

# first impressions

# Paint It Black

*The art world may fall for images made of elephant dung, but Simon Black opts for palette and brushes every time. Julia Weiner reports*



In an age when installations, video and photographic work dominate Turner Prize shortlists, there is a powerful case for thinking that ordinary painting has had its day.

Think again. Simon Black is one young artist who produces the kind of fearlessly figurative painting out of favour with some critics, and insists that his work is thoroughly contemporary.

Curators and exhibition organisers agree with him, judging from the fact that his work has been selected for exhibition by two public art galleries.

A major display of 50 paintings opened at the Jersey Galleries at Osterley Park this week, to be followed by a show at Woodlands Gallery, Greenwich, later this month.

Black has experimented with working in different media, but in the end has always returned to painting because he feels he can express a great deal more through this traditional form.

"I am not against different ways of doing things at all," he says, "but I am very interested in pictorial language and think it has endless possibilities. A lot of the problem nowadays is we are bombarded with so many images that people have forgotten how to look at things and how to spend time in front of a painting."

His solution is to paint works that

"are accessible to people so that they can be seen on a very simple level, but then if you want to take it further, they are multi-layered in meaning."

The exhibition at Osterley will concentrate on Black's series of "tall paintings" — long, narrow works measuring five feet by one or two feet. The artist is extremely enthusiastic about this format, which he first used three or four years ago.

"You have a figure in the centre and it is almost like it is confronting you. It encourages viewers to think about how they relate to the image and invites them to flesh out the space beyond the painting."

He also relishes the composition challenge the narrow format presents.

Several of Black's paintings are circus scenes, ranging from stilt- or tightrope-walkers to big wheels and roller-coasters. These, he feels, are "visually interesting subjects which are connected to all our pasts — they are archetypal images from childhood."

Perhaps his most thought-provoking and complex work is "The

Merchant of Mittel Europa," which reflects the artist's ambivalent feelings about a recent trip to Munich, when he spent a day at Dachau, followed by an evening at the beer festival.

He has painted himself as an itinerant toy merchant, who carries his cultural baggage on his back. Although dressed in typical Bavarian costume, including *lederhosen*, a painting of a toy alien among his wares suggests he is not the pure German he seems.

Among the toys are two or three wooden models of typical Jewish characters standing in line watching a model soldier goose-step past. The presence of a roller-coaster in the background suggests the ups and downs of history and the unexpected turns life can take.

It is a figurative painting that richly rewards close observation. Turner Prize judges, please take note.

*Simon Black's paintings can be seen at the Jersey Galleries, Osterley Park, Isleworth, Middlesex, until October 10 and at Woodlands Gallery, Greenwich, from October 12 to November 7.*