

ART

By SASHA GRISHIN

Spontaneous gestures of abstract expressionism

The Spontaneous Gesture: Prints and Books of the Abstract Expressionist Era, Australian National Gallery, closes 13 September.

THE OMNIPOTENCE of the mark, the spontaneous gesture, is a characteristic that we normally associate with Abstract Expressionist painting that emerged both in Paris and New York in the 1940s and became almost a religious creed in international art by the 1960s.

Artists who most readily come to mind are Jackson Pollock and William de Kooning in America, Soulages and Wols in Europe and Peter Upward and early Stanislaus Rapotec in Australia.

The exhibition at the Australian National Gallery looks at the phenomenon of gestural abstraction in printmaking. Initially we face an inherent contradiction. Printmaking is thought of as a very deliberate, controlled and exacting art form, while gestural painting demands an unbr-

dled freedom, or what Harold Rosenberg termed "the revelation contained in the act".

The exhibition proves this conservative idea of printmaking to be wrong. The artists here represented, not only achieve the freedom and spontaneity associated with the paintings, but also accurately preserve the precious accidental effects, the "breathings of change".

The Abstract Expressionist prints of Robert Motherwell, de Kooning, Karel Appel, David Smith and Dubuffet, are well known and are lithographs, a medium well suited to preserve a lightly worked surface. Equally well known are the screenprints of Jackson Pollock. But what was a great surprise to me was a magical print by Antonio Tapies *Rôig i negre 2* (1985), which achieves a flowing gestural freedom in an etching.

A strength of the show is that it mounts a fairly comprehensive survey of the work

of Abstract Expressionist artists, with all 125 prints and books on display being drawn from the gallery's own immensely rich holdings in this area. Not only does it document the work of the main American artists working in this style and in the case of de Kooning and Sam Francis looking also at their slightly later work, but it also places this work in an international context. The Europeans include Hans Hartung, Jean Messagier, Wols, Asger Jorn, Pierre Alechinsky, Miro and Soulages. The antipodean reflections of this style include Peter Upward and Stacha Halpern.

At a time when figurative expressionism has become a dominant tendency in Australian art, this exhibition presents a timely review of the heroic days of Abstract Expressionism. While the major Abstract Expressionist paintings have taken their place in the pantheon of 20th century art, this exhibition makes a strong claim for the inclusion of the prints as well.

Victor Pasmore and John Piper: Two English Printmakers, Solander Gallery, 36 Grey St, Deakin, closes 15 July, daily 11am-5pm.

VICTOR Pasmore and John Piper are two veteran English artists who have been exhibiting widely internationally since the 1930s.

Victor Pasmore left a long-lasting impact on the English art scene partly through his early abstractions, some of which were of monumental propor-

five years, was also an early English convert to abstraction. Like Pasmore he was an admirer of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth in his early days and produced a considerable number of abstract mood paintings. However, by the late 1930s he broke away from the abstract fold and found his place in a very traditional English artistic genre of topographic painting.

Piper's love of grand mansions and ancient churches seen within their rustic setting and frequently in a state of decay earned him the title of the