

Nicholas Usherwood
Features Editor
Galleries Magazine February 2005

At a moment when there would seem to be more galleries - both public and private - more exhibition opportunities, more books, more information and, not least, greater levels of patronage for contemporary art than at any time in the last century, what possible rationale can there be now for the continuing existence of the London Group, an exhibiting society founded some 92 years ago with the simple (even simplistic) aim of "advancing public awareness of contemporary visual art by holding exhibition/s annually"? Surely the moment has passed, our exposure to a wide range of contemporary art making the need for such a group a complete irrelevance, while the battle for recognition and understanding, as far as contemporary art practice is concerned, would seem to be, more or less, over? Well, yes, in those simple, confrontational ways, all of this may well be largely true and yet, as my own daily experience of talking and meeting with artists, going to exhibitions, reading what's written about them, talking to the people who go to see them, makes increasingly apparent, things aren't at all what they seem to be, the spin newspapers, books and magazines, television and radio, not to mention curators and gallerists, give to the situation not, even remotely, beginning to square with the reality that such experiences actually brings.

Nor, it would seem, has done so for the 90-strong membership of the London Group either! Over the course of the last decade or more, through a process of lively internal debate, they have been coming to much the same sort of conclusion, namely that for all the size, scale, numbers and apparent 'difference' that would seem to characterise the current state of art in this country, the situation for artists and the facts governing most artists' career paths has, in truth, stayed very much the same. The reasons why this should be so, I believe, find their focus principally in issues of artistic fashion and diversity. With the exception of a fractional percentage who have managed to achieve a continuing, almost lifelong, measure of institutional/ commercial support, most artists are well aware of how short-lived (and often hard-fought for) those moments of curatorial and critical support and commercial success can be. One look at this current show of the the London Group in its entirety, will reveal members whose work can be considered to fall into every kind of category, from that of those enjoying an almost lifelong success and those currently very much in fashion, to those now perhaps somewhat out of it and those yet perhaps to achieve it. What is, in fact, common to them all is the sense that, unlike the RA for example, the measure of membership within the London Group, is not so much concerned with some notional, fashionable idea of 'success' or 'achievement' but rather of respect for each other's artistic integrity and respect as well as support for an artistic practice that, almost by definition, is very different from one's own. Just looking at this show is evidence of such an assertion - from the conceptual and experimental through variations of abstraction from lyrical hard-edge, colour field and the painterly and organic to hard-won realism, figurative, landscape and narrative painting lies the kind of astonishingly rich and diverse cross-section of attitudes and approach to making two and three-dimensional work that places British art, to my mind at least, among the richest and most idiosyncratic in the Western tradition and makes the London Group a more representative artistic society than most in the UK.

It is, in short, an assertion of the importance the LG places on diversity, not simply because of the need to prevent the group from falling into the kind of cliquy-ness that has beset, and all but destroyed, the effectiveness of so many art groups in this country - as any good biologist will tell you, diversity represents future health and strength - but because, as perhaps only artists themselves understand from their daily practice, you never know who or what or when you are going to need someone or something next. In all of this, it has to be said, the LG runs very much counter to the prevailing orthodoxies of much current critical and curatorial practice which, with its emphasis on the primacy of the verbal discourse and its lack either of understanding or sympathy for painting, drawing or the made object as a medium of poetic and imaginative response - often, quite crudely, because they are not felt to be media capable of expressing 'modern/contemporary' means of working or modern 'issues' - has, once again, appeared to put painting back on the endangered species list. None of this would matter too much if such views had not become quite so all-prevailing within the London art-scene - but which art periodical can you now read to discover possible alternative ways of working, which contemporary art-space, public or private dares to differ, and, more seriously, which collectors have the nerve or the knowledgeable support to form their own, truly independent judgements? The London Group cannot, by itself, hope to change any of this but it can, and does, at the very least, provide some extremely healthy options to what is rapidly becoming a distinctly limited and unhealthy diet of globalised and commodified art, much, if not most of it, judging by the last Frieze Art Fair, looking virtually identical in form and concept.

In a recent paper, written by member Mike Phillipson in response to a debate about the group's future, he saw its survival as lying in an ability "to slip through the cracks in the global economy", the London Group's role as "a co-operative immediately distinguishing itself from the entrenched interests of the usual museum-gallery sites", its very lack of a solid institutional base or identity with complex ties to state and economy a real advantage. As he shrewdly goes on to observe what the LG "seeks to show is that art's inner strength (and thus its outer weakness) lies in the co-operative multiplication of differences beyond all ties to particular non-art interests" and representing the virtues of the small, the light, the nimble, of surviving on the move, through its inventiveness in finding/creating alternative spaces." This policy has, of course, already been under way very successfully, for some time and in some quantity, this show being the 18th since May 2001. It has, as well, in celebration of the Group's 90th Birthday, also published on its own initiative, a substantial publication which, while recording something of the Group's hugely distinguished history, quite typically, and rightly, also chose not to dwell overlong on past glories, giving the bulk of the space to the work of its current members and a discussion of future possibilities. It would be nice, to say the least, if just one of these were to include a major London institution and a curator with the passion and independence of spirit. It has been done, in living memory (well, mine anyway!) with shows in the R.A.'s Diploma Galleries in 1970/71, when I was a young exhibitions officer there, and two years later at the Whitechapel, and I notice also that the Tate presented its 50th Anniversary show in 1963. With its 100th coming up in 7 years or so, it would be nice to think of such a thing happening again perhaps! Meanwhile, lines from a passage Susan Wilson quotes in her book entry from the New Zealand writer Janet Frame, might well stand for both the individual and collective aims and aspirations of the group and its membership "Putting it all down as it happens is not fiction, there must be the journey by itself."