

Building towards a brighter future

Max Bill's art and architecture embody the optimistic spirit of early modernism, says **James Dunnett**

EXHIBITION

MAX BILL

Annely Juda Fine Art, 23 Dering Street, London W1.

www.annelyjudafineart.co.uk

Until July 30

★★★★★

Modern architecture was in the 1920s and 30s seen as the embodiment of a new era of rational and scientific thought, decision, and management in human affairs, superseding messy romanticisms, nationalisms, and superstitions of old. It was the embodiment of hope in a brighter future, and it is hard to think of a single individual who appears more fully to exemplify

this outlook than Max Bill (1908-1994).

His activities ranged from typography and fine art, through design, and politics — to architecture, uniquely rivalling his fellow-Swiss Le Corbusier in the breadth of his outlook, and yet remaining relatively unknown in Britain. The present show at Annely Juda provides an excellent opportunity to get to know his work better as regards painting and sculpture and, in the 93-minute film being shown, his life.

The film, *Max Bill* — a master's vision, made in 2008 by Eric Schmid, second husband of Bill's second wife (who was 40 years younger than Bill) has not stormed the box offices like *My Architect*, the 2004 film about

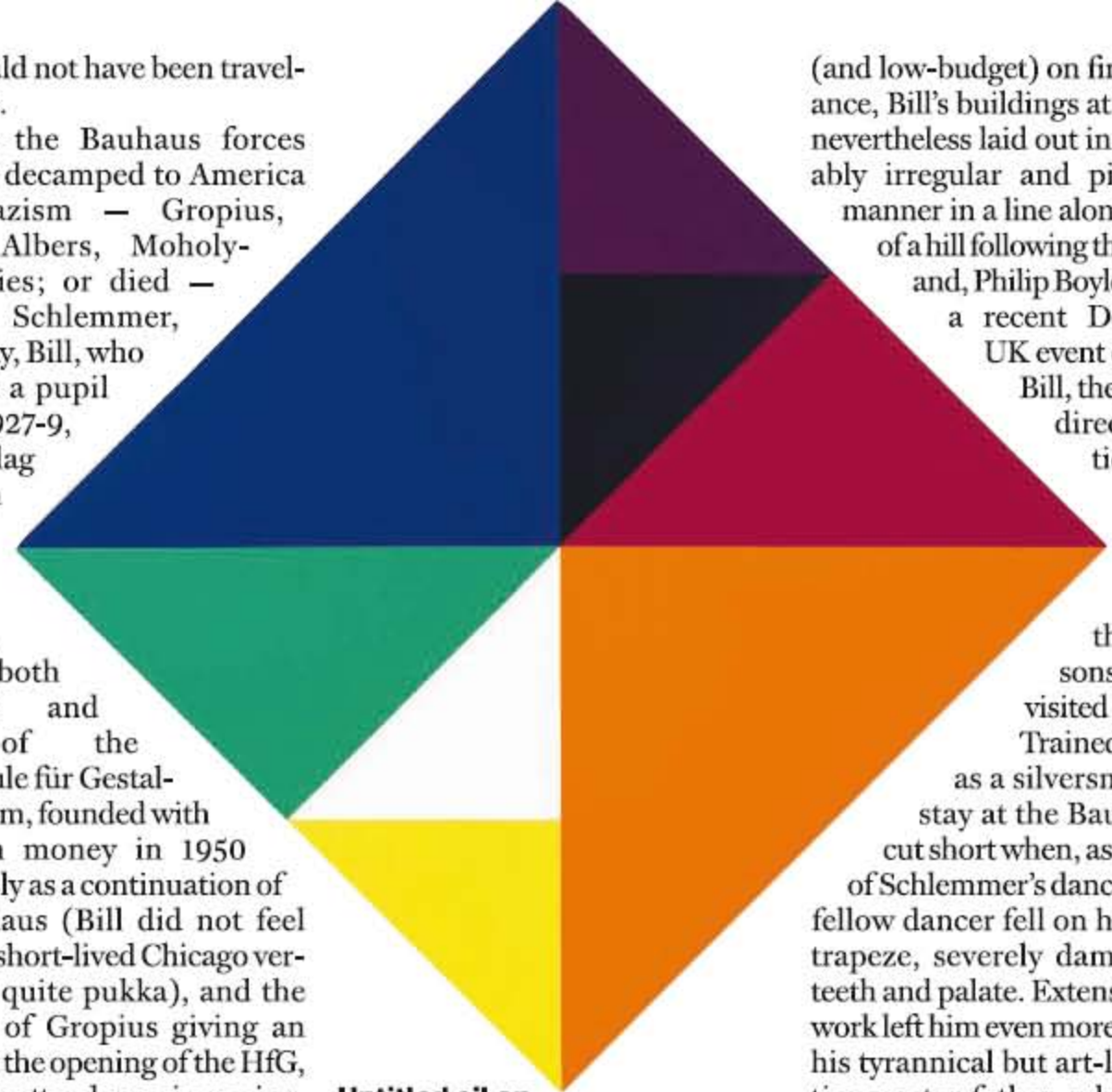
Louis Kahn, but it has an emotional pull of its own and records at least one similarity between them: each died on their way home from presenting an architectural project, Bill at Berlin airport after successfully presenting his project for an extension to the Gropius-designed Bauhaus-Archiv (which was to remain unbuilt for want of funds). He was 85 to Kahn's 72 and, one feels, per-

His Bauhaus stay was cut short when a fellow dancer fell on him from a trapeze

haps should not have been travelling alone.

Where the Bauhaus forces famously decamped to America after Nazism — Gropius, Breuer, Albers, Moholy-Nagy, Mies; or died — Klee, Schlemmer, Kandinsky, Bill, who had been a pupil there in 1927-9, kept the flag flying in Europe, becoming, Gropius-like, both architect and head of the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, founded with American money in 1950 consciously as a continuation of the Bauhaus (Bill did not feel Moholy's short-lived Chicago version was quite pukka), and the film clip of Gropius giving an address at the opening of the HfG, with Bill in attendance, is moving.

Though the HfG did indeed found a school of typography and design with world-wide influence and, according to one interviewee in the film, even established the concept of the designer as a professional, Bill's stay there lasted no more than five years. Internal dis-



Untitled oil on canvas, 1970.

sension drove him out and the school was finally closed in 1968 by the minister-president of Baden-Württemberg, a former Nazi judge.

Severely plain and rectangular

(and low-budget) on first appearance, Bill's buildings at Ulm were nevertheless laid out in a remarkably irregular and picturesque manner in a line along the crest of a hill following the contours and, Philip Boyle argued in a recent Docomomo UK event devoted to Bill, they were the direct inspiration for the buildings at Bath University by the Smithsons, who had visited the HfG.

Trained in Zurich as a silversmith, Bill's stay at the Bauhaus was cut short when, as a member of Schlemmer's dance troupe, a fellow dancer fell on him from a trapeze, severely damaging his teeth and palate. Extensive dental work left him even more in hock to his tyrannical but art-loving stationmaster father, who forbade him to marry his first love — the future Nusch Eluard (whose first name Bill gave her).

Nevertheless, after a spell in Paris he was able, in ways not fully explained in the film, to set himself up in Zurich as a designer and architect, and there to see out the



Twin as quarter sphere, 1968, montorfano granite.

war. His art and sculpture — the earliest piece in this show dates from 1934 — is calm and abstract from the start, and the prime quality that always shines through is intelligence. There is always a sense of enquiry, of search, of invention, a remarkable variety, and a sensual enjoyment of colour. A strong theoretical position can be felt behind it.

Certainly it is always cool — refreshingly so — revealing nothing of the turbulence of Bill's life any more than, according to his widow, he wished to know about that of others. Unlike Le Corbusier, who saw art as providing a formal contrast to architecture, in the Ulm school it complements it — a difference in approach worthy of further reflection.