

THERE'S a phone call one evening: would I like to go to the Press view for the painting and printmaking degree shows at the Royal College of Art?

I think: I'll go, but I won't review it: this is the first of umpteen such shows right across the country for the next month or so. If I review this one, they'll all be after me.

On the other hand, I reflect, this show is one of the most important in a young artist's life: the first appearance on the public stage; for many, also their last appearance in London for many years.

On the way there next day, I contemplate the grim statistics of being an art student. Three or four years—seven, if you're talented and lucky—of self-discovery in the supportive company of your peers and teachers interested in the same things; then out into a world which is not very interested in visual art.

The first one or two years out will be pretty lonely. Only between one in a thousand and one in ten thousand art students is going to be able to pursue fine art full-time.

Granted, artists are privileged—as students: they can pursue self-discovery in the light of

ART

Last days at the RCA

eternity at a more profound depth than most of us get around to, certainly at that age. But then they have to support themselves after that, by selling a product. In theory, the products of that self-discovery should be attractive enough, important enough, for us to buy them, eagerly.

When I arrive, the students are well prepared, with an illustrated catalogue of the 28 graduating painters, another of the 14 printmakers, and a separate list of the numbers, titles and prices. I try not to look at the prices. Off round the show, trying to avoid the glances of those students still finishing off their well-displayed cubicles of work. They seem a friendly lot, I think.

Then I am shattered by a white-hot confrontation between one student and an organiser about a missing spotlight; a performance worthy of a henchman of Hitler or Mussolini. 1984 seems the right year for that student to graduate, anyway. But then I see the contribu-

tion of a student from Northern Ireland; strong work reminiscent of Schlemmer's marionettes and Balthus' haunted moments? A flood of unreasoned compassion restores some of my calm.

Last year, the predominating RCA influence was that of Beckmann's psycho-dramas stuffed with symbols (there's one such here, centre stage); this year, it's nearer home—our own Ken Kiff. Then I think: how can critics do justice to such a show? We come in off the street or off the aeroplane, having fed on the cream of every period of art—is it any wonder we see influences in our first minutes in the show, rather than the other side, the imagination, the integrity?

Then a student comes up, to give me an item missing from the press pack: an illustrated edition of George Crabbe's "Peter Grimes" by a student who is, appropriately, a trained shipwright; a fine thing and on sale at £3.95. Imagina-

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tion and integrity there all right.

What the show has—I think, generalising as I walk round—is psychic integrity. Expressionism, as practised so far, has tended to be more about the obstructions the mind throws up, than about the real world behind them; thus wide open to artistic exploitation of the nameless-horror school of unfelt symbolism, old spirits in painting and *geists* out of their *zeit*. Here at the RCA is—along with too much tacky, messy, first-year-ish work—some serious self-discovery, in tune with the times, in sincere mindscapes rather than more pretentious psycho-dramas suitable to older artists.

I stop for some time in front of several cubicles. These shows (this one runs until May 20; phone your local art school for its own dates) are excellent for getting your eye in, buying cheaply, and spotting talent and watching it develop. As I leave the show, I wonder: how can I write it up without doing a heavy art crit on it?