



JOHN HOYLAND

John McEwen, Landscapes of the mind, The Independent Magazine, 16 June 1990

LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND

John Hoyland's exuberant, non-figurative paintings bring a much-needed dash of colour to English art. The temptation is to ask what his works mean but, he tells JOHN MCEWEN, they should remain a mystery

John Hoyland has the singular distinction for an English artist of having been at the forefront of international non-figurative painting since his twenties, and can look back today on 25 years of honours and achievement. As long ago as 1967 Bryan Robertson gave him a retrospective at the Whitechapel Art Gallery; and one of his wall-length stain-paintings from the Sixties currently represents his generation of English non-figurative painters in the sparsely hung Modern rooms at the re-organized Tate Gallery.

His thirties saw him travelling a lot, with an academic term in Australia, a couple of

years in New York, and the establishment of a regular winter trip to the Caribbean, surely not without its vivacious effect on his painting; middle age and the Eighties brought prizes – the most prestigious English art prize, the John Moores, in 1982, and the richest, the Athena, in 1987. Now, in 1990, a major show of new work at Waddington's also serves to launch the publication of the first book on Hoyland's work: a lavishly illustrated monograph with a text by the art critic Mel Gooding.

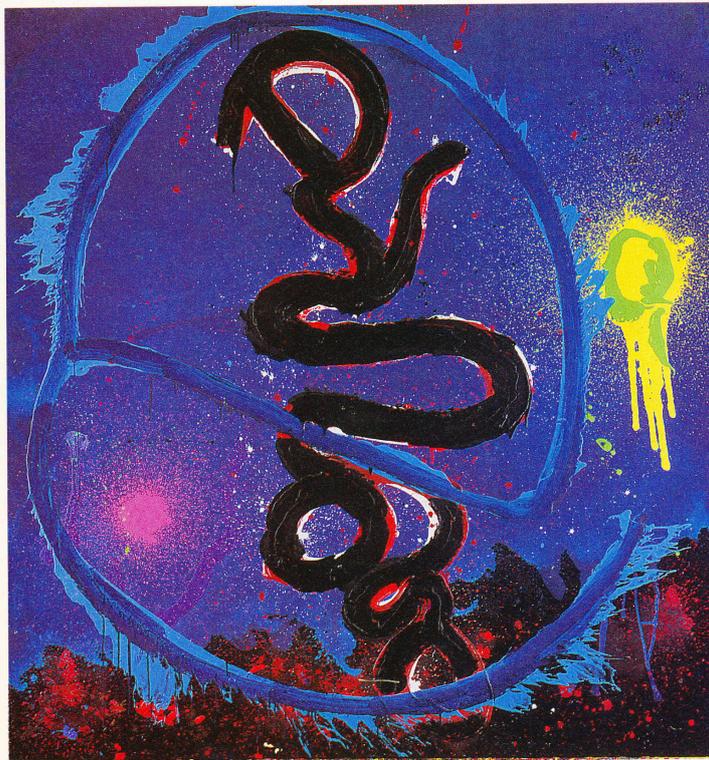
Today Hoyland lives and works in a studio flat that was once the first floor of a hat factory. At 56 his zest is undiminished and

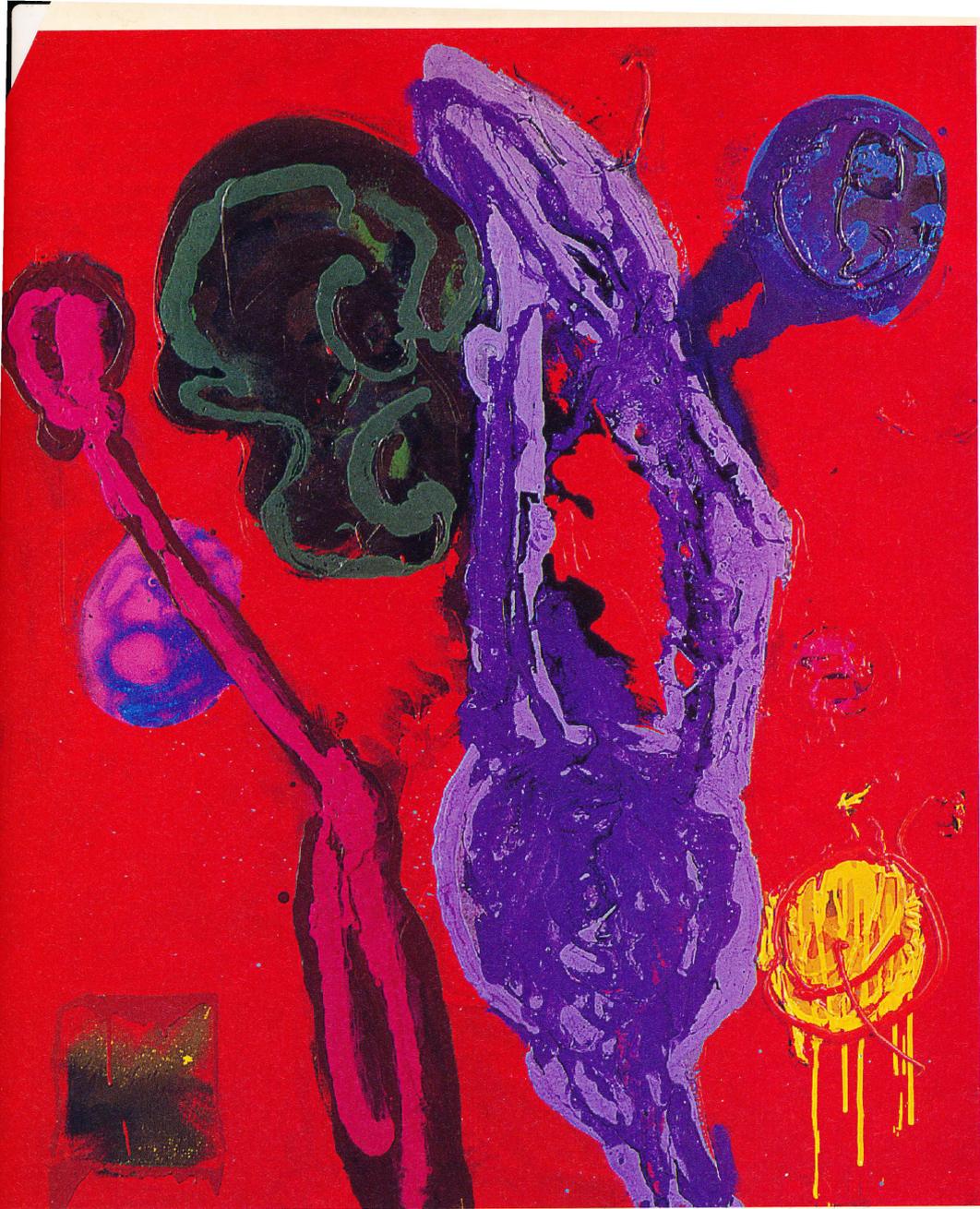
the past year, which he has spent almost entirely in London, has seen him paint more freely and productively than ever.

The battle of the non-figurative artist – and Hoyland is firm in his preference for the categorisation “non-figurative” as opposed to “abstract” – is to release colour and form from the servitude of describing the world and to invest them with a life and spirit of their own. This is not a new artistic ambition, and Hoyland, who is old enough to have benefitted from a junior as well as senior art school training, knows it as well as anyone. He often takes note of a pertinent comment, like the following on Turner, which he acknowledges to have been of particular relevance to his painting since 1970: “Turner came to realise that the forms of movement were what he wanted to define, and that nature consisted not of separate objects in mechanical relations to one another but of fields of force. Hence the deep tensions that entered into his forms and colours.” Tensions and fields of force abound in Hoyland's recent paintings, in which the colour has been spattered, whiplashed, tipped, knifed and squirted to controlled ends but ecstatic effect.

Manhandling one 10x8ft canvas after another into position, he patiently submits to the interview; enlivening the proceedings with a self-deprecating joke, or hilarious imitations of the voices of various art-world personalities – a vivacity which seems more than ever reflected in the latest work; his normal voice, with its softly Americanised Sheffield accent, has something of Dennis Law about it – surely a fitting coincidence, in that Hoyland's flamboyance has been to British art rather what Law's has been to British football. In their separate fields they have both added a dash of much-needed colour.

“As I'm getting freer and freer with the shapes, I like to imbue them with some sort of character – but I want them to defy explanation or, at least, rational explanation, anything obviously illustrational. That's what I hate about the way people





*Above: Rivers of Surprise
(acrylic on canvas), 1988*

*Left: Lamia
(acrylic on cotton duck), 1989*

look at painting – the constant demand to know what everything is. I like mystery. My girlfriend says, ‘I don’t like English films. They never have an ending.’ But that’s exactly why I like them. Everybody wants everything spelled out.” Nevertheless, he gives his paintings titles, if only to set the mood. “This one’s called *Lamia*; after the Eastern goddess, half-serpent, half-woman.” He pauses, and then pricks

the statement of any pretension by adding with a chortle. “I read in the paper it also happens to be the name of Khashoggi’s wife.” Another painting, *Black Something*, takes its place on the stand. “Now this one was a risk – I thought the solution was the violet and then I realized it wasn’t. I put in this halo of acid yellow, the spectral opposite of violet, and it did the trick.”

Each of the paintings is built up, veil on

stained veil, over several days, with gestural fireworks coming as a final *de grâce*. One mis-shot at this stage, false move, and days of careful contrivance may be a write-off. Contrary to superficial appearance, Hoyland works out the basics in pen drawings before he starts to paint; but spontaneity and the happy accident are subsequently allowed to play their part. To explain what he is after he resorts



Above: *Jinel* (acrylic on cotton duck), 1989

Right: *Red Snake* (acrylic on cotton duck), 1989

other quotation. "Two parallel zones, monolithic and petrified while the other is melting and protean'. I read that somewhere and it reminded me of what I'm trying to do. Inevitably you realize that Miró and Picasso went this way before; but I'm just diving in, doing exactly what I feel like doing – trying to freeze the moment. And then I like some of them to have these crazy sideplays.

Crazy Sideplays – now there's a title for you."

Ranks of Lascaux's bottled acrylic paint crowd the floor. Hoyland has been true to acrylic since its water-based, fast-drying properties first let artists rip in 1964. It has enabled him to stretch non-figurative painting in ways the oil-based painters of older generations never dreamed. Technology often helps art shift a gear: the invention of the metal tube enabled 19th

century painters to escape the studio and realize their "impressions" out-of-doors. In Hoyland's hands, acrylics bring a similar freedom to the landscapes of the mind. ●

John Hoyland's recent paintings and prints can be seen at Waddington Galleries and at Waddington Graphics, London W1, from 20 June to 14 July. John Hoyland will be published on 1 July by John Taylor/Lund Humphries at £35

