

Around the galleries John Russell Taylor

An alternative world

For some years Derek Hyatt, who has just turned 80, has been assumed, in the absence of concrete evidence to the contrary, to be one of those artists who lament their few hours of youthful glory and wonder where they went.

Not a bit of it, as is clear from *Meetings on the Moor*, a shatteringly good exhibition at the Art Space Gallery. Yet again, it makes us realise how much we lose by the obsessive concentration of attention in the art world on what is happening in the capital. Hyatt's last London exhibition, *Clouds over the Moor*, at the same gallery, was nearly 20 years ago. Since then he has had four important, reputation-making shows in major Northern public galleries. Why have they not made his reputation? Precisely because they were in Sheffield, Bradford and Halifax, not in London.

For those not familiar with Hyatt's work, some description is necessary. Hints may be gleaned from the titles of his

shows. Landscape presumably they are, or anyway landscape-inspired. And with such atmospheric titles, they probably have strongly symbolic overtones. Both of these are fair characterisations. But, such as they are, they could apply to much of mid-20th-century British art, especially that emanating from St Ives or thereabouts. Hyatt's paintings definitely have little or nothing to do with St Ives.

If they recall anything in recent British art, it would be such virtual outsiders as Michael Cullimore or Brian Horton, and back beyond them, conceivably, to Paul Nash. But again, we are talking mainly of spiritual affinities, only a little of stylistic traits. Hyatt, unlike any of the others, delights in hot, hectic colours. Also, he is closer to abstraction than any of them. Every now and then in his paintings we can distinguish a clear representation of something: a moon, a stormy sky, a crucifix, a bracken frond, the sea.

But more often the apparent objects in these paintings are more in the line of Lord Berners's famous description of a Dali detail, "A thing that is almost a Thing". Sometimes the underlying reference seems to be sexual, sometimes it looks more scientific. Almost always it is for Hyatt to know, and us to find out — if we can. But his spectators are not expected to lose too much sleep over the process. Hyatt's great skill is to create an alternative world, where we feel provoked yet strangely happy, playing, like Auden's children, among the ruined languages.

Derek Hyatt's Meetings on the Moor is at the Art Space Gallery, London N1 (artspacegallery.co.uk) until July 27.