

TESS Jaray, who teaches painting at the Slade School, has always held the esteem of critics, but she confuses them. Even they must instinctively recognise the qualities that inform her work, but they have scant command of words with which to explain it or to express their reactions.

She has had a measure of official recognition; the Tate Gallery, the V&A, the Arts and British Councils are among her many public patrons at home, and abroad her work is to be found in Australia, Germany, Sweden, Holland and eastern Europe.

She has been chosen to represent contemporary British art in exhibitions in Milan, Tokyo, Paris, Berlin and New York. She has been both exhibitor and selector in an Arts Council Hayward Annual. The list of official events in which she has played some part, especially abroad, is formidable, and yet art dealers have been wary with their support, and the British public has had little opportunity to look at her work in any quantity, let alone buy it.

Limbo

The Serpentine Gallery is now housing an exhibition, her first one-man show in London for 12 years, in which all 32 paintings are for sale. They represent her total output for this decade—four pictures a year. They are abstractions that at first sight seem outmoded, harking back to the hard-edged patterns that were in high fashion 20 years ago, left in limbo by the deliberately bad painting that passes for Expressionism now, but they are not to be so speedily dismissed.

A talent to confuse



BRIAN SEWELL

In essence the pictures are not abstract at all, for they are based on the observation of an organic or architectural structure, and they are concerned with three-dimensional forms that attempt a movement into the fourth dimension, taking time to explore.

The references are to the intersecting vaults and arches of a gothic church, the black and white marble banding of an Italian cathedral, the elliptical staircase of a Bavarian palace, the winding ramp of a Roman stable, and the soaring minarets of Islam; in the natural world her sources are the twisting, turning forms of sea shell and ram's horn.

Her prime concern is to set forms in light, leaching the colour from them where the light is stron-

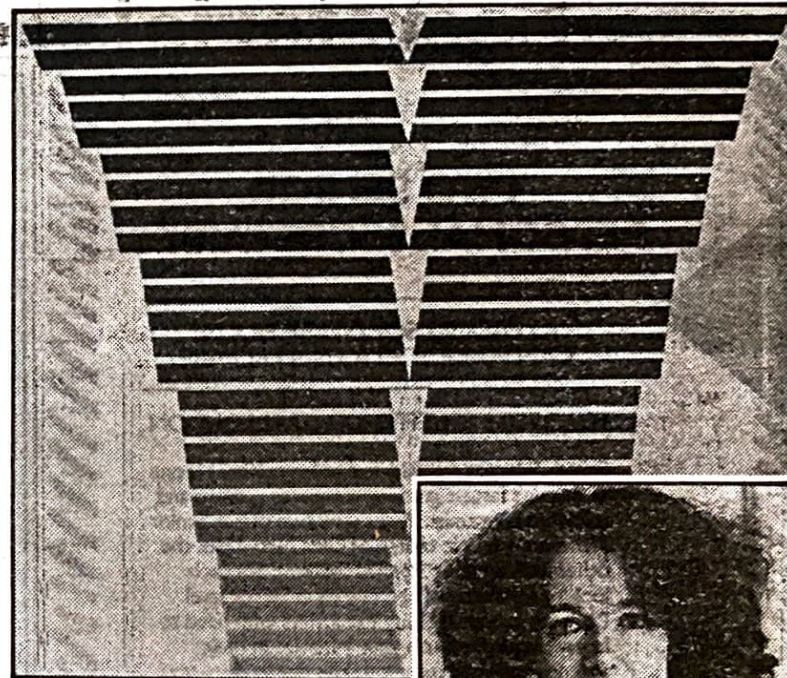
gest, but occasionally she focuses on a detail of form and its related decoration, and plays the optical tricks of the Sixties in which form retreats or projects, depending on the brain's confusion of messages from the eye.

With some such building as Durham Cathedral in her mind, she sets out to identify a single characteristic element on which to base a composition, working on graph paper with sharp HB pencils. Drawing taps her reservoirs of metaphor and recollection; one stage away from doodling, it organises ideas retrieved from her half-conscious memory.

Complexities

The aim is always evocation, not illustration; if the drawings are too descriptive they are discarded. Having found the simple key element from which the complexities will spring, perhaps a rectangle, its dimensions will in neighbouring rectangles be extended and distorted by the simplest arithmetical progression, introducing a sense of structure that is illuminated by colour.

These paintings have no glance



Intuitive talent: Tess Jaray and her work, Cadence



life, large though they are, the brisk visitor simply will not see them. Their designs grow from Jaray's belief in the disciplines of contemplation, and their colour from her intuitive judgment of response and relationship.

They demand the same activities from the spectator. Given time, and perhaps access to the source material, the spectator becomes aware of a multiplicity of simultaneous ideas and sensations. The images then take on the character of likeness, movement, volume, flow, freezing a moment of change as light floods a Romanesque facade, winding up the tension as an

architectural stress changes direction. They are pictures with which to live under high ceilings, behind large windows, in ordered rooms.

Tess Jaray is now something of a Dodo. Most post-war abstract painters, hard edge, soft edge, bucket and slosh, deserve the extinction that is at last upon them, but she does not—her subtle and intelligent work should survive the general nemesis.

● Tess Jaray, at the Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens. Daily 10—6. Admission free.