



RECENT PAINTINGS
SEVEN BRITISH ARTISTS

AUSTRALIA 1959

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*An exhibition organized by the British Council
at the request of the State Galleries of Australia, 1959*

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The State Galleries of Australia are indebted to the British Council for the present exhibition of Recent Paintings by Seven British Artists and we wish to place on record our appreciation. It is also our wish to thank Mrs Lilian Somerville, Director of the Fine Arts Department of the British Council, and her staff for making the exhibition possible; the Selection Committee, who have given generously of their time and knowledge, and Mr Michael Middleton, for writing the most valuable introduction to the exhibition.

ROBERT HAINES
Organizing Director

INTRODUCTION

IT IS ten years since the British Council last sent an exhibition to Australia. From that exhibition the works shown here differ radically. Ours is a century of chain-invention and shifting social frameworks; rapid change is general and not confined to science or technology. Our clothes, our buildings, our incomes, the words we use – all show significant changes from ten years ago. It is not therefore to be wondered at that the last decade has seen also a radical shift of emphasis in painting throughout the Western world.

Ten years ago, British painting was largely animated by a romanticism that found its sources in certain aspects of surrealism, in certain odd corners of the English landscape tradition, perhaps in the heightened awareness of the transitory nature of beauty induced by the war itself. Many British artists still felt the need somewhat strenuously to assert their independence of foreign influences. Today, with international awards coming to Britain from all over the world, the need for that kind of defensiveness has disappeared. Britain, for better or for worse, has taken her place in the main stream of western art.

While the leaders of ten years ago have broken through to international fame, the younger generation of today, as is the way of younger generations, finds itself in opposition to the whole ethos of those years. The tide of abstraction, ebbing and flowing now for nearly half a century, seems at last to have reached highwater mark. The energizing impulse that so significantly colours so much present-day painting is, however, abstraction of a special kind. Stemming almost equally from North America and from Paris, it has been variously labelled 'action painting', *tachisme*, abstract expressionism, abstract impressionism and *art brut*. These tags do not, in fact, carry identical connotations, but the various approaches that they represent overlap in important essentials and may be regarded at least as aspects of a common tendency.

Central to them all is a rediscovery of paint as paint, a free release of energy and an abhorrence of pictorial structure. Abstract impressionism, concerned with space rather than form, looks back to the atmospheric abstraction of Turner and late Monet; the exponents of *art brut* affect to despise the tools of their trade and show their contempt for outworn currencies by reverting to signs and images of the most primitive kind, unrefined and shorn of any civilizing gloss; the action painters have sought to record what the late Jackson Pollock called 'the paroxysm of creation': in their encounter with the canvas they have reduced the art of painting to little more than a physical gesture.

It is tempting to see in such exclusion of the traditional criteria of technique parallels with the theatre of Samuel Beckett and Ionesco, with *musique concrète* and the rock-and-roll of the 'beat' generation. There is clearly an iconoclastic spirit abroad, akin at times to that which animated Dada with its desire to shock and its dependence on automatism. The sardonic mockery of Dada is absent however, save perhaps in a Dubuffet, and the significance of the movement, if such it can be called,

lies rather in its attempt to explore the more tenuous regions of free non-figuration as systematically as have already been those of geometric non-figuration.

It is against this general background that the present exhibition must be viewed. It shows something of the effect of these tendencies upon one group of British painters and something of their own contribution to this climate of opinion and taste.

Not that these seven artists must be taken as sharing a common programme or subscribing to a common manifesto. The only thing that unites them is the shared experience of a similar age group, subjected to similar confrontations by the *Zeitgeist*. Alan Davie is the youngest; the remaining six were all born between 1910 and 1915 (three of them in the latter year). In this one sense they form a homogeneous group for study: mature artists already known beyond the shores of their own land (all have been shown widely in many parts of the world).

Their work may be considered as stretching in an arc from Vaughan to Hilton, from formalized abstraction to the most absolute non-figuration. Only in the work of Vaughan and Evans do traces of the 'thing seen' remain. The former has sought steadily to simplify and purify his instinctive romanticism, to attain plasticity in his figure compositions and to construct strong spatial relationships through broad areas of characteristic colour. His painting is now poised in that most difficult of balancing acts, almost exactly halfway between percept and concept. Formalized as they are, his bullet-headed figures and his landscapes are still abstracted from life in much the same way as were Cézanne's.

Those of Merlyn Evans are rather built up of intellectually contrived elements. Where Sutherland's presences are formed from the *minutiae* of nature, Evans' seem to be composed of fragments from the foundry or the shipyard. A swift and flamelike rhythm animates them, but they remain automatons living in a dark world of their own making, in the shadow of Wyndham Lewis' vorticism.

With Gear we are over the dividing line into purely formal relationships – not the magisterially calm and stoic relationships of a Ben Nicholson, but still a world of finite statements in which generosity of shape and colour is controlled by a taut and sturdy commonsense. A step nearer towards the autonomous act of painting stands Terry Frost. The characteristic striations and fractures of *Blue Winter* or *Black, white and red* seem to grow as organically as the lines made by raindrops coursing down a window-pane. It may be noted that Frost's more recent work is increasingly atmospheric; a sense of unlocalized space is created and clothed with soft and gentle colours.

In Hilton, Davie and Wynter may be seen the full impact of the movement to which I have referred earlier. Hilton stands at the most extreme point of free non-figuration. No vestige of sign or symbol or ideogram remains in these uncompromising paintings. This is paint existing in its own right; a series of visual statements which provide their own self-justification. There is no magic button to press – either you are moved and excited by a red shape, a black fringe, two black lines and white, or you are not. Of *October 1956* one London critic wrote recently that it 'grotes and blunders in a marvellous way and records his (Hilton's) doubt, distaste and delight with a queer, muffled eloquence'.

At the other extreme, in one sense, is Bryan Wynter. Highly professional, with a seductive charm which never fails him, he is incapable of an unpleasing effect. Behind the calligraphic sign-language of his canvases lies the handwriting of the American, Tobey – but how various they are. Compare the march of the skeletal forms in *Hostile Tribe* with the singing blues and vermilion of *River Boat Blues*; the dense, compact intricacies of *The Indias* with its more open cousin *Monumental*; or the sensuous amplitude of *Earth Tremor* with the almost oriental reticence of the earth-

coloured hieroglyphs of *V9*, so reminiscent of a 1913 Mondrian. In all these, hand and eye move in perfect accord, expressing themselves with clarity, self-confidence and delight.

Finally, in the chaotic, seething, visceral imagery of Alan Davie, the most immediately powerful of all these painters, abstract expressionism or action painting or whatever you like to call it bursts through with explosive force. A recent triptych, too large to be included in this exhibition, showed very clearly Davie's kinship with aspects of German Expressionism; the spontaneous bravura of *Blue triangle enters* shows his kinship with action painting as exemplified by, say, Mathieu in Paris. These pictures record gestures from the subconscious, signs welling up from hidden depths, glimpses, if you will, of the Id. 'Art just happens, like falling in love', Davie has written; 'I do not practise painting as an art (but) simply to find enlightenment and revelation'.

What can be claimed for such an assembly as this? Not that it represents the whole of 'British Art Today', or 'The Seven Best British Painters', though there is a danger, particularly if cultural intercourse between nations is at all limited, that some such implication may be thought to exist. Too many strands comprise contemporary British Painting for them to be set out fully in a collection of this size. The other face of non-figuration, the geometric and constructivist, seen pre-eminently in the more recent work of Victor Pasmore, is totally unrepresented here. The reaction towards 'realism', which created a small stir some years ago, is not hinted at – perhaps with more reason. It is noteworthy that the angry young men of what soon became known as the 'Kitchen Sink School' have already abandoned their prepared position of modified social realism for more formal modes. But over and above ideologies, individuals remain. Any complete picture of current British painting would have to take account of the romanticism of Sutherland and Francis Bacon, the penetrating portraiture of Lucien Freud, the lyric landscapes of Ivon Hitchens, Herman's solemn chants in praise of labouring humanity – the list could be extended endlessly. There are the prints of engravers like Hayter and the drawings of a dozen internationally known sculptors, headed by Moore himself.

Surveys, however, usually end up by being skimpy and consequently confusing. It was therefore with pleasure that the British Council responded to a request from the Australian State Galleries for an exhibition that would show a few of the more interesting young British painters in sufficient strength for their identities to emerge with clarity – and preferably painters likely to be less familiar in Australia. This is obviously the more rewarding approach. Yet even here problems arose. We would have liked, for example, to include William Scott, who was one of those representing Britain in the Venice Biennale last year; and Peter Lanyon, who lives in St Ives and distils the spirit of the Cornish coast so remarkably; but circumstances made it impossible. So here are seven individuals to be judged on their merits, representative of nothing but themselves and a certain climate of opinion.

To your judgement do not bring too many pre-conceived notions, but rather a receptive eye and mind. At the heart of painting is a mystery not to be explained in words. It is neither more nor less true today than in the past that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder; non-figuration has merely stripped away the alibis provided by anecdote, perspective, chiaroscuro and the traditional trimmings. Let me quote, in conclusion, two of the artists shown here. Davie has written: 'No synthetic understanding can possibly pass from my mind to yours. A synthesis must occur in your mind'. Wynter has written: 'I think of my painting as a *source* of imagery, something that generates imagery rather than contains it'.

MICHAEL MIDDLETON

CATALOGUE



ALAN DAVIE. Born at Grangemouth, Scotland, in 1920. He studied at the Edinburgh College of Art from 1940 to 1941.

His first one-man exhibition was held in London in 1950 at the Gimpel Fils Gallery, where he has exhibited regularly ever since. He also exhibits in New York, where his first one-man exhibition was held in 1956 at the Viviano Gallery. In 1957 he was awarded the Gregory Fellowship in Painting at Leeds University. In the same year he was one of the five British artists selected for the International Guggenheim Award. He was represented in the Fourth International Art Exhibition in Tokyo in 1957 and his paintings have also been included in exhibitions in France, Italy, Holland and Germany. In 1958 a retrospective exhibition of his work was shown in Wakefield, Nottingham, Whitechapel and Liverpool, and he was

invited to show work in the Central Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, with a group of younger Italian and foreign artists.

His work is represented in public collections in Great Britain, including the Tate Gallery, and in the United States, including the Museum of Modern Art, and in Yale and Buffalo.

- 1 *Entrance to a paradise* 1949 oil on hardboard 60 × 48 ins
Collection: J. W. Davie, Bishop Stortford, Herts.
- 2 *Green egg* 1952 oil on hardboard 60 × 48 ins
Collection: M. W. Mihaeloff, Ilkley, Yorks.
- 3 *Blue triangle enters* 1953 oil on hardboard 60 × 75 ins
- 4 *Altar of the moon* 1955 oil on hardboard 63 × 96 ins
- 5 *Image of Fish God* 1956 oil on hardboard 48 × 60 ins
- 6 *Farmer's wife No. 1* 1957 oil on canvas 84 × 68 ins
- 7 *Flag dream No. 4* 1957 oil on board 48 × 60 ins



MERLYN EVANS. Born at Cardiff, Wales, in 1910. Studied at the Glasgow School of Art, 1927-30 and the Royal College of Art, London, 1931-33 and later in Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen and Italy. In 1936 he exhibited work in the International Exhibition of Surrealism, London. He lived in South Africa, 1937-40. He has exhibited regularly in London at the Leicester Galleries since 1949. He was invited in 1951 to take part in the exhibition '60 Paintings for '51' held in London. He was represented, with four other British painters, in the Sao Paulo Biennial Exhibition, Brazil, 1953. A retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1956. In 1956 he executed a large mural painting (10 ft × 12 ft) entitled 'Metropolitan crowd' which was subsequently lent to the Royal Festival Hall, London.

His work is represented in many public collections in Great Britain, including the Tate Gallery, and in Australia, South Africa and the United States.

Since 1936 he has worked also as an engraver, and now teaches drawing and engraving at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London.

- 8 *Actors dressed as birds from 'The Birds' by Aristophanes* 1953-55
oil on canvas 61½ × 74 ins
- 9 *The window by evening* 1955 oil on canvas 40 × 50 ins
Collection: Contemporary Art Society, London
- 10 *Recumbent figure in interior* 1955 oil on canvas 45 × 69 ins
- 11 *Centripetal composition August 5, 1955* oil on canvas
40 × 56½ ins
- 12 *Standing figure* 1955 oil on canvas 69 × 48 ins
- 13 *Vertical figure No. 1* 1956 oil on canvas 72 × 36 ins
- 14 *Vertical figure No. 2* 1956 oil on canvas 72 × 36 ins



TERRY FROST. Born at Leamington Spa in 1915. He studied at the Camberwell School of Art in London from 1947 to 1950. He held his first one-man exhibition in London in 1952 at the Leicester Galleries where he has exhibited regularly ever since.

He was represented in the Fourth International Exhibition in Tokyo in 1957, and his paintings have also been shown in Canada, France, Italy, Norway, Denmark and the United States.

From 1954 to 1956 he held the Gregory Fellowship in Painting at Leeds University. He was one of the five British artists selected in 1958 for the International Guggenheim Award.

His work is represented in public collections in Great Britain and Canada.

He is now teaching basic design at the Leeds College of Art.

- 15 *Yellow, red and black* 1955 oil on canvas 45 × 40 ins
- 16 *Blue winter* 1956 oil on board 48 × 76 ins
- 17 *Yellow February* 1957 oil on board 48 × 60 ins
- 18 *Black, white and red March* 1957 oil on canvas 30 × 40 ins
- 19 *August* 1957 oil on canvas 48 × 35½ ins
- 20 *Blue, black and white* 1957 oil on board 50 × 40 ins
- 21 *Border blue ford September* 1957 oil on canvas 20 × 30 ins
- 22 *Painting February* 1958 oil on board 60 × 36 ins



WILLIAM GEAR. Born in Scotland in 1915. He studied at Edinburgh College of Art and University, 1933-7, and in Paris. He held his first exhibition in Italy in 1944 and since then in Germany and New York, where his first exhibition was in 1949. He has exhibited regularly in London since 1948 at Gimpel Fils. In 1951 he was invited to take part in the exhibition '60 Paintings for '51' and was awarded a prize. In 1953, with four other British painters he exhibited at the Sao Paulo Biennial, Brazil. Exhibited prints at the Venice Biennale 1954, and in 1952 and 1955 was represented by paintings in the second and third International Art Exhibitions in Tokyo. His work has also been represented in exhibitions in most countries in Europe, as well as Canada and the United States.

His paintings are represented in important public collections in Great Britain, Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Israel.

He was recently appointed Curator of the Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne.

- 23 *Sculpture project June '54* oil on canvas 70 × 50 ins
- 24 *Blue element July '54* oil on canvas 48 × 32 ins
- 25 *Interior with sculpture August '54* oil on canvas 50 × 70 ins
- 26 *Winter structure Nov '55-Jan '56* oil on canvas 36 × 60 ins
- 27 *Black figure on red Dec '56* oil on canvas 24 × 36 ins
- 28 *White square on red Jan '57* oil on canvas 36 × 60 ins
- 29 *Black red figure No. 3 Dec '57* oil on canvas 40 × 28 ins



ROGER HILTON. Born in Northwood, Middlesex in 1911. He studied at the Slade School of Art, London, 1929-1931 and afterwards at the Academie Ranson in Paris.

He held his first one-man exhibition in London at the Bloomsbury Gallery in 1936 and from 1952 to 1956 exhibited at Gimpel Fils. In 1957 a retrospective exhibition of his paintings was shown at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. His paintings have also been included in exhibitions in France, Italy and Germany.

His work is represented in public collections in Great Britain and the Netherlands.

He teaches drawing at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London.

30 *June 1953* oil on canvas 36 × 28 ins

31 *January 1954* oil on canvas 24 × 18 ins

32 *June 1955* oil on canvas 40 × 50 ins

33 *November 1955 (emerald)* oil on canvas 44 × 34 ins

34 *March 1956 (liver, black and white)* oil on canvas 44 × 34 ins

35 *October 1956* oil on canvas 55 × 50 ins

36 *September 1957* oil on canvas 48 × 84 ins



KEITH VAUGHAN. Born at Selsey Bill, Sussex, in 1912. Self taught as a painter. He held his first one-man exhibition in London at the Lefèvre Gallery in 1942, and he has exhibited regularly, first at the Lefèvre, and then at the Leicester Galleries, ever since. He has also held one-man exhibitions in New York since 1948. In 1951 he was commissioned to execute a large mural for the Dome of Discovery for the Festival of Britain and he was invited to take part in the '60 Paintings for '51' exhibition held in London. His drawings and paintings have been shown in many countries in Europe and in the Argentine and the United States.

His work is represented in many public collections in Great Britain, including the Tate Gallery; in the United States, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York and Buffalo; in Canada, New Zealand and Israel.

He teaches painting at the Slade School and the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London.

37 *Green vertical landscape* 1955 oil on board 38 × 28 ins

38 *Lazarus 1956* oil on board 44 × 32 ins

39 *Lazarus (second version)* 1956 oil on board 43 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 32 ins

40 *Fourth assembly of figures* 1956 oil on canvas 45 × 48 ins

41 *Figure on the edge of a wood* 1957 oil on board 28 × 40 ins

42 *Landscape with figure* 1958 oil on canvas 36 × 40 ins

43 *Two figures in sequence* 1958 oil on canvas 45 × 50 ins



BRYAN WYNTER. Born in London in 1915. He studied at the Slade School, London, from 1938-40. He held his first one-man exhibition in London in 1947 at the Redfern Gallery, where he has exhibited regularly ever since.

In 1951 he was invited to take part in the exhibition '60 Paintings for '51' held in London. He was represented by paintings in the 4th International Art Exhibition in Japan in 1957, and his watercolours and lithographs have been included in exhibitions in Germany, France and the United States.

His work is represented in public collections in Great Britain and the United States.

He taught painting and drawing at the Bath Academy of Art 1949-1956. He now lives in Cornwall.

44 *River boat blues* 1956 oil on canvas 44 × 56 ins

45 "V 9" 1956 oil on canvas 56 × 44 ins

46 *The Indias* 1956 oil on canvas 88 × 44 ins

47 *Hostile tribe* 1956 oil on canvas 44 × 56 ins

48 *Earth tremor* 1958 oil on canvas 56 × 44 ins

49 *City at evening* 1958 oil on canvas 56 × 44 ins

50 *Monumental* 1958 oil on canvas 80 × 40½ ins

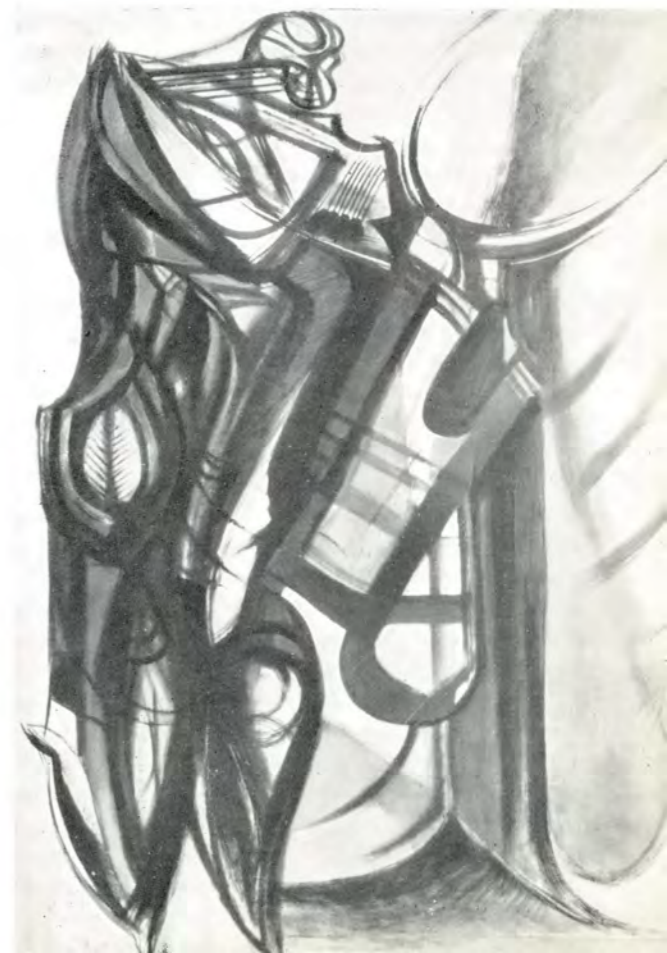
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Altar of the moon

ALAN DAVIE

12



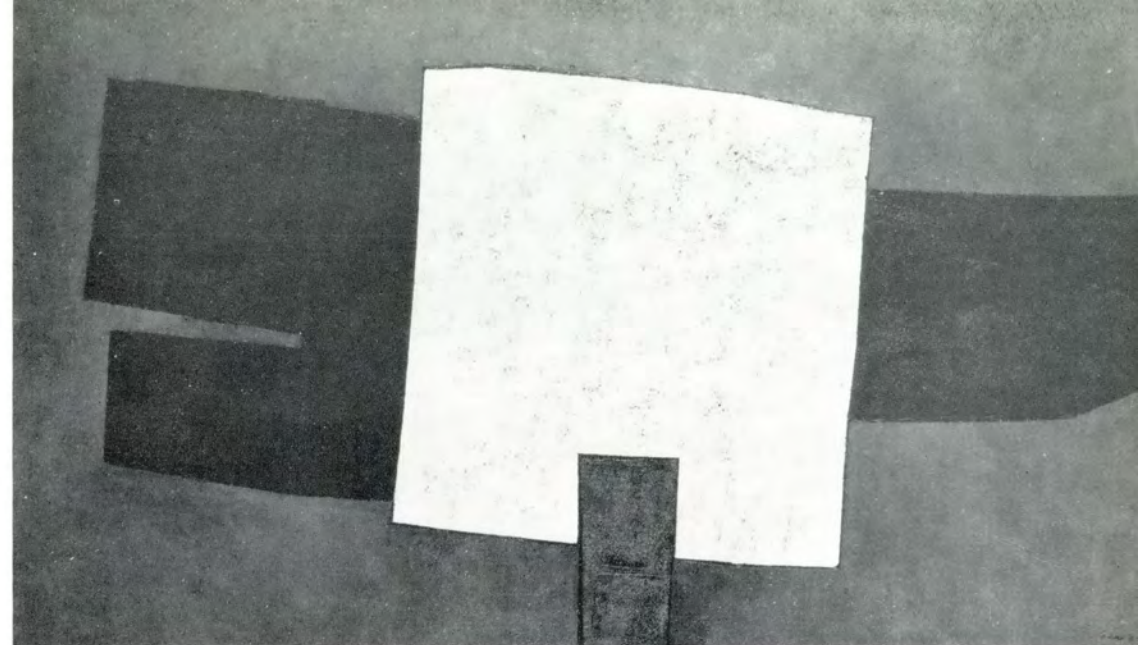
Standing figure
MERLYN EVANS



20

Blue, black and white 1957
TERRY FROST

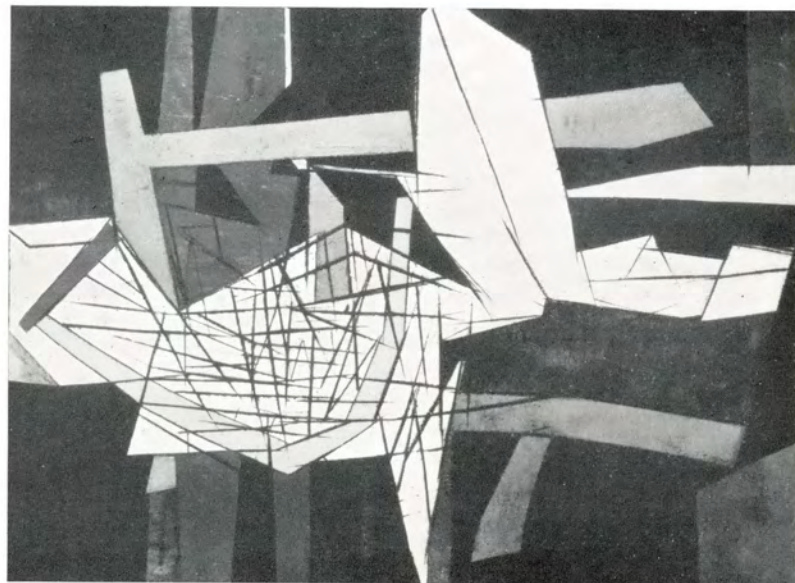
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White square on red January '57

WILLIAM GEAR

25

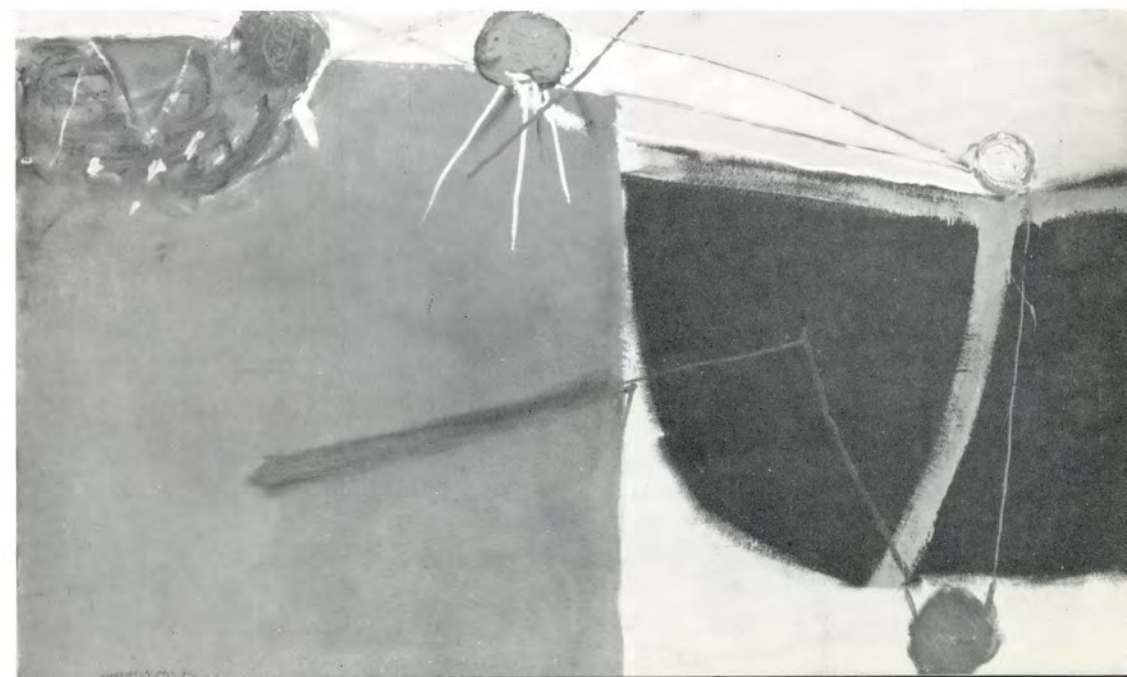


Interior with sculpture August '54

WILLIAM GEAR

36

September 1957



ROGER HILTON



40

Fourth assembly of figures 1956,
KEITH VAUGHAN



49

City at evening 1958
BRYAN WYNTER

