

Boyd presents three-act show

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THREE London exhibitions in one week might seem over-indulgent — even for an Australian.

But Arthur Boyd's recent paintings at Arthur Tooth and Sons, his tapestries, pastels and drawings at the Hamet Gallery, and his lithographs, etchings and engravings at the Maltzahn Gallery, were really a single all-embracing performance divided into three acts, according to Edwin Mullin of the Sunday Telegraph.

Besides, it is more than seven years since Boyd last showed any quantity of his work in London — at his Whitechapel Gallery retrospective in 1962, which arrived rather on the crest of the Australian wave following the popularity of Sidney Nolan and his narrative paintings on the outlaw, Ned Kelly.

Since then, that wave has

decidedly flattened, and to be looking once again at Boyd's work — after pop art and op art and minimal art — is already an experience in revaluation, so rapidly do values now rise and fall.

The strongest of Boyd's new paintings are on the theme of the dream and madness of Nebuchadnezzar, as recounted very briefly in the book of Daniel. Boyd has taken a free and highly subjective interpretation of this Nebuchadnezzar legend: the "dream" has become a personal sex fantasy: his "madness" is translated into what I can best describe as a rage of paint.

Boyd's apocalyptic autobiography is, to me, a splendid and violent thing, which may have nothing to do with "art today." Nonetheless, it combines most happily the traditional demonology of Flemish painting, and a passionate dialogue with paint itself which owes much to American abstract expressionism, and to the work of Soutine.

Unexpectedly, the vitality of his work carries over better in the series of tapestries, woven with anonymous and, no doubt, underpaid expertise in Portugal, than it does in the various black-and-white graphic media in which the debt to Picasso and Chagall looks rather raw.

The Times of London art critic found Boyd's exhibition at Tooth's Gallery too symbolic, to the point of obscurity.

Saying the myth-making propensity of the Australian painter appeared in Boyd's pictures, the critic added that, like Sydney Nolan, who after building an Australian legend in his Ned Kelly series then turned to the fable of Leda and the Swan, Boyd had deserted his antipodean themes.

He was whetting his imagination on the ancient Middle East, as represented by Nebuchadnezzar.

"The artist seems to convert Nebuchadnezzar into a symbol of agony and dissolution, of sexual fire or emptiness, although there is a good deal of the significance left to the spectator to figure out," the critic said.

"Enigmatic also are other pictures in the exhibition, in which Potter appears — a friend of the artist, or one who makes pots, the spectator can hardly be expected to know — nor does Potter looking at a Chardin Print much enlighten him.

"That Mr Boyd's undoubted abilities would be none the worse for less obscurity may be gathered from his Early Morning Figures on a Beach.

The Times critic described this picture as having a lyrical mood "clearly and quite beautifully expressed."