

Yannis Kyriakides's *An Ocean of Rain*. And then there are the regular workshops of Bill Bankes-Jones's ten-year-old company Tête à Tête. The quality varies hugely, but his is a crucially important organisation in giving practical experience and opportunity to composers who don't want merely to decorate our lives but also to illuminate them.

Which brings me to the young Swiss-resident British composer Edward Rushton, who for some time has been creating a series of pithy, highly effective chamber operas. His most recent is called *The Shops*. It was seen at Covent Garden's Linbury Theatre last year, performed by The Opera Group, and has just appeared on a CD issued by NMC. It's a miniature masterpiece, holding a mirror up to its audiences just as Mozart did in *Figaro*, and pouring distinctly good-humoured, comic and indeed charming scorn upon our materialistic ways. Given that such ways might soon lead to the planet's demise, *The Shops*, modest and innocuous though it might seem, makes a rather important statement. An exotic and irrational entertainment it is not.

Interview

Collaborating with chaos

Andrew Lambirth

talks to the artist

John Hoyland about his life and work

John Hoyland dislikes being called 'one of Britain's leading abstract painters'. He thinks it's lazy thinking, and over-reliance on labelling. 'They don't say: "Lucian Freud, leading figurative painter" — he's just a painter. Or "Francis Bacon, leading melodramatist".' Mention of Bacon sends him off on a tangent, one of the digressions that make Hoyland's conversation — along with his forthright opinions — so rewarding and enjoyable. 'I look at Bacon's paintings and instead of being moved by them they make me want to laugh. They're supposed to be horrible and moving and frightening, but they're so shrill and so theatrical. I like drama in music or painting, but not melodrama.' And having dismissed one of the most expensive and sought-after of modern British artists, he leans back and grins. Hoyland is not too keen on auction rooms and the prices they generate. His own Sixties' work is currently a focus of buyers' attention, generating auction records, and he finds it rather annoying. A true artist, he is really only interested in his latest work or what he is about to do, not in the achievements of 40 years ago.

'I think the vultures are circling a bit,' he says with a chuckle. 'I suppose artists' early work always fetches more money. It can be irritating when people forget whole swathes of work, like the paintings I did in the Seventies and Eighties.' Of course, what is needed is a full-scale Hoyland retrospective, and the Tate is the place for such a show, though under the current regime such an exhibition is unlikely. Has England so many artists of international stature that they can afford to ignore such a figure as Hoyland? Of course not, yet it seems that our museums are more interested in showing foreign artists than the home-grown variety. Meanwhile, Hoyland continues to paint in his London studio just north of Smithfield Market, and to have shows of vibrant new work. One exhibition has just finished at Beaux Arts in Cork Street, while another continues at Lemon Street Gallery in Truro until 7 June.

Although Hoyland's latest work, with its effervescent colour combinations and its wild paint-trails, seems to some like an arsonist's night out in a fireworks factory, it's not all madcap celebration. A very recent painting, a dark beauty we look at in the studio, is called 'Goodbye'; not exactly exuberant. In fact, he can't stand art that is perpetually euphoric. He himself is more often than not in elegiac mood these days. 'I've been doing these paintings called "Letters" to people I admire. There's one to Chaim Soutine and a couple to van Gogh. I've been rereading his letters. I've done a number of paintings in the past couple of years that just came over me from the deaths of friends: Patrick Caulfield, Bryan Robertson, Terry Frost, Piero Dorazio.' Robertson was the inspired critic and director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery who gave Hoyland his first museum

show in 1967; Dorazio was a famous Italian painter. All were close friends that Hoyland misses. The Grim Reaper has been busy.

'I think painting should express all kinds of different things, not be limited. I can't think of anything worse than just taking painting towards refinement, if you don't allow yourself to change. I don't force change on myself, it just happens. I'd probably get bored if I did the same thing all the time. Not so long ago I said I'd like to be able to paint anything in a painting. I think I'm getting there slowly. Robert Motherwell gave me a book on Miró. He's supposed to be the great surrealist with a fantastic imagination but he went on the beach every day picking stuff up — a bit of string, a shell, a bit of wood. If Miró needed outside stimulation then who am I to think that I can keep on developing through a kind of formalist grid? That opened me up to plundering nature.' His work now is as likely to take its impulse from something seen on his travels as it is to be formed from one colour working with or against another. After half a century of endeavour, he has won through to a hard-earned freedom of expression.

John Hoyland was born in Sheffield in 1934 and went to art school there before gaining a place at the Royal Academy Schools and coming to London. He first made his name in the Sixties for bold abstract works which entirely rejected the observable world and dealt exclusively in shape and colour. (A selection of these paintings along with some gouaches, all from Hoyland's own collection, is being shown at Nevill Keating Pictures, 5 Pickering Place, St James's Street, London SW1, 020 7839 8386, from 11 June to 4 July.) From 1967 he spent increasing amounts of time in America, associating with such artists as Rothko, Newman and Motherwell,



'18.6.65' by John Hoyland, to be shown at Nevill Keating from 11 June