a show of this size.

● Until 22 September. Tel: 020 7960 4242.

So moved by these mighty Magyars

DURING last week's Hungary in Focus festival, Blackheath Hall was transformed into a Hungarian cultural centre; even the WC signs were bilingual, and the café's "special" was goulash. But the greatest delicacy was saved for the last night, when the country's best known and best-loved music group, Muzsikás, led by singer Márta Sebastyén, filled the place.

This lively, informal folk group (four male musicians, two dancers, and the singer), founded in the Seventies, picked up where Béla Bartók left off nearly a century ago. They tracked down folk music and dances in far-flung villages and introduced them into popular repertoires; Hungary's

WORLD MUSIC

Márta Sebastyén and Muzsikás

Blackheath Concert Halls

Sue Steward

equivalent of Fairport Convention, whose line-up includes violins, a three-stringed viola, mandolin, double bass (mostly bowed), flutes and percussion (including a baby cello, gently spanked with a threshing stick).

The men's natty outfits contrasted with Sebastyén's demure "Victorian widow" look, but that contradicted her joy at every song. She prefaced slow-

burning, haunting, Moldavian love songs (including *Szerelem, szerelem, Love, Love* from the soundtrack to *The English Patient*), swirling wedding celebrations and brisk Transylvanian dances with stories of learning them from elderly women in remote villages.

She matched the emotional pull of the musicians' notes with deep, bluesy tones and danced flirtatiously around the fiddlers with skipping steps. She also demonstrated exquisite melody on a shepherd's flute. Sebastyén's nasal, often strident voice occasionally gave way to hollering as a choice solo flew from a fiddle or mandolin, but neither that nor the dancers' exuberant folk moves failed to rouse the audience.