Puddles, plants and one small joy

THE AMERICANS: NEW ART O Barbican Gallery

Nick Hackworth

UNFORTUNATE timing, perhaps. Conceived well before 11 September, this is the first major international exhibition of the most recent wave of American contemporary art. As some have pointed out, this show presents a perfect opportunity for critics to mount broadsides against the frivolous and decadent nature of contemporary art. In the light of the mass-murder of thousands of people and the spectre of anthrax, the esoteric musings of contemporary artists are bound to look even flakier than usual.

Disappointingly, the art on show is neither bad enough to entirely justify such criticisms nor good enough to entirely quash them either. Instead, it floats in a no-man's land of adequacy. Collectively the art carries the imprint of the culture that spawned it. It is described as "post ironic", steering clear of the heavy-handed use of irony that characterised young British art. It is individual, there are certainly no art movements identifiable here, and a vast range of styles, materials, mediums and methods are represented. It is engaged with the world, but avoids the perceived crassness of actually being political. It is also, at times, very dull.

Paul Sietsema's excruciatingly boring 19-minute silent film investigates, with "forensic detail", a bunch of plants.

Wilcox's Midnite Movie, which records an amateur performance of the Rocky Horror Picture Show that was evidently staged in a mad house, emerges as a paradigm of a certain strand of video-art being at once aesthetically displeasing, conceptually castrated and emotionally retarded.



Rachel Feinstein's Yesterday, 2000

Meanwhile, Piotr Uklanski exhibits a puddle of water, a piece that should be avoided by those with porous, lightly soled footwear.

There are, however, a few highlights. Keith Edmier presents a work entitled Beverly Edmier 1967. It is a life-sized pink resin cast of a woman got up in quintessentially Sixties suburban American garb. She is heavily pregnant, sitting with her head tilted downwards and

her eyes focused on her stomach. She is pulling up her top and visible through the transparent resin skin of her belly are the familiar features of a fully formed human baby. As sharper readers will have noticed, artist and subject share a surname and the piece is a brilliant self-portrait, a small note of pink joy in a darkling world.

• Until 23 December: Tel: 020 7638 8891.

O adequate,

 $\star\star$ very good,

outstanding,

★ good,

Tragic brilliance

EMERSON STRING QUARTET ★★

Queen Elizabeth Hall, SE1

Rick Jones

ON SUNDAY, in the first of three concerts this week, the Emerson String Quartet of the USA marked its 25th birthday by performing the six quartets of Bartók. This is a fourhour feat which they have perfected over 20 years. Audiences like the idea not only because it satisfies the musical trainspotting urge, but also because it is the closest concert programming comes to biography.

Bartók was a 26-year-old disappointed romantic when he composed his first quartet in 1907 and a 58-year-old motherless exile for his last in 1939. They played them chronologically. The two violinists shared first and second desks as they always do. Eugene Drucker (the curly-haired one — the programme fails to identify them) led first. His tone is brighter but thinner than that of his more corpulent col-

league Philip Setzer.

Quartet No1 progressed from sad falling sixths to a final tense and turbulent zigzag motif. Cellist David Finckel, puffing through his goatee, played an eloquent, self-pitying recitative. No2 proved the players' pinpoint precision in a delirious prestissimo. No3 produced a steely magic in the bridge-bowed passage, though the similar muted movement in the otherwise blazing No4 wanted clearer definition. The dismissive scherzo of No5 won an appreciative chuckle between agonised slow movements and the sneering bur-lesque of No6 was a final piece of brilliant invention.

As a cycle, the quartets are bathed in tragedy. The concert series is sponsored by the Risk Waters Group which lost 17

employees on 11 September.

● The Emerson Quartet plays six Haydn quartets including the Joke, Lark, Rider and Fifths tonight at 7pm and Beethoven's three Razumovsky Quartets on Thursday, both in the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Box office: 020 7960 4201.

No finger on pulse

LAURENCE AND GUS O

Etcetera Theatre, NW1

Bruce Dessau

IF HEFTY golfer Colin Montgomerie shrank and teamed up with a younger Griff Rhys Jones, the result would look like Laurence Howarth and Gus Brown.

Howarth has written for Alistair McGowan, Brown appeared briefly in BBC2's Happiness, but this sketch show is their first joint effort and currently it shows.

There is plenty of talent on display but they are heading for treacherous comedy waters, trying to explore how men are. The easy option would be a litany of Loaded archetypes, but this is more ambitious, addressing man's inability to emote. In one recurring vignette, they play a cheery duo who meet when their stigmata appear, but they might as well be discussing the football. A highlight is a Brideshead Revisited variant, relocated to Ipswich, in which corny gags are a substitute for intimacy.

Elsewhere, the comedic clutter of cultural references scrabbles for laughs. A Matter Of Life And Death, Unbreakable and 1984 jostle for sparky lines, but the performances are more polished than the script. At an hour this would not outstay its welcome, but at the moment it is 15 minutes overlong. In fact, if Colin Montgomerie teamed up with Griff Rhys Jones the result would probably be funnier.

• Mondays until 3 December: Box office: 020 7482 4857.

Cast a spell on you

THIS Friday sees the start of the annual London Jazz Festival and a procession of US tenor and sopranosax aces which includes Mike Brecker, Wayne Shorter and Joshua Redman. None of them, though, will be making more exhilarating mod-ern jazz than Branford Marsalis.

Branford, sax scion of the famous New Orleans family, sees Ronnie Scott's putting in a strong finish to an in-and-out year. The magic was certainly back in its famous room last night, with all eyes on the bandstand and pin-drop silence from a spellbound crowd who had earlier given pianist Gareth Williams's trio similar attention, and deservedly so.

A more contemporary and less controversial player than brother Wynton. Branford opened with Mr JJ. a brisk minor-key number, by drum-mer Jeff "Tain" Watts, about his dog. Watts, a stocky powerhouse behind the kit, grimacing and carving at his cymbals with unusual curved motions, dug in ferociously from the opening bar, perhaps stung by the leader's quip that his tune was "of anecdotal interest in being written by a drummer but still being a good song".

Bassist Eric Revis, a visual clone of

football bad-boy Stan Collymore,

BRANFORD MARSALIS QUARTET ★★★

Ronnie Scott's Club

Jack Massarik

teamed brilliantly with Watts as Branford spun out complex, surging tenor lines like a modern-day John

Switching to soprano for one of Ornette Coleman's perky themes, Giggin', he weaved gracefully around Watts's rolling New Orleans beat before pianist Joey Calderazzo's bluesy contribution near the end.

Later, Branford selected a gentle ballad, Tonality of Atonement, by the late Kenny Kirkland, referring to him not as "our former pianist" but 'our fallen comrade", a curious but topical wartime analogy. Was he thinking of Kenny as a victim of materialism, racism, narcotics or simply the Philistinism of the music business?

Tune in at Frith Street for further information. Every absorbing number this week is an education.

• Until Saturday. Box office: 020 7439 0747.



Exhilarating: Branford Marsalis

