

## The Arts

# Touch of Zen with no zing

THERE is a coherent and poetic vision that drives the work of Belgian artist Raoul de Keyser. For more than 40 years he has painted pieces that sit on the borderline between abstraction and figuration. He didn't achieve serious international recognition until the Nineties, and remains practically unknown in Britain.

Somehow the slow ascent of his reputation is fitting, for his work is an attempt to manifest a quiet, patient, Zen-like understanding of the world in paint, taking as his subject only everyday sights — the corner of a room, the form of Venetian blinds, the bark of a tree, birds in flight, or the branches of a monkey puzzle tree.

He aims to encapsulate purity rather than beauty — and occasionally succeeds. On the flat, grey background of *Untitled (Bern-Berlin Sst.)*, sit a number of regular white

## EXHIBITION

**Raoul de Keyser/Edge of the Real**

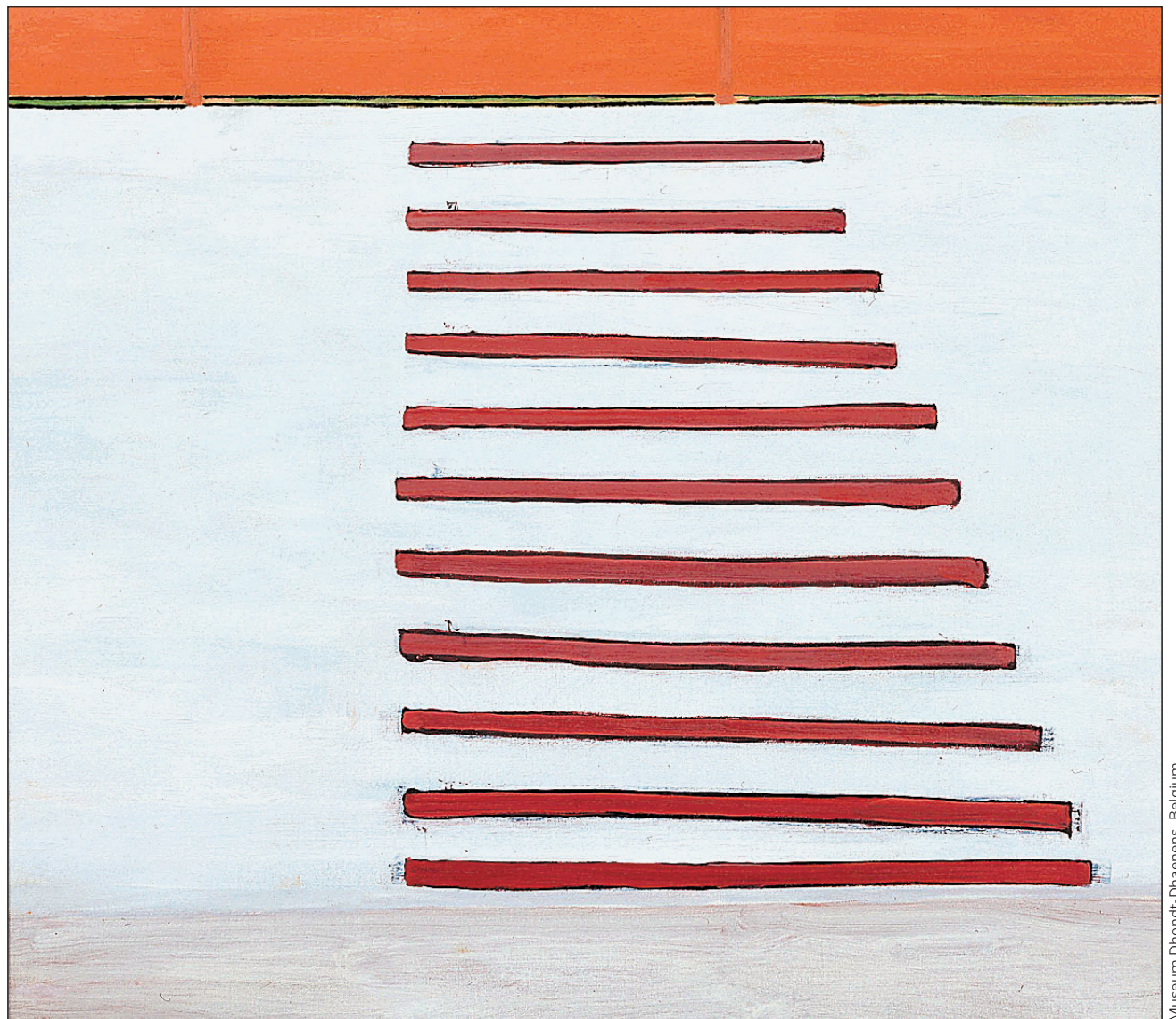
Whitechapel Art Gallery, E1

**Nick Hackworth**

stripes, easily read as clouds, and upon the surface swarm rough blue marks and points that evoke the movement of a flock of birds in flight.

*Untitled (Suggestion)*, meanwhile, is just that: two vertical, stripes of muted pinky-brown of varying intensity, in a sea of light blue-grey, perhaps legs in water, though it doesn't actually matter.

But like haikus that try to capture the simplicity and purity of fleeting moments, most of these works teeter on the edge of banality and, alas, fall in. And when your faith in de Keyser's ability to execute his own vision fails, all is lost, for few of the



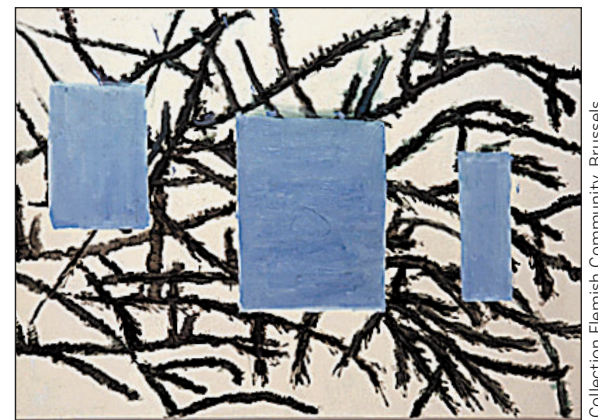
Strong lines: in abstracts such as *Surplace nr. 2 (2002)*, de Keyser aims to convey a patient, Zen-like understanding of the world in print

canvases here are redeemed by their aesthetic qualities. Like most contemporary painters, de Keyser loathes "prettiness" and make it hard for the viewer by employing the crudest of forms and using colours that epitomise dullness.

The painting is far more desperate in the accompanying exhibition, *Edge of the Real*, taking up one of the Whitechapel's small upstairs galleries. Modishly gritty and distinctly average figurative styles inform most of these visions of the here and now from 15 British artists. A few rise above, such as *Callum*

Innes's quiet abstraction and Nigel Cooke's flash of luminosity in a wasteland. Mostly, though, this lot contrasts unfavourably with some of the young international painters recently seen at Hoxton's Victoria Miro Gallery. Leading that altogether brighter pack are the lyrically imaginative Raqib Shaw and Suling Wang, neither of whom sit anywhere near the edge of the real but are firmly encamped in the realms of visual fantasy, and all the better for it.

● Until 23 May.  
Information: 020 7522 7888.



Monkey puzzle tree: de Keyser's *Bern-Berline-hangen*, 1993

## Smooth, subtle Elgar

OUTSIDE the Proms season, regional British orchestras tend to play at home, and when they do tour tend to sidestep the capital. So last night's concert by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, given under the auspices of the London Symphony Orchestra, was an important one, and a commensurately large audience, albeit much of it Scottish, turned up.

Oddly, orchestras inspire the same sort of loyalties as football teams.

Under Joseph Swensen, their American-born conductor, the SCO has developed its warm sound to an impressively sophisticated level. Indeed, there were times when less refinement and more raw emotion would have served the music better, though not in their opener, Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*

## CLASSICAL

**Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Swensen**

Barbican

**Stephen Pettitt**

for strings, a work that demands all the opulence and security a string section can muster. Here Swensen, helped by a fine solo quartet of principal players, made one marvel anew at the subtlety of Elgar's writing, at how he slips the focus almost imperceptibly from the general to the particular and back again.

For the same composer's *Cello Concerto*, soloist Ralph Kirshbaum, joined by a now expanded orchestra, though one still built on the SCO's smallish string section, impressed with his command and his

own opulent sound. There were advantages to what seemed a primarily cool approach, although one disadvantage was that the emotion-packed passage just before the work's end, taken very slowly indeed, seemed insufficiently fuelled by what had come before. Or maybe the atmosphere's charge had been negated by certain inattentive elements in the audience.

Finally came Vaughan Williams's *Fifth Symphony*, that other-wordly wartime work that incorporates important themes from the opera to be, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Again this was a technically fine reading, with a particularly well controlled slow movement. But again Swensen failed to connect spiritually with this powerful work's poignant musical heart.

## Poised and slyly sexy

GIVEN it is only weeks until Wayne McGregor's highly rated *Random Dance Company* premieres his new piece at Sadler's Wells, you'd have thought his troupe would be busy rehearsing. But seven of them have found time to create their own choreographic shorts and they showed them at *The Place* last night.

McGregor's dancers are accomplished and good looking, the women especially, with fine limbs and neat, pretty heads. They also radiate poise and sophistication, while managing to stay fresh-faced and slyly sexy, a very appealing combination.

The important question, at least for this performance, is: do they have choreographic ideas and the wherewithal to grow them? The answer is a few and a little, although all are better performers than dance-makers, and there's a nagging workshop feel to much of the evening.

## DANCE

**Random Dancers/AWOL**

The Place, WC1

**Sarah Frater**

One of the stronger pieces was an untitled solo by Hilary Stainsby. Against a projected stage-high photo of an open road, she performed with slow-paced precision, limbs articulated, movement isolated, and with controlled falls and precipitous angles (shades of McGregor here).

Stainsby also danced in Matthias Sperling's *Dexter Sinister*. The duet (billed as a trio) portrayed the dancers in a sort of separated embrace, together alone. It was strongly dance, although, like Stainsby's untitled solo, its debt to McGregor (those elbows, those falls) was clear. Ditto Laila Diallo's gorgeous if bafflingly titled solo *Out Of*

*Sight In The Direction Of My Body*. Less good was Fred Gehrig's *Im Panzer*, a solo inspired by RM Rilke's poem about a panther, and *The Making of You!* by Frederick Opoku-Addaie, a quintet that felt more like group analysis than choreographic enquiry.

Likewise the angsty *Black Light* solo by Khamlane Halsackda, which included strong theatrical elements (speech, props).

Given its awesome provenance, choreographing to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* is a brave, or barmy, move. Anh Ngoc Nguyen did surprisingly well, marshalling his seven dancers to speedy, dramatic effect. It wasn't always clear what was going on, but Ngoc Nguyen is still a beginner. It's a boon that he and his choreographic confreres are keen to try their hand.

● Tonight only.  
Information: 020 7387 0031.