



Cleopatra by Jan de Vlieghe at Gow Langsford.

Paintings capture artists' expression of energy

By T.J. McNamara

Energy is a great thing in painting. It can be expressed in the subject and the way the artist paints. This week we have three energetic exhibitions, mostly of the painterly kind.

Gow Langsford is showing a spectacular exhibition of the work of Belgian artist Jan de Vlieghe. He is from Bruges, once home to artists famous for their precise detail. His kind of precision is a different matter. It derives from hitting the canvas with paint exactly right first time. The brush strokes come from the shoulder rather than the hand and, as he is painting wet on wet, give the effect of complete spontaneity of response to the still-life subject he is painting.

Most of the works are large, much larger than their still-life subjects, which are decorated porcelain plates. They are not illustrations but pure painting. The subject is subordinate to the action. Yet this is not Jackson Pollock's form of action painting where the rhythm of the arm is all-important. The charm of the subject matter cannot be totally denied.

A typical work by de Vlieghe is a stunning Cleopatra, derived from a Baroque majolica plate that dominates the end of the gallery. The Egyptian queen stands tall and nude against golden drapery. Amid the slashes of paint that define her you can probably find the fatal asp if you look hard. The impact of the whole is connected with the blue and green landscape beyond the drapery.

Here, as elsewhere, the image is confined within the perfect circle of a plate but the canvas is square and as part of the action drips and splashes of paint remain on the surface outside the plate.

The images themselves are varied. The artist moves easily from the bold Cleopatra to a perfectly neo-classical plate from a service made for Napoleon. A feature of the control apparent in the elegant spontaneity is the brisk way he conveys the concavity of a plate by splashes of white light or a hint of shadow.

On the other hand, a second very big work, Gentleman Riding on a Horse, works its magic of colour and handling as a flat and busy surface.