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## AJ REVIEW

## EXHIBITIONS

## VICTORIAN VIEWS

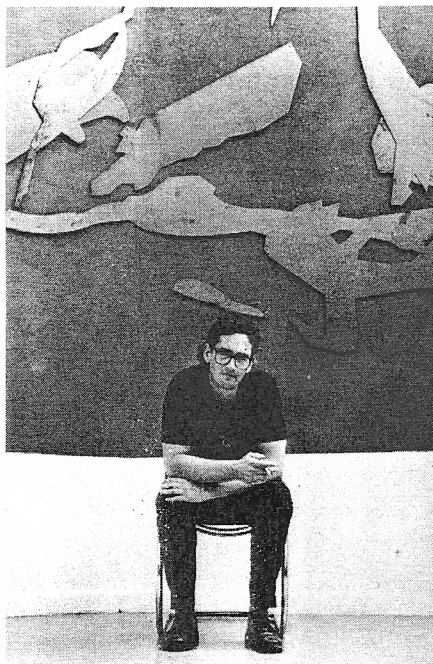
**Cader Idris and the City of a Thousand Trades** Ikon Gallery, Birmingham until 12 August

*Duncan Hadfield*

One item in this small but intriguing exhibition of the work of David Patten is not ostensibly by the artist, although it stems from his idea. It consists of a rotating display rack containing postcards drawn by primary schoolchildren from mid-Wales and from Birmingham. Although the bright colours and 'techniques' of the two sets of young artists are identical, their subject matter differs widely: for the Welsh it is hills, fields and animals; for the Midlanders, buildings, roads and cars.

Patten's concept for this show, which marks the centenary of the city of Birmingham, stretches to an eye-opening examination of the attitudes of nineteenth century Birmingham artists to the teeming industrial workshop which they inhabited. Rather than depict it, they headed for the country, most popularly to Wales and to the mountain of Cader Idris. Patten's first huge mural has as its background a bed of nails (Victorian factories produced 100 000 000 a day) on which he has mounted 100 'Birmingham sketch-books', each symbolically empty. Mirroring this monolithic black-and-white image is a huge blown-up photograph of Cader Idris, with a meandering stream luring the viewer towards the 'sublime' mystique of the crag.

Parallels, contrasts, mirrorings and comparisons abound throughout this critical commentary/commemoration of Birmingham past and present. The imposing jagged skyline of Cader Idris, be it in William Ellis' mannered 1889 oil or Patten's own swirling abstract



**Patten with his cut-steel-plate Cader Idris.**

representation in cut steel plate, is never far from view. Yet further metropolitan skylines, such as another huge blown-up photograph of Birmingham's new International Convention Centre, prove equally alluring. Patten is also keen to suggest symbolic discrepancies between his two key materials of iron and brass, comparing the grey with the golden, and even the appeal of verdigris with that of rust.

Supporting his 'large' statements (and impressively large they certainly are), the artist provides an array of tangential material for his thesis: a handful of ancient nails sit in a gleaming 1989 centenary tea mug; a Victorian Society of Artists exhibition catalogue is positioned adjacent to a towering brass triptych at the base of which the word 'ergo' has been immaculately embossed. An illuminating selection of clearly printed texts—ranging from accounts of sketching trips to the Welsh hills, to

factual statistics on manufacturing output—also adorn the walls and are continued in a well-produced supporting catalogue.

Patten's stature as a young artist cannot be gleaned from this small show alone. And neither, it must be admitted, can any message be construed from the m  le of often confusing material. Yet perhaps Patten has ingeniously subverted both these conventional aims, electing instead for a method in which the spectator is invited to provide his or her own creative input. At least he can be applauded for an installation that provides, in Yeats' words, 'those images that yet fresh images beget'.