

Painting comes out of the cold

Painting is back in the picture at the 14th EAST exhibition, which opens in Norwich today. **IAN COLLINS** is impressed.

Over 13 summers the EAST exhibition of cutting-edge creativity has advanced annually to confirm the name of Norwich on the global art map. Now it is taking a very shocking (and wholly welcome) turn.

Having displayed the art of cluttered basements and putrefaction – of video installations and countless conceptual conceits – this grand and sweeping survey has rediscovered what co-selector Neo Rauch calls the “perfume of painting”.

Drawing, the true foundation and springboard of art, has been dismissed in art schools for decades – and, all too often, paint has been given the brush-off.

Well, now these traditional tools are being reapplied for new and novel purposes. Painting is bursting back.

For many art students art history is something that began around 1997, but it's fitting that East Anglia – the home of Gainsborough and Constable, and the birthplace of Crome and Cotman's Norwich School 201 years ago – should now ponder paint afresh.

And the Norwich Gallery – showcase of the Norwich School of Art and Design, whose past luminaries range from Alfred Munnings to Michael Andrews – is the perfect venue for such a show.

Rauch and Gerd Harry Lybke have selected the work of 30 artists from Europe, North America and Asia – choosing from 1620 entries from 38 countries (a measure of the esteem with which EAST is now held across the art world).

The exhibition, which opens to the public today, is arranged in a series of one-person displays – of figurative and abstract painting, collage, photography and (still claiming a space) video.

Norwich Gallery curator Lynda Morris says: “The selectors chose images that show us not only what it looks like to live now, but also what it feels like to be alive now.”

“They looked for work that was made from observed experience rather than images mediated by photography or film. They responded to work that was concerned with personal experience and human values, plus the skills of draughtsmanship and composition.”

“Many of the paintings and photographs represent the life cycle from childhood and family life, through to old age and death.”

“Most of all, the selectors talked about the way the language of depiction expresses emotions and feelings.”

EAST took its title not only from East Anglia but also from the new spirit emerging after East-West conflict.

This year, with eight former Communist countries joining the European Union, and others set to follow, the political geography of art – and the sense of a continent as a domestic arena – seemed particularly timely.

Painter Rauch and dealer Lybke have been associated for 20 years, since the latter launched a commercial gallery in then-Marxist Leipzig and East Berlin. They know a lot about walls and bridges.

Rauch, a winner of the Van Gogh

Prize (Europe's Turner Prize), has a big reputation on the Continent and in America. It's ironic that he is making an initial mark in Britain as a selector!

For both men the key iconic image in the show is probably *Escape to West Germany 1972* by the Czech-born, Toronto-residing Jakub Dolejs – a blending of paint and photography which imagines his mother's flight across the Iron Curtain.

But other featured artists concentrate on an escape from fact into fiction.

Mexico-born, London-based Alicia Paz produces collage paintings like Catholic shrines reassembled higgledy-piggledy on Mars, which contrast vividly with a voyage into science fiction and surrealism by Leipzig's Rosa Loy. Both propel women into the weirdest landscapes.

Veteran painter Rose Wylie (70 this year) offers huge canvases of cartoon-like figures which toy with the art of graffiti while being unable to avoid a rough beauty.

But viewers may be pulled up sharp – or else move swiftly on – after encountering the photos of Liz Nicol. Having focused on the birth of her son, she has now snapped her dead partner, Willy.

There he lies, hands clasped and wearing a baseball cap whose peak projects above the open coffin. Pathos mingles with bathos (I thought of the Alan Bennett line from the director of a nursing home who said: “We've just welcomed our first Darren.”)

There are some gorgeous, witty and glorious paintings by America's

Ridley Howard and Leipzig's Christoph Ruckhaberle.

But – surprise, surprise – my favourite one-person show in the 14th EAST exhibition turns out to be a video.

Germany's Lela Budde, who works in London and Munich, has shot (apparently literally) a spaghetti western gunfight in which blood spurts and spouts freely from writhing bodies.

Then Lela herself appears, in a 1960s nurse's uniform, to dress wounds and give injections.

A moving version of America's Cindy Sherman who pictures herself in endless guises, this splendid artist proves that wit really can be the deadliest weapon.

There's much to enjoy in this year's EAST assembly – with the overall EASTaward winner to be announced at a reception tonight.

But, with this month's trend-setting Basle Art Fair also being all about painting, this up-to-the-minute offering has already generated unprecedented interest.

Lynda Morris has responded to two particularly important requests for e-mailed images.

One caller was Jay Jopling, of London's influential White Cube gallery. The other was Charles Saatchi.

One of the most recent and most sensational additions to the Saatchi Gallery in County Hall was a group of bold, brash paintings by John Bratby – the lately deceased star of the 1950s Kitchen Sink school.

I wonder how many of the painterly works now in the Norwich Gallery may soon be winging their way to London.



ICONIC: *Escape to West Germany, 1972*, by Czech-born Jakub Dolejs – a blend of paint and photography