

depth of your being, both intellectually and spiritually, and to the outer limits of your technical resources.

The last is a very big 'if' of course, but then we – and by that I mean both writers and artists – are facing a situation of quiet desperation that comes from the present loss of faith in the imaginative possibilities of painting to transform personal experience. As a consequence the only kind of contemporary painting that seems to be countenanced at a serious critical level at the moment amounts, on the one hand, to the aesthetic, and largely esoteric 'touch' school of abstraction and the new generation 'slippy-sloppy' school of landscape/figurative painting that is abstract in all but name, and, on the other, to the essentially critical text-based and utterly unpainterly paintings of the kind that made up the greater part of the Hayward's recent 'Unbound: Possibilities in Painting' show, a title that about said it all as far as the arcane emptiness of current curatorial attitudes is concerned. If this is all there is it is a dismal prospect, a critical/artistic dead-end that speaks of a bankruptcy of critical convictions and plays straight into the hands of those who feel that that's the way it is because that's the way it is, namely that painting long ago reached the end of the road as an expressive force.

Which, of course, makes it precisely the moment to start looking in unlikely directions with an open eye and an open mind and with a real belief that painting is not just a question of autonomous mark-making, but to do with the life of the spirit and the feelings, and our experience of the world as well. This does not mean a return to the essentially illustrational and overwrought qualities of much Scottish expressionism and figurative painting generally in the '80s, nor even to the old School of London war-horses of the '60s and '70s (good though many of them still are), but may rather be found in those one or two painters that have caught the eye over the

last year or so with work that reveals an underlying belief in the capability of painting to build an utterly personal and powerful imaginative language, one that deals quite literally with life and death issues, out of the fabric of their immediate and ongoing experience. The young Leeds painter, Chris Wood, seen at Sue Williams in March, is one such, an artist whose work is developing fast and will in two or three years' time be reaching its full potential. Howard Rogers, some ten years older, is another, though he has, with this latest exhibition at the Eagle Gallery, most devastatingly and unequivocally 'arrived' with one of the toughest, most paradoxically beautiful and dangerous group of paintings to be seen in London for some time.

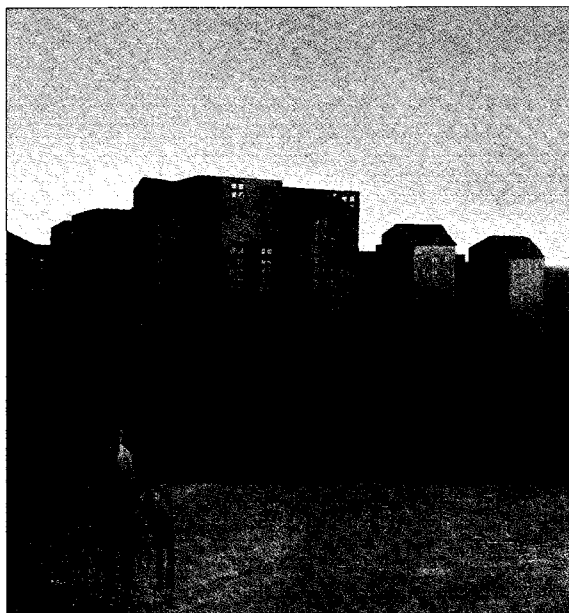
Trained originally as a sculptor at the Royal College of Art in the late '60s, Howard Rogers only started painting about ten years ago. The themes and preoccupations of his work have been consistent from the start, however: the evocation of a profoundly haunted physical world in which the real and the ethereal co-exist and are indistinguishable from one another. In some of the earliest paintings this was achieved in terms of landscape, a landscape containing clear evidences of man's imprint, with abandoned cars and aircraft sharing with the human figures also depicted a mythical world, in which, as well as conveying the simple constitution of these things, he succeeded in giving them that aura of idealised significance with which the human imagination invests them.

These qualities were very apparent too in a series of paintings completed six years ago and shown at the Lanchester Gallery (Coventry Polytechnic), in which Rogers managed to translate these themes into a much more specific and personal physical setting: the city (London) where he was brought up and moved about in, the tower-blocks and railway arches of Camberwell where he lived; and Bow, where he had his studio (and still does). These paintings showed an immediate increase in force and intensity: the shock of finding this same haunted world existing in a harsh urban environment (it seems more 'natural' in a landscape somehow) quite startling, and at the same time very touching and human indeed. These were not paintings of architecture as gleaming, hi-tec material fact, but of an architecture lived and worked in by human beings and, by implication, filled with humanity. Here tower blocks were neither beautiful nor ugly, good nor bad, but simply the environment in which human life was contained. These impassive towers, dazzling ziggurats in the morning sunlight, ghostly urban lighthouses by night, were – as well as revealing the flickering evidences of human life in and around them – imbued with the unmistakable symbolism of a technology which, at the same time, had disinherited man from nature.

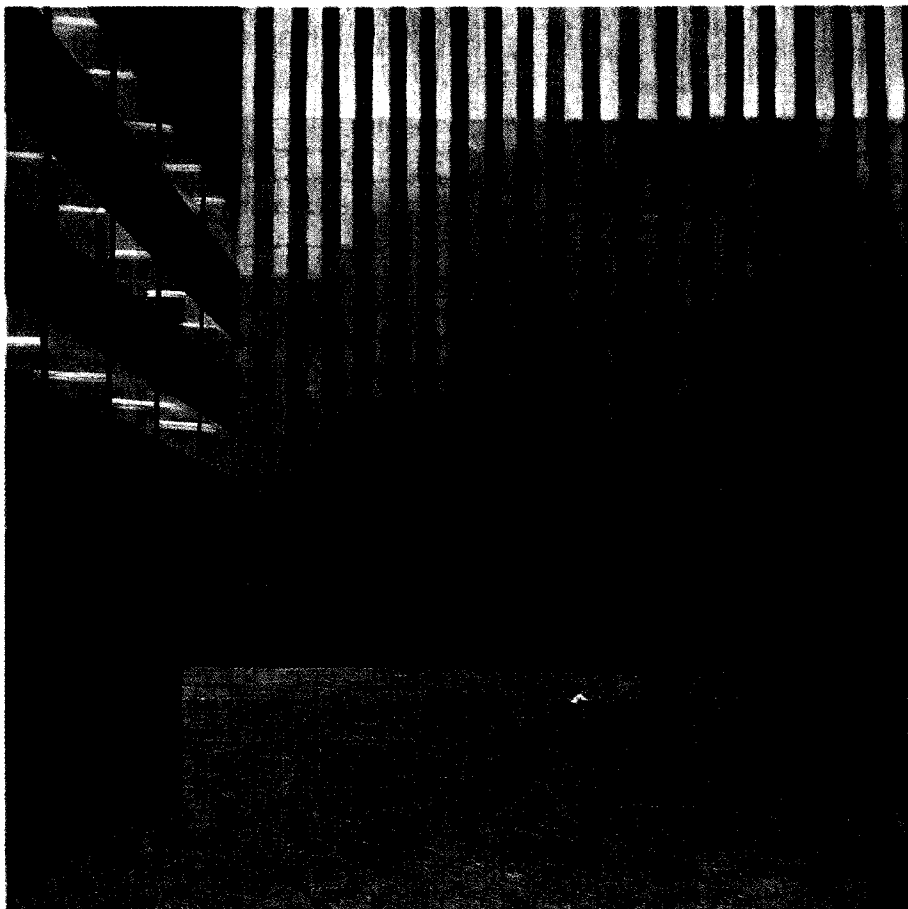
Howard Rogers

by NICHOLAS USHEROOD

Just 50 years or so ago Sidney Nolan was sitting guarding an Australian army store in the middle of the vast wheatfields of the Wimmera working out how to paint the surrounding landscape in a way that was personal, truthful and also completely contemporary in feeling. It was a distinctly odd preoccupation for an artist who, only two or three years before, had been painting sophisticated abstractions directly influenced by European avant-garde art and designing sets for Serge Lifar and de Basil's Ballets Russes 1940 Australian tour, and most of whose contemporaries were into Socialist Realism. Yet it was, paradoxically, about the most revolutionary thing he could have chosen to have done, resulting in an astonishingly original, and still inexplicably unrecognised, group of landscapes that swiftly led into the Ned Kelly series (currently stirring it up at the Metropolitan in New York) and an international profile for Australian contemporary art few could ever have imagined possible. It is a nice parable as well as being a true one (and there are plenty of others – Philip Guston for example) by which to illustrate two largely ignored facts: that good, even great art rarely comes from the direction you are looking in, and that you can, as a painter, very rarely go far wrong if you stick with what you know and try to explore that experience to the



Howard Rogers, Dawning, 1994, oil on canvas



Howard Rogers, *Echo*, 1994, oil on canvas

They were uncompromising, dramatic images, abstract yet humming with the complexities of human existence, a mythic world created at a time and in a place that was short on belief that painting could take on such ideas any more. They were, for that reason, not easy pictures. This was not because they were obscure in any way, but rather that paintings so vividly conceived and passionate in intent were beyond most people's experience of contemporary painting. To eyes and minds inured to mark-making and illustrational storytelling, and resistant to the overbearing egos of expressionism, they were too strong a meat and met mostly with critical apathy or blank incomprehension.

Though technically commanding – even at this stage it was clear that Howard Rogers was a superb draughtsman who used colour with rich and experimental vigour and could handle paint with extraordinary strength and subtlety – the artist himself now felt a need to retrench and simplify his work at both a technical and compositional level. The paintings that followed returned to the landscape, albeit in a quite different way, with a series of forest and woodland scenes in which large architectural blocks, featureless and blank like bunkers, but, since they had no form of opening, unoccupied and unoccupiable, dominated lyrically painted landscape settings. The contrast between these man-made forms and the naturalness of a setting painted with the density and texture of a

nineteenth-century landscape by Courbet was unsettling to say the least, the more so since any such feelings about the sinister character of these structures was largely what we, very much as involved onlookers, read into them ourselves, the artist's own position towards them being ambiguous. They were, again, neither good nor bad, but different, or 'other', as indeed was the nature that surrounded them.

Emptied of all but the most fundamental of human references, these were extreme and difficult works, representing an attempt (as I see it) to simplify and focus the complexities of the earlier paintings and to explore those qualities of spiritual immanence we invest in the world of things. These same qualities are also very apparent in this new group of paintings at the Eagle Gallery where, translated back into the urban landscape once again, the outcome is a really remarkable increase in power even compared to the earlier treatments of such themes. In *Shadow*, *Bright Day* and *Daffodils* it is, once more we, the viewers, who contemplate a scene of urban desolation; the human presence, being implied but not described by the mute, solitary towers that dominate their surroundings. In the other three works – *Canyon*, *Echo* and *Dawning* – people and people in cars are introduced, but only as impassive mediators, directing or drawing our gaze inwards. Nowhere are there any statements as to how or what we should feel. Yet they all generate a quite astonishing

density of spiritual feeling, a feeling that is, in turn, embodied in the richly textured layers of the paint surface itself. Thus, for all the seeming 'unreality' of the apparently unoccupied tower-block in *Bright Day*, isolated in its anonymous landscape, the way it is set down in paint as uncompromising fact makes its reality hard to avoid. As with those terrifying Goyas of cannibals, madhouses and prisons recently seen at the Royal Academy, it is the sense of fantasy and imagination set down in paint as though solidly observed fact which lends this, and all the other works in this show, their deeply disturbing beauty. Thus in *Daffodils*, where the passionate truthfulness of touch with which Rogers places the foreground field of daffodils against the looming, monolithic towers behind, themselves painted wreathed in a misty-blue morning light that renders them unnervingly radiant also, the painting carries the conviction of an observed vision.

This sense is no less marked in *Dawning* and *Echo*, where the introduction of figures is not allowed to break the contemplative mood but, rather like the figure in Casper David Friedrich's famous *Capuchin Friar by the Sea*, seems only to reinforce the sensation of mystical awe which we project on to these impassive and unnatural urban landscapes of the late twentieth century, themselves no more nor less beautiful than Friedrich's bleak and wintry Baltic seashore, but simply a fact of existence. The third painting in this group, *Canyon*, seems to return most closely to the preoccupations of the earlier work (of six years ago), the car with its headlights glaring eerily in the early morning light raising perhaps more complex suggestions as to the human life it contains.

As the critic Christopher Finch once remarked, however,

the most expansive or dense work of art can do no more than imply some absolute which is beyond its scope... What finally gives the work its validity is its fitness in a total pattern of things. That it exists in itself is none the less vital since it is the apartness of a work of art which gives us the leisure to adjust ourselves to its values – and by implication, to the values of the greater pattern into which it fits.

Much of the strength of these works derives from an attempt to contain a wholeness on the canvas and it is tempting for a critic therefore to try and treat them in absolute terms. To do this would be to ignore the magnificent ambiguities of his work – the apartness if you like – which invite a whole variety of readings and meanings. This is the real strength of these works – the creation of a parallel imaginative world, outwardly with the physical appearance of ours but, in reality, quite 'other'. That painting can still make such things possible is the greatest pleasure and exhilaration this show affords.

Howard Rogers, 1 June – 6 July, Eagle Gallery, London.