

For paint's sake

Sickert's art of resistance and elusiveness

JULIAN BELL

SICKERT

A life in art

Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, until February 27
2022

SICKERT

The theatre of life

Piano Nobile, 96-129 Portland Road, London W11,
until December 17

SICKERT

The theatre of life

WENDY BARON, RICHARD SHONE, LUKE
FAREY

185pp. Piano Nobile. £60.

PROLIFIC, EBULLIENT, capricious and charismatic, Walter Sickert cast a broad but scattered shadow over British art. Nearly seventy years after his death, it remains hard to see him in the round. “Ennui” is the image by which the public have known Sickert best: that torpid duo in the dowdy parlour, the cigar-puffing codger and the housekeeper who leans on the chest-of-drawers beside the case of stuffed birds, he and she each miles away yet hopelessly interlinked - not only by their crisply overlapping contours, but by the pervasive nicotine-brownness and Sunday-afternoonness of the room and by inference of their lives. The five-foot-high canvas, first exhibited in London a couple of months before the outbreak of the First World War, was surely intended for this fame: an imposing

and carefully calculated climax to some nine years of investigation, in the course of which a debonair man-about-town hired needier Londoners to enact informal moments in side-street or back-street life. (Here, his charwoman and a small-time crook play out a scene of modest respectability: elsewhere, sex worker and client become their roles.)

To discover pictorial beauty in such relatively unselfconscious corners of society was to vindicate the claim made by the fifty-year-old when, in 1910, he sought to take a lead in London's art world: “The plastic arts are gross arts, dealing joyously with gross material facts.” Gross and material, yet also full of narrative implication: “I have always been a literary painter, thank goodness, like all decent painters”, Sickert would later claim to Virginia Woolf. “Do be the first to say so.” Woolf obliged, weaving a fantasia around the characters in “Ennui” - imagining that “innumerable days”, like “an avalanche of rubbish”, had crushed their aspirations, but “on they must go” - while enrolling Sickert among her fellow novelists - “a realist, of course”.

Yet even a painted yawn is contagious, and to revisit the Tate's “Ennui” - borrowed by Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery for its chronological survey *Sickert: A life in art* - is to read self-accusation into its title. Uncomfortably close to programmatic, this French-styled take on English frowstiness: so deferential to the Degas of “L’Absinthe” and so detached from its social specimens, these moderns sunk in bathos beneath the bygone grandeur of a Venetian courtesan who - improbably - dangles framed on their parlour wall; moreover, such a tartness to its paint surface, its sullen, minimally inflected compartments of colour. (As if acknowledging this, Sickert redid his intended *pièce de résistance* half-size, enlivening those bare expanses with wallpaper and fabric patterns - an adroit afterthought that the

“The Brighton
Pierrots”, 1915, by
Walter Sickert

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What Is Painting?
(2017)*

Walker also exhibits.) But if the sardonic realist of Camden Town nonpluses you, Sickert by no means lacks for other acts. In the reflected light of Gerhard Richter and Andy Warhol, the photo-painter - the persona of Sickert's senior years, the 1920s and 30s - has swung back into view.

As well as the capacious exhibition at the Walker - eighty-plus paintings, many more drawings and documents - a further, smaller selection of items from Sickert's copious oeuvre is currently showing at Piano Nobile in London. Here, the publicity images adopted are two 1928 canvases of “The Plaza Tiller Girls”. We see a painter seizing a visual from the Age of the Machine - a precision-formation dance troupe who wow the masses between film showings, in a press photographer's snap - but with half a will to misalign its gears. Wildly thwacking down scarlets and russets on top of a prussian blue wash, Sickert scrambles the supplied visual information till it teeters on incoherence - rather as he has homed in on a curtain call when the troupe is falling out of step. Such high-spirited old-age performances anticipated by decades the subsequent hankering of figure painters to keep up a wry manual banter with flickery instantaneity. Equally, though, the “Tiller Girls” harks back to the earliest of Sickert's pictorial personas, the former actor sitting in the stalls of a Late Victorian music hall, scribbling down memos of the spotlight singers and the twilit crowds in the gods for translation onto canvas. The curators at the Walker - where these sheets belong, as part of the largest single collection of the artist's drawings - point out that here too, this Munich-born, Paris-frequenting sophisticate was breaking new ground. If working-class cockneys had shown up before on West End gallery walls, they had been subjects for earnest pathos rather than for the cool upwards gaze of an admiring aesthete.

The stage and Sickert's studio remained umbilically linked across six decades, giving the Piano Nobile curators good reason to style their show *The Theatre of Life*. Leading them, Richard Shone explains that their focus is on Sickert's depiction of men and women - “perhaps the most important” aspect of his oeuvre. And indeed, when Sickert beams his attention on a human singularity - be this a skeletally haggard old woman or a tremulous six-year-old boy - you are confronted by a primal, unruly force: you sense in these more-than-portraits why Degas recognized something exceptional in the articulate young autodidact who came to sit at his feet. Dauntingly unbiddable, though, so that the Piano Nobile selectors can do no more than ride the bumps as Sickert switches from those exercises in empathy to a cocky insouciant affectlessness when he inspects a naked woman or manipulates a snapshot. You relish his flair but search in vain for a cohesive purpose. But go back to the Walker, and the view of Sickert that opens out is not exactly of a figure painter - nor for that matter of a “realist”, photo- or otherwise, let alone of a “literary” artist.

Sickert's career, in this lucid presentation, segments fairly neatly into pictorial campaigns. After a decade of exhibiting music hall work, the well connected, poorly funded polyglot chose to take off from London in 1898, aged thirty-eight, after the collapse of his first marriage. For seven years he hunkered down and delivered streetscapes, fixing his sights on ever-picturesque Venice or on Dieppe, a port conveniently midway between metropolises. The middle-aged man who reinstalled himself in London in 1905 came meaning to create an impact. He briskly recruited allies for new exhibiting groups, pitched into art-critical battles and set about to provoke the all-too-polite taste of the English with the brutal nudes and grungy mini-dramas of these pre-war, “Camden Town” years. If Sickert's energies later ebbed, falling to rock bottom in 1919 at the death of his second wife, he was able in his sixties to reinvent himself as a media-friendly grand old British eccentric, accessorizing the act not only with his photo-paintings but with the often outrageously slovenly colourizations of old Victorian prints that he chose to call “Echoes”. Several younger female

artists, such as Sylvia Gosse and Thérèse Lessore (who became his third wife), now joined Sickert as accomplices, and the Walker's hang features some of their canvases: soberer, rather more refined than their mentor's.

So what was Sickert thinking about, whether the material to hand was a "serio-comic" chanteuse at the Old Bedford or the domes of St Mark's or prone flesh on unwashed sheets or newsprint with a shot of a 1930s wedding? Paint itself: that was his abiding obsession, without question. He fretted away at the yieldingness and resistances afforded by oils and at the elusive interactions between successive layers of pigment - here catalysing thrillingly - as in the "Tiller Girls" or in certain Venetian vistas - there beaten to a stalemate, as in the Tate's "Ennui" or in a large, misjudged commission for a Dieppe restaurateur. From the outset Sickert plunged into the extreme deep end of the tonal register, and one of the beauties of his art (particularly brought out by the lighting at Piano Nobile) is the way that his hues can stay vibrant, no matter how dark the passage of brushwork to which they belong. In the teachings of Sickert's middle and later years, the tenet became that to lay down a well-resolved physical structure of paint on the canvas was sufficient in itself. In order to be sound, the pigment loads must rest on equally firm linear foundations - but in the end it mattered not, whether the partitions between one patch of colour and another originated from a draw-

ing or from a photograph. The "real object of a picture", he confided to another painter, was formal - "design & light & shade" - rather than "literary", as he wished to persuade Woolf. Sickert's art, then, was emphatically a studio deliberation and a rejection of what he felt was all too prevalent among disciples of Impressionism, the "gospel of so-called painting from nature".

Reduce all this to a principle of painting for paint's sake, and Sickert seems to fall into line with many a modern artist elsewhere. But then, "paint" remains an arid watchword unless you set it in a social context. What type of performance, I kept wondering as I roved the Walker, did this late-of-Sadler's-Wells mean to offer his London audience? Certainly he knew how to project his voice, poaching a headline title or subject ("The Camden Town Murder", "King Edward VIII"), yet he was at once too imperious and too wily wholly to play to the gallery. When he drew, Sickert kept intervals under tight control but proceeded by knights' moves, deconstructing bodies and their surrounds into jerky strewn notations. When he moved to his palette, he mixed up orderly tonal sequences but set them at tangents to observed local colour. His prevailing demand that the eyes adjust downwards - that they treat his pictures less as opened windows, more as unlocked cellar doors - speaks of an art that wished to resist and elude. Sickert (who, before he met Degas, had idolized Whistler) remained funda-

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mentally an aesthete, for all that he despised "good taste": no other agendas, whether social or spiritual, claimed his allegiance. But it was a slippery perch to occupy, in his heyday and in his city of choice. Over in Paris at this time there might be hopes of tethering painting, by dint of technique, to rational foundations: here in London, those dreams looked half-fanciful, and the pressures were more ethical - the socialist politics of his younger associate Harold Gilman for instance. In the circumstances, probably the shrewdest tactic was to arm-wrestle your adopted audience.

Tease the English, parry their earnestly wordy worldviews with diverting persiflage, pursuing all the while the investigation of your silent medium. It proved a rewarding formula, at once persuading a public tempted by verbal takeaways to reattune their eyes and inducing fellow painters to reattune their palettes. Perhaps Sickert lives on more as a provocateur than as a producer of self-contained masterworks. Or perhaps the work comes most alive when the medium wrestles him: when paint half slides out of his own control. As in the little canvas "Jack Ashore", on show at the Walker - the charwoman and the crook again, but here so urgently at hand that the brushloads judder, lurch and collide. Pushed that way by the subject and the moment - by nature even, for all Sickert's own scepticism; so that here, if anywhere, you witness a "theatre of life". ■

Pheasants and donkey skin

Pablo Larraín's new film: the life of Diana as a fable

MURIEL ZAGHA

SPENCER

Various cinemas

THE ACTION of *Spencer*, by the Chilean director Pablo Larraín, unfolds during Diana, Princess of Wales's three-day stay with the royal family at Sandringham over Christmas 1991, at a time when her marriage was in crisis. With an iconic, globally famous real-life female protagonist at its centre, the film is strongly related to Larraín's *Jackie* (2016), which starred Natalie Portman as Jackie Kennedy. While Jackie focused on the days that followed the assassination of JFK in 1963, *Spencer* takes place a few years before Diana's death in a car crash. In both cases, however, Larraín trains his adoring cinematic gaze on a glamorous woman dealing with considerable external and internal pressures, and seeks to evoke her inner state of turmoil.

Spencer's subtitle is "A fable from a true tragedy", signalling that this is no factual, historical documentary but rather a piece of freestyling reverie. Its enigmatic opening scene, in which a convoy of military vehicles is seen delivering a great number of army canteens to a royal residence of forbidding appearance - Nordkirchen Castle, known as "the Versailles of Westphalia", which, combined with other aristocratic German residences, stands in for Sandringham in the film - suggests an atmosphere of dictatorial menace. The soldiers inspect the castle's vast, empty kitchens, in which a large sign reads: "Keep Noise to a Minimum. They Can Hear You", a reminder for the kitchen brigades when

they are at work, and a foreshadowing of the overall feeling of surveillance and paranoia experienced by the heroine in her royal environment.

When Diana (Kristen Stewart) appears, driving an open-top car along isolated country roads, her first words are: "Where the fuck am I?" followed by: "I'm lost." Her disorientation, and her bloneness, align her with some of David Lynch's distracted, otherworldly heroines. This may be Norfolk, but *Mulholland Drive* seems just around the corner. When she at last finds a familiar landmark, it turns out to be a scarecrow, not unlike, perhaps, the one encountered by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The scarecrow is a remnant of Diana's childhood, dating from her early years spent at Park House on the Sandringham estate. It is clad in an ancient and heavily weathered waxed jacket, which Diana retrieves and takes with her to Sandringham. This, she says to a bemused observer, is what's left of her identity - of "Spencer". In a sort of inversion of the Donkey Skin fairy tale, in which a runaway princess hides beneath a repulsive donkey skin and discards it to reveal her true identity at the end of the story to marry the prince she loves, Larraín's Diana reconnects with her true self when, towards the end of the film, she puts on the coat, before leaving Sandringham - and, it is implied, her marriage to the Prince.

Some of these surreal avenues of speculation are intriguing, especially when they coincide with real-

Kristen Stewart in *Spencer*

life oddities such as the weighing-in of guests on arrival at and departure from Sandringham. A playful tradition introduced by Prince Albert in order to evaluate his guests' enjoyment of the Christmas festivities - it is a requirement to gain weight during your stay - it does, in the context of the film, draw uncomfortable attention to Diana's troubled relationship with food. This is revisited many times. Meals are apt to degenerate into nightmares of pearl-crunching bulimia, followed by nocturnal trips to a larder filled with lustrous, dreamlike food-stuffs. Diana also hallucinates the ghost of Anne Boleyn, with whom she identifies as a fellow "royal martyr". With the exception of her children, the actual royal family are only present to Diana's perception as semi-ghostly figures with basilisk stares. Everything about the house is tyrannically, suffocatingly haunting: the dust in her bedroom, Diana explains, is particles of Queen Victoria's skin floating in the air.

There is enough material here for a quirky short film, especially with the addition of Jonny Greenwood's lovely, discordant score. But at feature length it feels indulgent, stretched excessively thin, and the film's aspirations to measure up to the immersive universes of heightened reality provided by Buñuel, Almodóvar or indeed Cassavetes dissolve into a sort of enervated pantomime. There are far too many scenes showing Diana striding, running, dancing in the grounds or along corridors wearing a variety of her well-documented outfits (including, of course, her wedding dress) and suggesting, above all, a perfume ad.

Although Kristen Stewart captures some of Diana's heron-legged physical elegance, she simply does not sound like her, and does not have the screen presence to anchor the movie, in which she appears in almost every sequence. This is made particularly clear in the too-few scenes where the ever-excellent Sally Hawkins appears as Diana's maid and dresser, effortlessly stealing the scene in every case. There is also a heavy-handed pheasant motif: we see a dead bird in the road in the opening scene; Diana converses with a pheasant, like her of beautiful bright plumage "but not very bright", and she is repelled by the murderous violence of royal shoots, declaring sententiously: "I love fast food. I feel sorry for pheasants". The climax, when Diana is able finally to reclaim herself, occurs when ordering at a drive-through KFC and giving her name as "Spencer". This film feels like a love letter from a fan. But beyond that, who is *Spencer* for? ■

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