

ARTS 37

Fair's fare

Tim Hilton finds the
Olympia Art Fair
insufficiently barmy

THERE are more than 300 stands at the Olympia Art Fair (which opened yesterday and closes on Sunday), mostly occupied by dealers but with representation from art magazines and moderately good causes like the National Arts-Collections Fund and the Printmakers' Council.

Needless to say, the purpose of the fair to sell lots of work to new punters and, failing that, to pretend that the market is buoyant. Which of course it isn't. There are lots of paintings and sculptures at Olympia that I've seen before in the last year, stuff that the galleries can't move. This includes good work, so I'm sorry for the artists and for the dealers too.

A good reason for going to Olympia is to encounter dealers themselves. You may be surprised by these depressed, usually nice capitalists, who are in a risky business, play their chances, like general success and with luck do a lot of good in the world.

All the best of them are slightly or more than slightly mad. The trouble with Olympia is that dealers have to meet Fergie and Renton and pretend to be normal.

The fair is probably better now the official side is over. Visitors this weekend can gaze on some ace nutters. Not that I would count Andrew Kalman, of the Crane Kalman Gallery, as one of these: it's just that you never know what he's going to come up with next.

On his stand he has Ruskin Spear, L S Lowry, plus Hans Hoffmann and some beautiful early Ben Nicholsons. I guess he likes rare, odd pictures. If Kalman finds contemporaries of his sort, this eccentric gallery will be a winner. Kapil Jariwala is eccentric too, and I'm glad he supports terrific domestic painters like Marilyn Hallam as well as some routine formalists.

Expectedness is the problem with a vast trade show like this, and not many stands have surprises. Bernard Jacobson, though, exhibits a set of Graham Sutherland paintings better by far than we normally see by this artist, and it's always worth looking at the Royal College of Art paintings school graduates (not up, alas, when I visited the show yesterday).

New trends? None. Only a consolidation of the higher weediness in semi-abstract painting. One person with a future if she ceases to aspire to good taste is Durban-born Lalitha Jawahirilal, on the Del-fina stand. She's good, but paints on her best behaviour.

The whole fair is too well-behaved. The galleries are pretending that they're not run by barmies, which they are, and they also pretend that they're making a lot of sensible-not-serious money, which they aren't.