



LONDON LETTER

By Nushin Elahi

Photography continues to dominate the London art scene, as galleries slowly grind into gear for the coming year.

A name that brings to mind the grand landscapes of America is photographic pioneer Ansel Adams, who grew up with a Kodak in his hands. As an awkward boy, barely into his teens, he was capturing the great wilderness areas of his country, and continued throughout his long life to capture the magnificence of nature, untarnished by humans. The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich presents a show that spans his entire life, from a shot he took at the age of 13, until the late Sixties. *Ansel Adams: Photography from the Mountains to the Sea* (until 28 April) focuses on his fascination with all types of water: crashing waves, ice storms, mountain pools.

Adams talked of his photography in musical terms, describing the negative as the score and the print as the performance and considered his artistry not only in setting up the camera for a shot, but also how he manipulated it in the printing. When you see some of the tiny early prints, it is quite remarkable to think that they can stand being blown up to the size of the posters that cover the museum. The sheer scale and grandeur of these landscapes makes this an unforgettable exhibition, but it has also been sensitively curated to reveal the man's pioneering approach to what was then a new art form. Embracing change as he did, one wonders what he would think of the prospect of everyone being able to snap a shot as we all now so casually do.

Soviet oligarchs may take up riotous living once they settle in the West, but the Soviet Union isn't a place one really associates with levity. The full irony of the title *Gaiety is The Outstanding Feature of the Soviet Union: New Art from Russia*, however, doesn't actually hit one until you have seen the extended scope of the Russian artwork on show at the Saatchi Gallery (until 5 May). The unrelenting misery of life in a land of snow and ice becomes apparent particularly in the photographic documentation of ordinary lives. The images will haunt you: sleeping rough in the cold, revealing the naked scars of poverty in an icy wasteland, bodies tattooed with peculiarly Russian symbols, individuals relaxing on windowsills high up in tower blocks, all blown up in colourful detail on the huge walls of the gallery. Besides the photographs, there are other works, mainly installations, which seem to be a rather random choice of artists. There are pastels of alien figures in outrageous scenes, delicate wooden cut-outs, and my particular favourite, sensitive impressions of great buildings like the Paris Opera, juxtaposed with the ephemeral cardboard on which they are drawn.

Probably even more important is the short retrospective of Soviet art, *Breaking the Ice: Moscow Art 1960 – 80s* (until 24 Feb) upstairs in the Saatchi Gallery which offers more familiar imagery from the USSR, even without the top names.

Taking the viewer through periods such as constructivism and abstraction it ends with a marvellously satirical take on Russian propaganda art – the point where Lenin meets Coca-Cola.

The idea of *A Bigger Splash – Painting after Performance* at Tate Modern (until 1 April) is brilliant. What happened to painting after performance had shattered all the boundaries of what constituted art? It's a question which is just as current today as it was when a young David Hockney created his Californian blue Splash paintings, or when Jackson Pollock dripped paint onto a canvas. As a historical synopsis of how painting changed, the exhibition succeeds admirably, but sadly the second half, which showcases modern installations, has none of the energy and excitement of its early stages.

From the violence and destructive gestures of post-war art, with Niki de Saint Phalle's shooting paintings, Yves Klein's public events where women covered in paint became 'live brushes', the provocative ritualism of Viennese Actionism, the flower orgies of Yayoi Kusama, the debate around gender and beauty, the exhibition moves from a wild splash to a very timid dribble. It leaves one wondering whether the best current examples are simply stage sets, or whether in fact the party has moved on elsewhere. Personally, I believe that there are any number of wildly exciting installations the Tate could have illustrated, and this rather random, albeit international, choice, is indicative of weak curating. It is the same uninspired approach that has made the Tate Tanks such a disappointment.

Some of the big exhibitions that are coming up in the next few months in London include the ever-popular Impressionists, with Manet's portraits in the Royal Academy's *Manet: Portraying Life* (Jan 26 to April 14) and Surrealist artist Man Ray's photographic portraits at the National Portrait Gallery (7 Feb to 27 May). The British Museum hosts a blockbuster in *Life and Death - Pompeii and Herculaneum* (28 March to 29 September) which includes loans from Naples and Pompeii which have never before travelled abroad, as well as *Ice Age Art: Arrival of the Modern Mind* (7 Feb to 26 May) which shows the world's oldest known sculptures, drawings and portraits – ancient work alongside the modern artists they influenced: Picasso, Mondrian, Matisse and Henry Moore. The Tate Modern (21 Feb to 27 May) presents a retrospective of pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, bringing together 125 iconic works, many on loan from major American galleries. Later in the year (15 Oct to 9 March 2014) it offers the first major UK show of Paul Klee. Tate Britain has a retrospective of L.S. Lowry (26 June to 20 October), whose distinctive images of life in the industrial North with their stick-like figures have made him much-loved, despite never really being critically regarded. Dulwich Picture Gallery presents a major retrospective of Whistler in the autumn, when the National Gallery looks at *The Portrait in Vienna 1900*, with Klimt, Kokoschka and Egon Schiele.



Saatchi Gallery: Installation shots from Moscow Art 1960 - 1980s. Installation view of Boris Mikhailov's 1997 - 1998 Case History photographs Saatchi - Soviet Man in window, Soviet Tattooed man - from Sergei Vasilev's Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Prints 2010. (Right below) Vikenti Nilin From the Neighbours Series 1993 - present. Krasinksi's Thin blue line - Installation view of Edward Krasinski's installation Untitled 2001. The Tetons and the Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, 1942, photograph by Ansel Adams. Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite National Park, California, about 1937 Photograph by Ansel Adams. The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust. A Bigger Splash: Painting after Performance (14 November 2012 – 1 April 2013) Klein & action painting: Installation view - Yves Klein and Niki de Saint