

## Art

MERLIN JAMES

### Enthusiastic Underwriting

Paintings by the American Stephen Mueller at the Fabian Carlsson Gallery. The first impression was déjà-vu: big vibrant canvases of splurged, splattered, blobbed and dragged colour over fine rainbow diffusions and streaming wind-tunnel currents of background stain. Occasional masked-out rectangles hanging in mid-paint or butting canvas edges. Here and there elements assembled more deliberately into a flaming sun, a Catherine-wheelish propeller, a lush flower. Late-late abstract expressionism, surely, of which Britain has more than enough of its own. Mueller has his particular qualities, of course - an immaculate arbitrariness, a kind of high-tech organicism in which, despite the loose landscape feel, the drama becomes inter-galactic or sub-molecular: haloed black holes soaking into saturated atmospheres, sun spots suppurating, meteors of turquoise or lemon pigment trailing sulphurous vapours. At the same time it would be wrong to call the works richly evocative; the peculiar literalness of surface militates against metaphor. Unlike orthodox New York School formalism, Mueller's more acute emphasis on surface and plasticity does not co-exist and contrast with - rather it erodes - factors of illusion, motif, symbol, association. Though he preserves the expansive gestures, rich colours and biomorphic forms of supposedly expressive, allusive painting, his opulent ribbons of paint and molten metallic drips do not generate any simultaneous imaginative reality beyond themselves. Paint is raw paint, colour is synonymous with physical pigment. At most the richness of these paintings for the viewer involves seeing pictures in the random blots, fantasising some coherence of narrative or mood. Mueller's titles humour us (or ask us to humour him) with potential scenarios - *The Turks in Genoa*, *Memory Island* - but the most telling is *Enthusiastic Underwriter*; this is what all these pictures require the viewer to be - a 'backer' to guarantee meaning, to credit them with external significance. In themselves they remain rather like those crass desk-top toys - lamps or paperweights filled with oils or mineral filings that swirl endlessly into changing patterns of fantastic shapes and colours, unsatisfying in their inconclusiveness, their sheer coincidence of cadence.

A few years ago, after the general positivism of the 'sixties had faded, it would have been unlikely to have found a painter like Stephen Mueller being imported for a jaundiced British art-public then fond of deriding contemporary painting as self-indulgent, academic, peripheral, bolstered by verbiage, even 'in crisis'. Decorative derivations of painterly abstraction went especially out of favour, and Stephen Mueller typifies the mode so unapologetically. With their pristine messiness, their cosmic cosmetic pinks and synthetic greens, the pictures in this show looked like sample-charts showing ranges of effects achievable with some new brand of paint specially formulated for the thoroughly modern master. Pseudo-avant-garde extravaganzas, airport abstractions, sumptuous restaurant expressionism, plush office-foyer ornamentation. And yet, today, to dismiss this work as vulgar and predictable would itself be deemed vulgar and predictable. Of late we have seen the vocabulary of earnest expressionism appropriated ironically by American and European artists, set on its head, archly parodied, superimposed on random imagery, scrambled with caricatured fragments of other kinds of representation and non-representation. The coolly calculated trades freely with the highly charged; the bull (and the bear) in the china shop of style. In this climate, were we being asked to see irony in Mueller's near-camp panache and phosphorescent prettiness? The catalogue writer spoke of 'seventies Colour Field work turned mean . . . Abstract Expressionism in drag', and hinted that the artist's 'amusing impersonation' sought not ultimately a subversion of its adopted language of painting, but somehow a more conscious reinstatement of it, proceeding 'from a belief in its continuing potential - for expression, for instruction, for pure pleasure'. An attractive idea. And would this make the work not straight late modernism, then, but a manifestation of this elusive manner of the moment *postmodernism*? One hesitates to employ a term that tends to say more about those who use it than about those, or that, of which it used, and one which is thrown around so widely. Recently, at a low-key lunchtime lecture at the Tate Gallery, it was André Derain's late work that was characterized at the outset as defining postmodernism. (Was it in protest that the gentleman near the front from

that moment on snored loudly?) Well, Derain's qualified re-engagement with the 'outmoded' tradition of Poussin, Watteau, Corot could indeed be said to 'proceed from a belief in its continuing potential - for expression, for instruction, for pure pleasure', but does Stephen Mueller really achieve something analogous in his rarefied rehabilitation of abstract expressionism? One doubts it. One doubts, apart from anything else, whether his source-reference, abstract expressionism itself, is robust enough to survive the operation. The very impoverishment - the loss of illusionism, of orchestrated motif, of metaphoricness of material - that its vocabulary suffered under Mueller's self-conscious accentuation betrays the inherent weakness in much abstract expressionism that retains those elements, but in effect does nothing *more* than retain them, and with them an ambience of high art, culture, taste.

Uncertain as well, though, is how far such an irony or detachment can be substantially inferred from the internal evidence of the work and how far such a reading is just further underwriting. How many visitors to this exhibition perceived simply flashy, dynamic visual stimuli, and how much of the work was destined for environments in which it would be quite unable to offer anything more? Contemporary painting and sculpture - even in its once most discredited forms - is quite simply back in vogue, and postmodernism's ideological eclecticism merely endorses the universally profitable catholicity.



Meltami, 1987, Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 76"