

Compelling contrasts from List

THE Goethe Institute, West Germany's educational agency, continues to be a leading promoter of culture abroad, much to the benefit of New Zealand.

Video-maker Ulrike Rosenbach is showing her work and giving a talk at the Auckland City Art Gallery tonight. Light and Movement sculpture will

come to Auckland next week; and a touring exhibition of one of Germany's foremost black and white photographers, Herbert List, is at the Fisher Gallery.

The List exhibition covers his entire output, from the early Surrealist influenced work of the 1930s — set in the context of Man Ray, Max Ernst, di Chirico, Dalí — to his 1980s portraits, including Cocteau, Picasso, Auden, Maugham.

The largest proportion is documentary work done in the aftermath of the war, the Cartier-Bresson approach of the "decisive moment," human action frozen on film to produce psychologically profound and visually composed reports.

List, born in 1903 and died in 1975, was homosexual and part-Jewish,

relation to reflections.

A black/white polarity is often evident, one of a number of contrasts that carry through to his thematic concerns.

These counterpose the North (Germany) to the South (the Mediterranean), the clouds to the sun.

Still essentially Romantic, it bears comparison with the Wagnerism of Redon, to his mysticism and preoccupation with the dark and death.

List followed a countervailing impulse, a humanist one that, through Hellenism, sought freedom in life, health and beauty.

The classicism of the Carlyle Brown photograph aptly conveys these concerns. It shows the interchange that occurs on the surfaces in his work between the stone and



Art by Richard Dale

both significant factors in an eventful life which included forced exile from Germany during the Nazi rule.

Today, recognition of his importance focuses more on his personal photography, the private work that he did throughout his career of homoerotic and idealised studies of male nudes — an influence, it might be noted, on Robert Mapplethorpe, the subject of a censorship controversy in the United States.

The exhibition downplays this aspect by including a few examples and locating them in the context only of the 1930s. A conscious articulation of light and internal structure in all the photographs shows an abiding concern with formal properties.

He often photographed outside, using only natural light selected at the right moment of the day, for atmospheric conditions or placing of the figure in

skin, giving the qualities of one to the other.

If List is at one end of an historical axis that centres on the period of heroic modernism (the 1910s), then on the other side lies the work of Odilon Redon, the main exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery.

One could certainly see the pertinence of Redon as a further exposition of the 19th century art, a belated companion to the Monet blockbuster of 1985.

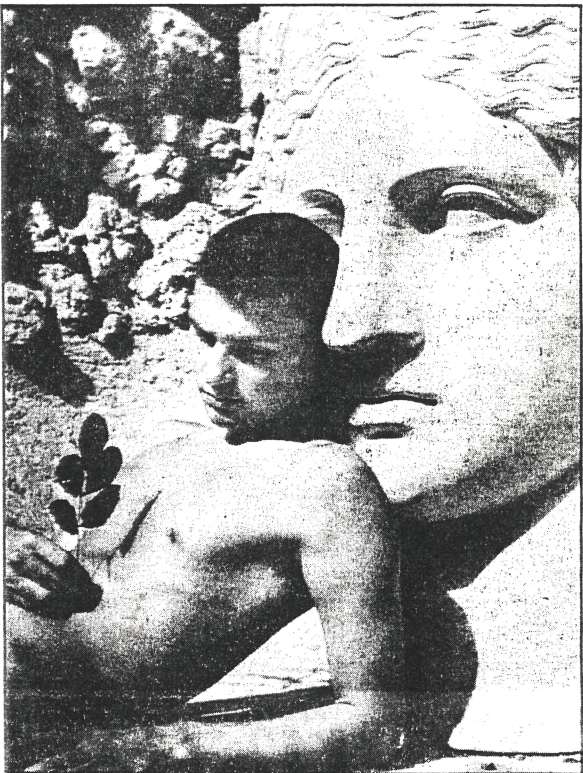
That it has not been given anything like the blockbuster treatment of Monet may reflect the lower status with which Redon is held — or more likely indicate a general economic depression affecting the arts.

The failure of the Munch exhibition to appear at the Waikato Museum of Art and History underscores the latter issue.

Advertised as the most important collection of Edvard Munch's paintings to be shown here, it was open this month at the museum as the Norwegian Government's official 1990 gift.

Without explanation, it has been discreetly dropped from their schedule of events, a great loss given the coincident appearance of Redon.

The younger artist Munch shared many of the same concerns as Redon, both being part of the same impetus and climate of the late 19th century that gave rise to Symbolism, having a parallel use of dream-like images and distortion. It would have made for very productive comparisons if



● Herbert List's photograph Carlyle Brown, *Foris d'Eschia*.

both exhibitions had been shown at the same time.

Of the four major exhibitions held at the Auckland City Art Gallery this year, three have been dominated by 19th-century art.

What one is to make of this domination, and how it fits into the gallery's overall cultural programme are open questions.

Either way it is in accordance with a general perception among international galleries that late 19th-century art draws in the crowds.

Whether this best serves the gallery is debatable.

More to the point, it is of greater concern that there is too much contemporary international art which we are not getting to see.

One does not wish to undervalue the Redon show, an enterprise which, treated with an ap-

propriate seriousness, has its place.

In comparison to the Monet exhibition it is superior, in terms of the number of works (more than 100) and in the scholarship of the catalogue.

Curated by Ted Goff of the National Gallery of Victoria, the exhibition and catalogue are divided through a loose chronology into theme and types of production.

Firstly there are subjects of the visionary, of nightmare and sadism, and the occult, his interest in philosophy and mythology.

A relationship of his lithography to text is explored, as well as poetry and the novel, where the long titles, not readily translatable from the French, are enjoyable even if for the resonance of their sounds.

The Symbolists had little need for the word, but adopted instead the word and the imagination as concrete experience.

Goff's main preoccupations are Redon's working methods in lithography, showing images in several proof states, and distribution, at an extensive discussion in the catalogue of

patronage and publishers. The late colour works, now less valued than the black drawings, are presented, including a rare opportunity to see a Redon pastel.

If the catalogue contents itself with accepted practices of art history, it does so at the expense of providing a social and historical context for Redon's work.

One has to look elsewhere to learn the connections between Redon and Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, Gauguin, or the English Pre-Raphaelites for an understanding of the impact he had on succeeding generations.

The relationship to the historical is always problematic, and never clear. Much of what comes to us from history can now appear commonplace; yet many of Redon's images are still as pertinent as once they were. Their strangeness is no less disruptive, his singular vision as compelling.

THE "history" in art history is always in a state of flux, a situation made apparent to me in the work of Stephen Bambyr and in New Melbourne Abstraction at the George Fraser Gallery.

Work by five Australian artists, Stephen Bram, Melinda Harper, Rose Nolan, Kerrie Polinnes and Gary Wilson, has been brought over by Ben Curnow as a personal selection.

Abstraction for them, be it in 60s minimalism or earlier constructiveness, has become one of any historical style which can be appropriated and commented upon — sardonically or otherwise.

Still, they remain abstract painters.

Their work is a series of dislocations which force the viewer's attention not to the spiritual but to the material conditions of reception — the gallery, Harper's thick black-ecrêpe coloured paint, Wilson's accidental ridges and black plastic. Polinnes' uneven perspex. Nolan's cardboard backing and found additions, and Bram's oscillating squares.

Though iconographic shapes are conformed to — cross, diamond, circle, square — they are no longer a purity, nor absolute. Instead they come impurity, latitude, multiplicity, serialisation — the temporal over the atemporal, an incommensurable attitude to high art.