

The 'wrong sort of art' enjoys a brush with celebrity

William Packer

With its annual open exhibition now on at The Mall Galleries, the New English Art Club, of which I have to say, declaring my interest, I am an active member, is now celebrating its 125th anniversary. Founded by a group of artists in the orbit of Whistler and Sickert, all conspicuously Francophile in their allegiances and, as is customary in these affairs, despairing of the Royal Academy for its stuffiness and exclusivity, it carries on still in its robust but undogmatical commitment to figurative and representational painting. It is a nice irony, not lost on its members, that as the RA chases the chimera of fashionable avant-garde acceptance, so artists of the professional middle ground, that were the RA's natural constituency, are looking back to the New English for a home.

But, for all its long history and the distinction of its members, the New English is only one of the many old-established exhibiting societies that, through all the intervening vagaries of fashion and fortune, remain among the more enduring if unsung features of the English, indeed the British, art scene — for they are by no means confined to London. The Royal Academy (1769) was of course the pioneer, but it didn't take long to generate fierce reaction and competition — the Royal Watercolour Society 1804; the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists 1821; the Royal Society of British Artists 1823; the Royal West of England Academy 1844; the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts 1859. These are only a few of the early ones, and if they make the New English seem comparative new boys, the Royal Society of Portrait Painters; the London Group; the Pastel Society; the Painter-Etchers; the Royal Institute of Oil Painters and so many more are positive Johnny-come-latelies. And I've said nothing of the Welsh, the Irish and the Scots.

But where once their annual exhibitions were an event, nowadays, other than the regulation sneering at the RA's Summer Show, these societies or associations get nothing of the critical attention they once regularly enjoyed, for all their importance for the opportunities they afford to artists, and the supportive role they still play.

I suppose I first became aware of



Portobello Road by Peter Brown is among the pictures on show at the New English Art Club's annual open exhibition at The Mall Galleries in London

their existence all of 50 years ago when, still at art school, I was just beginning to look about me, to see what was what, and who was who. For in those far-off days, the New English and the rest still commanded a wide constituency, and to the interested art student had much to offer. And though a certain snobbish prejudice was beginning to build against them even then, in the mind of the more ambitious and self-conscious Modernist, their open submission exhibitions still provided an important opportunity and a safety net. With galleries now numbering in the hundreds in London alone, it is hard to remember how difficult it once was, and not just for students, to get one's work on a public wall.

We certainly went in for them all, and for the RA Summer Show as well; and if the rejection slip on the doormat was something of a rite of passage, occasional acceptance, even if irregular, gave a wonderful sense of taking one's

place in a serious and thoroughly professional world. For, student or not, one had the sense of being taken, if only for the moment, as an artist among artists, judged and accepted by one's peers. The work was taken on its merits as being what it was. One had a foot on the ladder at last, if only just.

Perhaps for a while the societies themselves did contribute to their own decline in influence, through becoming too inward-looking, defensive and conventional: in short cleaving to those very attitudes they had come into being to counter. Perhaps with some of them it is still a problem. But if, from mid-century on, their natural constituency then seemed to drift away, the simultaneous emergence of the sponsored prize exhibitions, such as the John Moores and the Hunting Prizes, along with the continuing success of the Discerning Eye, the Lynn Painter-Stainers Prize, and the Threadneedle Prize, suggested that the need for the

open submission exhibition was no less strong.

However, in 1960 several of the societies — the New English, the RP, the RBA, the ROI, the Pastel Society, the Wildlife and the Marine Artists — came together in a practical and positive spirit of self-defence to make common cause as the Federation of British Artists. In 1970 the FBA moved into The Mall Galleries as its headquarters, where today it flourishes, solvent and, unlike its indigent next-door neighbour, the ICA, without ever receiving a penny of public subsidy.

Indeed, once seeking a modest grant from the Arts Council by which to upgrade a worn-out lighting system, it was famously rebuffed on the ground that it represented "the wrong sort of art". Well, thank you very much: and the galleries were handsomely transformed anyway some years ago, with the help instead of Threadneedle Investments, whose support continues

with work, shortly to be completed, on remodelling its East Gallery. The Linbury Trust, the Heritage Lottery Fund and Kirby Laing too are chipping in with help for an Education Centre, now also nearing completion.

What is seldom acknowledged, let alone said, is that Britain is quite remarkable for the strength in depth of its community of professional artists, which, right sort or wrong sort, is far richer and more various than current critical opinion ever allows. It has long been so. And, representing as it does a combined working membership of around 1,000, and through its exhibitions the work of thousands more, it is this community that the FBA serves. These may be difficult times for the world at large, but not altogether discouraging times for the FBA, and its wrong sort of artist.

The New English Art Club: Annual Open Exhibition 2011, The Mall Galleries, The Mall, SW1, until Dec 4