

W. GORDON SMITH

several small beach scenes at Yalta and Adla compare favourably with the airy joys of Boudin at his best in Trouville or Deauville — bright clothes against choppy seas and windy skies. A much larger painting, 'The Dinner Party,' appears to be a strangely solemn affair until its intended satire is revealed in the original Cyrillic title, 'Petit Bourgeois.' His disengaged diners, adrift in a powerful composition, seem to have thoughts only for themselves. Two still-lives, 'Dead Poppy Heads' and 'Bowl of Pomegranates,' demonstrate his impressive versatility.

Rubinstein's theatrical studies of musicians shiver with atmosphere and two paintings of Samarkand reminded me of Melville's delicate mastery of similar subjects. I found much to admire, too, in the work of Cherkes, Igoshev, Lubitch, Babij (particularly his magnificent nude 'Cardplayers'), and Lomykin (for the cool, contemplative planes of his 'Sitting Ballerina'). The futurist 'Le Retour du Pecheur' by Alexandra Exter, who made such a distinguished contribution to theatrical design, triumphs over inadequate lighting.

For something like 14 years Edith Simon has mounted big Festival shows under her own steam and often beneath provocative banners — 'Art is Alive and Well,' 'Moderation Be Damned,' 'Who's Afraid of Edith Simon.'

She is, as one of her exhibition titles acknowledges, a maverick. Her technical accomplishment — she works with a bewildering range of materials from cloth to rope to resins to paper — harnessed to severe classical disciplines, makes her formidable enough, but that is less than half the story. As if daunting intelligence and scholarship, natural draughtsmanship, a sure sense of form and colour, and insatiable artistic curiosity were not enough, she is also the author of nine novels and half a dozen books of history.

Inevitably, Simon is a victim of that pernicious British suspicion of multi-faceted talent — she can accomplish too much too damned well. She would be fêted in France and come

close to beatification in Italy. Living and working in Scotland, she just gets on with it, experimenting, expanding her own horizons, and occasionally indulging in some witty mischief at the expense of the art establishment and the status quo.

This year's show at the Student Centre, Bristo Square, is called 'The New Underground.' It is nothing of the sort. At its heart is a dramatic triptych of papercut bas reliefs in which Orpheus takes on 'the mindless hatreds' before 'the forces of destruction tear him to pieces,' but, being the legendary personification of the artist, his head lives on 'forever singing sweetly.' As Simon says herself, the New Underground is as old as the hills, and the enemy — anti-creativity — is still with us.

She has been working on papercuts for many years and could now claim to have perfected a medium of expression which gives her the greatest satisfaction. Up to nine sheets of paper are stapled together then cut away with a scalpel, revealing and concealing, exposing and shrouding, so that colour and form coalesce in a multi-layered blend of drawing and sculpture. Portraits of Sheena Macdonald, Robin Philipson, and William K. Fraser are startling, animated likenesses, with personality — like the portraits themselves — revealed in the layers.

The same technique works brilliantly in a decorative panel 'Pats, Cats, Hats,' a *jeu d'esprit* 'Ron's Pens,' and a mysteriously erotic figure with flowers 'The Lady of Éboli.' I loved the graceful simplicity of her 'Mackerel Cat' and the riotous greens and purples of 'Exotic Imagery.'

But this is a salon of many delights. The conventional sculpture ranges from a big daft dog, 'The Blue Ghost,' to 'Runner,' a dynamic celebration of the thrust of honed physicality. There are continuous-line drawings, their natural extension in fluid sculpture fashioned out of rope, oils, pastels — including 'Human Pinwheel,' a tennis player of explosive vitality — lifesize bendy rag dolls, even audio-visual shows which, like the catalogue, give some (but not all) of her artistic game away and express her good-natured didacticism.

The lady is a festival in herself. And enormous fun.

Observer, Sun. 6th
1986