

The Arts

Reputation hangs by more than a thread

EXHIBITION

Eva Hesse
Tate Modern

Nick Hackworth

WITH a large — but largely unnecessary — show, Tate Modern is bringing the work of Eva Hesse to the UK, where it has not been seen en masse since 1979. Hesse died in 1970, at the age of 34, just as her career was taking off, and is remembered chiefly for the experimental abstract sculpture she produced in the last five years of her life.

Born in Germany but raised in America, Hesse was well known on the New York art scene in the Sixties and was friends with the pioneering conceptualist Sol LeWitt, the minimalist Robert Rauschenberg and the feminist critic Lucy Lippard. Remarkably, given the short span of her career, Hesse's posthumous reputation has kept pace with those of her still-living contemporaries, for her work has starred in a myriad of international shows since her death. Time, however, always catches up. Several of Hesse's major works, executed in latex, have now become too fragile for further travel and so a major, comprehensive exhibition of her work is unlikely to be staged ever again. Perhaps that is as it should be, for though Hesse deserves to be remembered, she died too early in her career to make the kind of impact on the history of art implied by the scale of this show.

The exhibition proceeds in dull chronological order through Hesse's career, and so its first-half is quite forgettable. The small drawings, paintings and collages she was producing up until the mid-Sixties do chart her evolution from weak semi-abstractism into more confident and complex abstract painting and relief collages (such as



Sammlung Hauser und Wirth, St Gallen, Switzerland

Oomamaboomba) that made manifest her sculptural interests, but are otherwise of little note.

Hang Up, made in 1966, was Hesse's first major sculpture, and the first piece of real significance. It features a large loop of rope-clad steel tubing that flops into the space of the room, attached at opposite corners to a large, wall-mounted and banded wooden frame. The piece is an appropriate expression of

Hesse's interest in the absurdity of life, from which grew her desire to make "non-art": art that had no meaning outside itself. Art, in other words, that just was. From this point she went on to produce sculptures consisting of a series of similar elements, often in experimental materials.

Confident and complex: relief sculpture Oomamaboomba, 1965

Repetition Nineteen features 19 irregular bucket-shaped elements made of translucent fibreglass and resin that sit on the floor.

Better known is her untitled rope piece, made shortly before she died: a chaotic jumble of latex-covered rope, hung in several points from the surrounding walls and

ceiling. Frequently described as the sculptural equivalent of a Jackson Pollock, the rope piece, like much of her late work, succeeds in being a confident piece of abstract sculpture. But, at that point, Hesse's career, and life, came to an untimely end, before she was able to fulfil the promise she had begun to display.

● *Until 13 March (020 7887 8008).*

Why Ashcroft is missing verve

TWO albums into what is becoming a peculiar solo career, it is an indication of Richard Ashcroft's confidence that he book-ended his Friday concert revisiting his alumnus, the Verve.

The opening Sonnet is a reminder that he can write a direct, moving anthem. The crowd — mostly male — sang along in beery fashion. The concluding Bitter Sweet Symphony was delivered begrudgingly, but sounded strangely thin minus its orchestral, Rolling Stones sample.

These songs and other Verve material — particularly the acoustic, solo The Drugs Don't Work and the glorious Lucky Man — were the garnish: simultaneously appeasement of a geezerish audience and cathartic reminders of half a decade ago.

POP

Richard Ashcroft
John Aizlewood

Brixton Academy

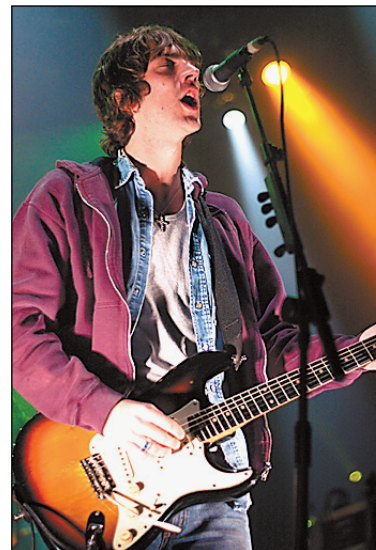
The meat, however, was post-Verve material. These days, the former critical darling garners only opprobrium. The reasons are clear: Ashcroft's voice is as flat as a field of freshly steamrolled pancakes, his songs meander like the Yangtze and his musical role model seems increasingly to be drugs-period Elton John.

All this remained true on Friday. Even Kate Radley, his wife and keyboard

player, looked bored during the interminable Lord I've Been Trying.

Yet, Ashcroft is a singular talent, as headstrong as Talk Talk's Mark Hollis, who sacrificed a successful pop career on the altar of self-indulgent but beguiling freeform scabbling. The dainty Science of Silence and the brisk A Song for the Lovers are packed with the discreet, sweeping melodies and a keen intelligence (lyrical fluffiness aside) which, in a slightly different musical world, serves Radiohead so well.

He might be struggling commercially and he might be a figure of fun among those who prefer music to wear Dr Marten's, but on balance, his vision is worth tapping into. At his best, Richard Ashcroft is transcendent.



Angela Lubrano

A singular talent: Richard Ashcroft

Reggae made it through a great night

POP

John Holt
Paul Clark

Wembley Arena

WEMBLEY hasn't seen a reggae artist on its stage for 15 years so, in the year of Jamaica's 40th Anniversary of Independence, it was only fitting that a virtual fleet of rock-steady crooners should be shipped into this bastion of rock and pop. Backed by the 36-strong London Philharmonic Orchestra and a large reggae band this was not a night for half measures.

Dubbed the Jamaican Barry White, Mikey Spice couldn't quite plumb the vocal depths of the Walrus of Love but his bulky frame and white jacket suggested some physical resemblance. It was former Bob Marley backing singer Marcia Griffiths, dressed in a striking crimson Afro-flamenco number, who brought the crowd to their dancing feet.

"Given the right treatment, our music is the best," she gushed amid wailing feedback from a foggy system which at times appeared overburdened by multiple layers of sound.

Thankfully, the feedback cleared for the second-half but the orchestra were lost behind a wall of choppy rhythm and bass. On occasion, the strings were reduced to a vague background noise while huge kettledrums were totally inaudible.

None of this seemed to bother Ken Boothe who jiggled like James Brown between soulful deliveries of his hits, culminating with Everything I Own. Prolific headliner John Holt arrived to a heroes welcome and teased fans with impressive Cappella flashes of his huge back catalogue. His breakthrough hit Help Me Make It Through The Night filled the aisles with swaying hips as did his Stick By Me duet with UB40 vocalist Ali Campbell. The Tide Is High, recently murdered by Atomic Kitten, drew all the vocalists on stage for a karaoke end to a night of easy listening, Jamaican style.