

Original work by developing artist

Murdo Macdonald casts a critical eye over three Edinburgh exhibitions

Work from 1988 and 1989 by Gwen Hardie is well suited to the three rooms it occupies in the National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh. Since her postgraduate year at Edinburgh College of Art in 1984 and her subsequent move to Berlin Hardie has consistently produced powerful and thought-provoking paintings and sculptures.

In many of her earlier works she was explicitly concerned with the psychological and physical nature of bodily reality, using her own body as a starting point to generate a visual commentary on sexuality and identity. In the exhibition, that concern is still strong but her work is more immediately abstract, moving directly into an engagement with the essentials of form, growth and containment.

She has moved from the body as a thing of weight, tugged at and shaped by gravity, to the body as a thing of skin, turned in on itself or spread out, developing from sensitive creases, places at which forms grow or split or join. Each of those works is primarily a surface, whether it is made of curling paper and glue — like the bark of a birch tree or a hide drying in the sun — or is painted on canvas in a dabbed texture-gradient of light and dark.

The display is given creative depth by drawings and sketch-books, some made on Hardie's recent visit to Africa, in which she shows a fascination with almost monochromatic interlocking patterns. Those are reworked in her paintings, implying colour and letting it emerge, rather than forcing it on the viewer.

This is an impressive exhibition in which Hardie shows herself to be engaged in a continuous and coherent development. She is a striking example of a young



Gwen Hardie with one of her exhibits at the Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh

artist whose success has not been based on the repetition of formula.

The work of an artist of an earlier age, David Scott, can be seen at the National Gallery of the Mound. He was born in 1806 the son of the engraver Robert Scott and brother of the painter William Bell Scott, and he died at the age of 43 having failed to gain any substantial recognition for his romantic vision. To modern eyes his paintings and drawings are interesting but for the most part heavy-handed illustrations of the classics Stanley Cursiter characterises that with respect to his drawing as not so much clumsiness but at "anxiety to give form as much shape as possible . . . he over-drew, he exaggerated shape, he

over-emphasised contour, he over-modelled."

Yet he was capable of outstanding work and that can be seen readily in three engravings for Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Those alone are justification enough for this exhibition, for they are very appropriate to the poet's text and its exploration of ill-considered act and expiation. Scott responded immediately to that hallucinatory vision of a person isolated on the surface of an ocean under a sky devoid of meaning, suspended over a vast deep, moved by supernatural entities.

Like the Runciman brothers 50 years earlier he shows himself well tuned to what we would now call the unconscious mind and it

is not surprising to discover that Coleridge liked those engravings. It seems that the cultural milieu of Edinburgh at that time was very responsive.

The exhibition is accompanied by the latest booklet in the Scottish Masters series which is a useful account of the artist, although sadly it reproduces only one of Scott's *Ancient Mariner* series, and that badly.

Also at the National Gallery is an exhibit of *English Portrait and Figure Drawings*, the general blandness of which is well characterised by the gallery's own information which begins "In any survey of European draughtsmanship England would not occupy a prominent position."

That is hardly calculated to

enthusiase the visitor, but while one might agree that many of these drawings — for example by the likes of the 19th century lightweight Thomas Stothard whose work has been described as being "without even a shadow of profundity" — are of little interest except insofar as they can be identified as bolsters for an unchallenging and complacent view of art, several of the works on show deserve more attention.

Not least of those are two watercolours by William Blake — who was, incidentally, a formative influence on David Scott — a fine and fluid pen drawing of a seated woman by Benjamin West, and an extraordinary portrait by Fuseli in which his wife's hair has the sculpted quality of a corinthian capital.