

low, repetitive images. The decision to jettison most of the subjects explored in his earlier career did not limit him as an artist. By casting aside his racehorses, singers, laun-

Degas habitually drew on tracing paper, so that he could replicate an existing design and then change it at will. Hanging next to the *Group of*

the face of it, less spectacular. After all, what could be more matter-of-fact than glimpses of women sitting on the edge of a tub, stepping in, climbing out

naked bodies purging themselves of urban grime. In one particularly luminous painting, a maid pours water from a jug on to a

like so many of these bathing figures, a woman rubs her neck with a white towel. Since no face is visible, she could

virtuoso technique. The hatched shading on her back is scratched on to the paper, and the rest of her body

opens at the National Gallery tomorrow and continues until 26 (tickets from First Call, 01 0000)

The bright spark in a brown world

Sacha Craddock celebrates the long career of one of Britain's best abstract painters; plus other new shows

To anyone standing in front of a work by Gillian Ayres it soon becomes clear that this artist's chosen subject is painting itself. Unlike a lot of lyrical abstraction, Ayres's work is almost belligerent in its direct, "hands-on", expressionistic approach. There is no sense of doubt or indecision, only an attempt to create a reality through massive volumes of paint. The struggle seems more physical than mental.

"Why should painting be bloody misery?" Ayres asks. Her current exhibition at Gimpel Fils is a vivid illustration of this attitude. It includes a generous selection of works: many large paintings, among them a diptych which is very large indeed, and a group of smaller works downstairs. The colour in the recent works

is forceful, the drawing blunt. Throughout her career, which spans almost half a century, Ayres has been concerned with paint's potential for transformation. Perhaps no other British painter, except Frank Auerbach, has explored this potential with such passion. The other enduring quality in Ayres's work is the expressive use of colour. From the thinner, more fluid abstract pictures of the 1950s to the later "arranged" works of the 1980s, all are uniformly bright and hedonistic and determinedly not rooted in the English tradition of muted tonal variations.

Her affiliations lie in a straight line from Impressionism, through Matisse to American Abstract Expressionism. She first came into contact with what she still

characterises as "brown" English art as a student at Camberwell Art School, where she kept herself to herself. "I thought when I went to art school: 'how wonderful, I will be able to talk to people'. But that was 1946, and they had all come out of the Army and they were talking about the desert and the jungle instead." Her work has remained consistently, almost blindly, unconcerned with specific subject matter or the trappings of autobiography, more decorative than descriptive.

"Our particular culture has always been difficult about decoration," she says. "It is happier with serious subjects and brown paintings. I'm not against the brown of Braque — the colour brown — but there was always thought to be an extra seriousness in dark



Gillian Ayres's *Hanging Gardens of Babylon*, 1994-95

paintings. In this country they also talk of pure decoration as if it were something like an embroidered cushion. It is a form of Puritanism."

Although Ayres has been making paintings for nearly five decades, it was at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s that her large, encrusted, spectacular works achieved acclaim, and came to be essential viewing for a great number of art students. Up to that point she had been teaching in art schools herself, but after an illness moved to Wales and painted full-time.

She talks about art using a language that presumes a singular shared view. "Reality is constant, but its manifestations are not. I would like to think that my paintings hit at a collective consciousness." She sees the world through her medium and its history. "Wherever I go in the world, I know the skies from painting. On the East Coast I see Constable clouds. People said to Picasso 'that's not in Nature,' and he said, 'well it is now'."

● Gillian Ayres is at Gimpel Fils, 30 Dering Street London W1 (0171

□ The usually expansive space at Matt's Gallery seems much smaller. Running right across it from side to side is a fake wall. Only slowly does it become clear that, despite the heavily opaque mix of red and purple paint which covers it and the elaborate black detailing at the bottom of the wall, all is not as solid as it seems: a taut, fragile membrane covers the structure, and daylight filters thinly through from behind. Called *What are you Lookin' At?*, this simple piece by John Frankland is strangely atmospheric: a potentially bland piece has been turned into something more elusive. *Matt's Gallery, 42-44 Copperfield Rd, London E3 (0181-983 1771), until June 9*

□ With a little help and a makeshift kitchen, Giorgio Sardotti managed to produce an excellent meal in the cold basement of the Cubitt Gallery. *Dinner* may sound like another cynical, cliquey exercise whereby a list of names becomes a substitute for art. At the same time, however, it was nice to be asked. But that

ing exhibition shows the dinner table exactly as it was left by the guests, with cigarette stubs, empty glasses, doodled table cloths and crumpled napkins "signed" by Gavin Turk. A frequently altered seating plan, a menu, snapshots of the cooking and a refusal by fax are tacked on the wall. At each end of the table a large television monitor shows various things, including two short films by Gillian Wearing, while a soundtrack specially arranged by Angela Bulloch plays on. Although nothing awful or embarrassing happened during dinner, the show creates a strong sense that it was all a long time ago, and that the traces should now be cleared up.

Cubitt Gallery 2/4 Caledonia Street London N1 (0171-278 8226) until June 2

□ Two obsessively worked paintings by Tim Renshaw turn intensive labour to real advantage. The tracery of a map or street plan is repeated in a creeping web across each canvas: yellow detail painstakingly spreads across a black ground in one; blue spreads across grey in the other. Two delicate pieces by Bernice Donzelman are traced straight onto the wall to make small finely woven patterns like drawn-out lace or two-dimensional basketwork. Andrew Chesher's work hovers between utility and flatness: a detailed but worn Formica table top sits directly on legs, while a sanded piece of blockboard sits mounted on a fine sandwich of board on the floor, leaning against the wall. Renshaw has selected an unusually discreet show which suggests some intriguing cross-references.

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Gustave Caillebotte The Unknown Impressionist



Paul de Langy (detail), 1876, Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva