

The Arts

Preaching to the converts

POP

Polyphonic Spree

Union Chapel, N1

David Smyth

IF CHURCH was like this every Sunday, we would be the most religious nation on the planet.

Texan "choral symphonic pop band" the Polyphonic Spree played the venue they were made for last night. The holy grandeur of Islington's Union Chapel, together with the evangelistic fervour of the band's 24 members, was a marriage made in heaven.

The group, who despite their colossal size are still a small-scale venture with only one single behind them, were clearly also excited about the union. Several took photos of the crowd sitting in the pews, and leader and songwriter Tim DeLaughter gave a short sermon before the start, saying: "This is such a moment for all of us."

It has probably been a while since the Union Chapel, today one of the most popular gig venues in London, played host to a white-robed choir, but here were 10 such singers, swaying and grinning as the 14-piece band built up towering walls of sound.

The first song was opened by a classical harpist, the newest addition to the group. He joins, among many others, a man on kettle drums, a French horn player, a trombonist and a long-haired lunatic on theremin. DeLaughter has said he needs only a tuba player now for his vast musical vision to be complete, although I note there is also space for someone on kazoo or washboard.

The band's music has occasionally been criticised for having only one unsubtle trick — the quiet setting of a scene, followed by the dynamic thunderstorm of every musician going at it hammer and tongs — but



The quiet setting of a scene is followed by the dynamic thunderstorm of every musician going at it hammer and tongs: Texan band Polyphonic Spree

done with such infectious enthusiasm, on such a scale, this is more than enough to hold interest for a long time. The acoustics amplified the instruments while leaving the singing rather muffled, but the choir's joyful performance made them worth watching even if they weren't audible.

Hearing 24 people give their all on a

cramped stage was an overwhelming experience, at times exhausting. At one point, just when it seemed that the music could sustain no more bombast, and the musicians could leap no higher, the theremin player climbed the 10-foot-high pulpit, stood on the edge, and jumped.

More than once, the more

theatrical elements of the show made things rather silly. One song began with the whole group clicking their fingers, seemingly about to launch into a number from West Side Story.

Since they grabbed attention with a show-stopping performance at this summer's Meltdown festival, the band have been signed to 679

Recordings, the same label as Mercury Music Prize favourite The Streets. Their album, *The Beginning Stages of the Polyphonic Spree*, will be released next month, although it is likely their flowing robes and ceaseless grinning will confine them to novelty status. But last night they were preaching to the converted, and this crowd were in raptures.

The young pretenders to Brit art's crown



Atmospheric: Dog Without Legs, one of three photographs by Poppy de Villeneuve

FOR more than a decade, art students have had to contend with the legacy of the Young British Art pack, who chanced upon fame and fortune at an early age. Since then, none has matched the vibrancy of that group nor achieved such success so fast.

Notably should be the place to look for this year's pretenders to the throne of the YBAs, as it showcases the best of London's 2002 degree shows, selected by a highly respectable and fashionable panel. Unfortunately, something, somewhere seems to have gone wrong.

Certainly, there is good work here. Charlotte Ginsborg's convincing and engaging video piece *Community Event* presents two short, narrated anecdotes about everyday but revealing incidents, each accompanied by a series of black-and-white stills.

Poppy de Villeneuve shows three photographs from a series shot in Kentucky in the US. They are brilliantly atmospheric, capturing small moments in the area

EXHIBITION

Notably

Pump House, SW11

Nick Hackworth

without being patronising or intrusive.

Different but equally impressive is Susan Collis's work. At first it looks like a risible conceptual work about the death of painting, as it comprises a paint-splattered blue boiler suit hung on the wall and a similarly paint-flecked wooden stool. But look closely and the splatters are revealed to be works of intricate artifice. On the boiler suit there are tiny patches of embroidered coloured thread and on the stool, even more remarkably, the splatters are made up of inlaid precious stones, green lapis lazuli, iridescent opal and even tiny, twinkling emeralds — a reminder that beauty can be found in unlikely places.

Beauty, however, is evidently the last thing on

the mind of the four painters included in the exhibition. Carda Caivano and Hiroshia Nakase both contribute deliberately poor paintings that are, sadly, simply bad and unfunny. Nakase's work is a miserable collection of coloured drips and daubs that apparently constitute a "post-post-impressionist statement", while Caivano's naive, anaemic renderings of robins and suchlike are a criminal waste of wall space, paint and canvas. It is a poor irony, when more students seem to be

returning to painting, that art schools appear to have totally forgotten how to teach painting skills.

All this, combined with the merely average video and installation work also on show, suggests that this year's graduates have again failed to come up with work that is fresh and substantial. And for the moment, at least, the YBAs will continue to dominate people's conception of what contemporary art can be.

● Until 29 September.
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