

## ART

Preview

## Wizards of Oz

DAVID LILLINGTON ON  
ABORIGINAL ART

An exhibition of aboriginal artefacts and paintings sounds like a pleasant thing. 'Boomerang', at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, includes paintings, boomerangs, *woomeras* (digging sticks), clubs, and, the centrepiece, a *tjuringa*. However, when you read the literature on the subject you enter an aesthetic and moral jungle, a string of debates of almost theological complexity. Aboriginal conventions are not European ones. If you ask Rebecca Hossack which way round a painting goes, she will turn the painting round on the wall: it doesn't matter. Comparisons are often made between aboriginal paintings and abstraction. But even recent examples, which are acrylic on canvas, are problematic if seen in this way. For example, they show a poor understanding of the way shapes and overall composition relate to the edges of a canvas.

Rebecca Hossack suggested that one of her exhibits resembles a Brancusi sculpture. It doesn't, and if you judge it by those standards it fails. But it's obvious to everyone (and Rebecca Hossack would agree) that such judgements miss the point: this art is interesting precisely because its aesthetic is wholly unfamiliar. It has to do with an entire way of life. It's the sense of a whole culture with all its parts integrated that fascinates us. Spirituality is fashionable and it seems to us that the most spiritual people on earth are the aborigines.

However, the plot thickens. Some critics point out that judging aborigi-

nal art solely for its 'spirituality', or even its narrative content, means that bad art and good art are given equal status. And if there are no good and bad aboriginal works of art, only authentic and inauthentic ones, the dealers can sell everything at the same price using this anti-aesthetic as justification. This is bad for good artists. What one thought was a defence of aboriginal integrity turns out to be a means of further repression. The Aboriginal Arts Association even suggested a total ban on the export of paintings. But this wouldn't do the artists any good at all. The idea that aboriginal artists should accept poverty as proof of their authenticity is just a quaint twist in the history of white hypocrisy. Rebecca Hossack, it should be said here, is an expert on, and a passionate campaigner for, aboriginal art and artists. She wants respect and decent prices for her artists.

'Boomerang' consists mainly of wooden objects dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With these, questions of authenticity don't arise. But they do look out of place. Is it even right that they should be here? Yes, people should see them, even if it is difficult to know how to approach them. When one of the gallery staff handed me a digging stick, I had the bizarre feeling that the object I was examining so reverentially might be the aboriginal equivalent of, say, a rolling pin. The boomerangs, which are beautiful and fascinatingly varied, are less of a problem, but it was with relief that I came across the *tjuringa*. This is a convex, oval piece of wood carved only with neat spirals connected by overlapping three-groove bands — places joined by pathways perhaps; the meaning of most *tjuringas* is unknown because they are 'secret-sacred' and the aborigines won't tell. This of course pleases us more than anything. It also raises yet another moral question, particularly for the good Ms Hossack, who takes these things seriously. *Tjuringas* are only meant to be seen by certain people. And this religion isn't dead, remember, it's alive. 'I'm proud that we've got this,' says Hossack, 'but it shouldn't be here really. If an aborigine walked in I'd have to take it down.'

'Boomerang' is at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery until May 11.



Jack B Yeats

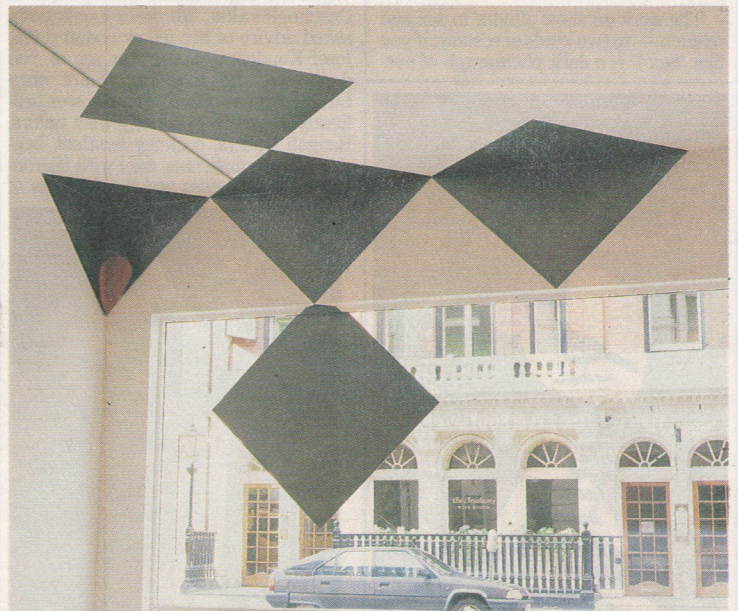
## WHITECHAPEL

Because of their Irish connection Waddingtons have long shown the paintings of Jack B Yeats, brother of the poet WB Yeats, though for many years his work had little appeal in Cork Street. The expressionist vigour of his palette-knife technique was admired, but in the 1960s and '70s the conventional view was that his imagery was suspect — how was one to react to the Queen Maeves and lone tinkers wandering in the spume of the west-coast surf or over Ireland's coastal crags? 'What great pictures they'd be if it wasn't for all that Celtic whimsy,' people said.

In these Post-Modernist times we can see that the archetypal figures give dra-

matic focus to the elemental chaos in Yeats's paintings. John Berger, who has long championed Yeats's work, once pointed out that 'in Ireland the sky is a dancer'. No other artist has captured so well the sense of an enormous, whirling atmosphere whose light transforms the humans down below, so that ordinary activities become suffused with the other-worldly. When Yeats paints two travellers talking beneath a rugged headland, the shining light of the Atlantic lends their meeting a supernatural quality. Yeats belongs to a visionary tradition, though it's strange to think that for many years he also drew cartoons for *Punch* under the pseudonym W Bird. Like Daumier, he was a tireless illustrator whose paintings soared into another realm.

Robert Macdonald



'Five Squares' by Yoko Terauchi.

## Eleven Women Artists

## VICTORIA MIRO

Showing one work apiece, the 11 artists here all produce sparse and enigmatic works which function in the way of visual aphorisms and sphynx-like conundrums. Marina Abramovic's three

roughly made terracotta cubes are hung vertically, at the height of the head, the heart and the sex. Four tiny, dusky blue boxes by Marilyn Weber have hinged doors, all ajar and showing a glimpse of absolute darkness and childhood dread. Beneath them is the bleached plaster hulk of Rachel Whiteread's cast bathtub, its whiteness rimmed in rust. A nearby painting by Kay Rosen should say 'Freud', but there's a black square where the 'r' should be: the piece is titled 'Feud'. One of Angela Bulloch's light pieces throbs slowly in the corner; a plinth on a rocking base supports the photo of a boomerang; and an elegant cube of corrugated iron is titled 'Outer Space'. The affinities of the artists here are less usefully described in terms of the cube, minimalism or the ready-made, than in terms of enigma, poetry and wit — fun, fear and Freud.

Adrian Searle

## CRITIC'S CHOICE

1. *Twilight of the Tsars*  
Hayward
2. *Rachel Budd*  
Pomeroy Purdy
3. *Jack B Yeats*  
Whitechapel
4. *Victor Pasmore*  
Serpentine
5. *Appearances: fashion photography since 1945*  
V&A

