

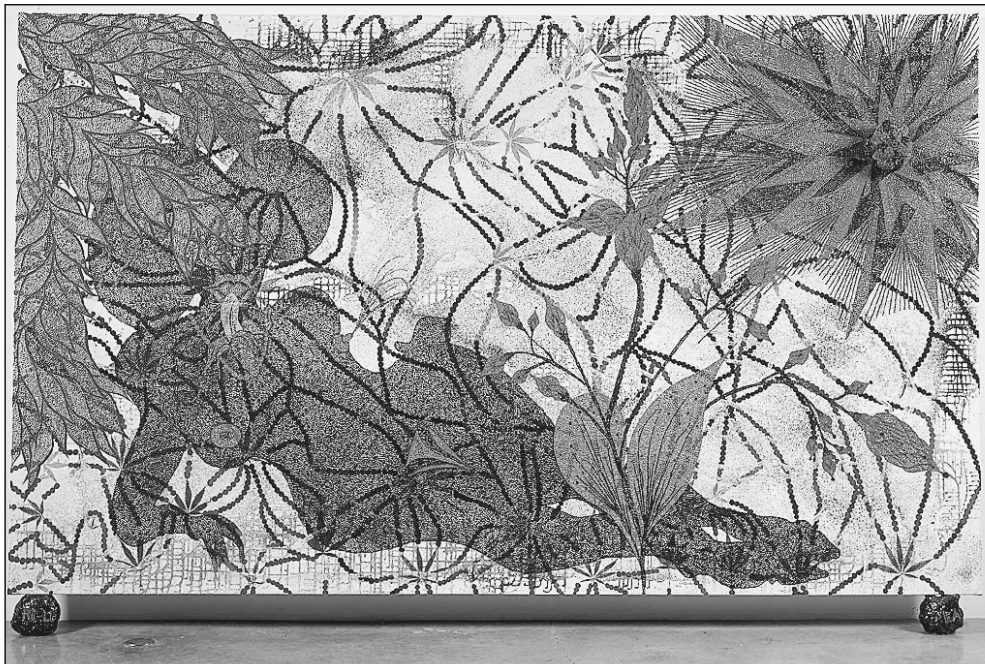
The Arts

In an African nirvana

IN his first solo show in London since winning the Turner Prize in 1998, Chris Ofili unveils a body of work that is more self-assured and attractive than anything he has yet produced. That fact is in itself notable, marking him out as the only winner of recent times whose work has actually improved since being awarded the prize. On offer in the exhibition are both a vision of paradise and a peculiar yet enthralling reconstruction of Christ's Last Supper. The four large paintings in the ground-floor gallery are part of an ongoing project depicting Afronirvarna (also the title of one of the works) using a palette

EXHIBITION
Chris Ofili
 Victoria Miro Gallery, N1
Nick Hackworth

restricted to black, green and red, the colours associated with African Unity since the 1920s. In this version of heaven, naively drawn black figures, their forms made up of a multitude of dots, frolic amid dense backgrounds of abstract patterns and semi-abstracted organic forms. In Triple Beam Dreamer, a black female nude endowed with ample charms lies in the foliage eating a banana.



Exotic fascination: Chris Ofili's Triple Beam Dreamer 2001-2002, featuring elephant-dung supports

Meanwhile, in Afronirvarna, a smartly dressed couple seen in profile hold hands beneath a shining star, at the centre of which there proudly protrudes Ofili's calling card, a ball of varnished and painted elephant dung. In the upstairs gallery, the atmosphere is altogether more mysterious. The once expansive, open space has been transformed. A narrow corridor leads to a dimly-lit, wood-pannelled room, with benches running down the centre, in which 13 paintings

are installed. Twelve, for the disciples, are of identical size, and each depicts the same figure of a monkey in profile, above which floats the requisite ball of elephant turd. The 12 monkeys flank the long sides of the room, six on either side, drawing one's eye in processional order to the larger painting hanging at the end, the Mono Oro, the Golden Monkey. Here, Christ has become a monkey of regal aspect who stares at you face-on, his skin of metallic paint shimmering in the spotlight.

In both series of paintings, Ofili succeeds in creating works of decorative beauty and visual richness. He has also moved away from the obvious parody of the racial assumptions that might have informed his audience, parody that manifested itself in the use of characters like the ludicrous black hero Captain Shit, who appeared in various works of his around a decade ago. These paintings seem altogether more at ease with themselves. ● *Until 3 August: 020 7336 8109.*

Young guns seize the day

CLASSICAL
Royal Over-Seas League Competition
 Queen Elizabeth Hall
Nick Kimberley

PREVIOUS winners of the Royal Over-Seas League Competition include a certain Jacqueline du Pre (1961). Whether this year's winner will match her lustre remains to be seen, but there was ample talent on display. Of course, it's impossible to judge between clarinettist and harpist, soprano and cellist, and there were no clues as to how the 14 judges reached their apparently unanimous decision, but part of the fun is always in disagreeing.

Harpist Eleanor Turner displayed admirable presence of mind in being able to joke while changing a broken string, but she wasn't being judged on sangfroid. If a sicilienne by Jean-Michel Damase proved merely pretty and sentimental, she invested Elias Parish-Alvars's Fantasy on Italian Airs with an engagingly tipsy swagger. But do harpists ever win? While clarinettist Sara Temple and pianist Catherine Milledge blended impressively, the long phrases of Debussy's First Rhapsody drew some ungainly breathing from Temple. Her tone, though, was lovely, like liquid wood. Then came soprano Lucy Crowe, who, accompanied by Anna Tilbrook, revealed a clean, agile voice, slightly pinched in Handel, more idiomatic in Mozart. In Debussy's Pierrot, however, she garbled both vowels and consonants.

For Samuel Barber's Cello Sonata, Gemma Rosefield unveiled a lovely, big-boned sound. While she at first seemed not wholly at one with pianist Inon Barnatan, both revelled in Martinu's suave and playful Rossini Variations. Finally, the Eimer Piano Trio, initially subdued in Haydn, eventually located the elusive Haydnesque *joie de vivre*.

And the winner? A generous round of applause for Crowe, a wholly engaging singer. My vote, though, went to pianist Simon Tedeschi, who revelled in the shifting moods of Prokofiev's Fugitive Visions. The finished article? No, that's not what the competition is about. But at 21 he already draws the listener into his world, and that is a rare gift.

Charmed by the country set



Gothic influence: Eaton Hall

Country Life Picture Library

THE English country house is now so cosseted and cherished, so much the stuff of dampish weekend excursions in rural England, and the centre of such an extensive industry of tea rooms and gift shops, that it is hard to remember that 30 years ago they were still knocking them down. Indeed, the 20th century is one of abrupt swings in the fortunes of this institution. In the first decade, they were still building them, as grand or grander than ever before, and using them for the purpose for which they had been invented, as

EXHIBITION
English Country Houses
 Sir John Soane's Museum, WC2
Rowan Moore

centres of power, wealth and society. Then their owners started knocking them down: at least 1,200 in the course of the century. Then, equally suddenly, demolition stopped.

To be honest, I tend to find country houses overrated as works of art, or as great days out. Too many evoke all too readily the endlessly dull afternoons that must have been spent there, or the

ghastly hostesses one can imagine once ruled them. One also feels a sneaking twang of sympathy for the aristocrats who spent the 1950s rattling around in the hundreds of rooms bequeathed them by their ancestors, wondering whether to demolish. But it would take a heart of stone not to be moved by the photographs in the Soane museum's exhibition. These are still, contemplative, uninhabited shots, taken in long exposures monochrome by the photographers of Country Life, and constitute the best record of these lost houses.

You can only marvel at the Gothic corridors of the immense Eaton Hall in Cheshire, designed by Alfred

Waterhouse, the architect of the Natural History Museum, and demolished in a misplaced attempt at common sense by the trustees of the present Duke of Westminster, when he was a boy. Coleshill, a rare intact 17th-century house, had an unusual perfection. Park Hall, in Shropshire, was the sort of black-and-white tudor extravaganza that would now be nationally famous and the set of a thousand costume dramas, had it not been destroyed by fire in 1918.

The Soane's exhibition space is small, so this is a small show, but for connoisseurs of haunting melancholy, worth the detour. ● *Until 21 September.*

LAST WEEK'S OPENINGS — WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

FILM	KEY ☺ Good ☹ OK ☹ Awful — No review											
	Evening Standard	Daily Mail	The Times	Daily Telegraph	The Guardian	The Independent	Financial Times	Daily Express	Sunday Times	Sunday Telegraph	The Observer	Independent on Sunday
Kissing Jessica Stein	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
Before You Go	☹	—	☺	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☺	☹	☹
Killing Me Softly	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
Dancing at the Blue Iguana	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	—	☹	—	☹	☹
Hardball	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹	☹
THEATRE												
Bollywood Dreams	☺	☺	☹	☹	☺	☹	☹	☺	☺	☹	☹	☹
Rose Rage	☺	—	☹	—	☹	☹	☹	—	☺	☺	☺	☺

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