

TS

THERE IS no copyright on titles to exhibitions, but to have two major public galleries with offerings that all but coincide to the letter is unusual, if not careless. In the event, the shows are very different. "Degas: Images of Women", at the Tate in Liverpool until December 31 and reviewed by Susan Moore two weeks ago, is a study of a great artist's treatment of particular subject-matter, wonderfully varied yet wonderfully consistent. I mention it now only to point the difference.

"Images of Women", at the Leeds City Art Galleries (until January 7: sponsored by Hammond Suddards, Solicitors), is an anthology made by Corinne Miller, assistant keeper at Leeds, to show how women have been represented by artists through the ages. "For generations, images of women based on preconceptions by men, have lined the walls of our public art galleries." Thus runs the foreword to the catalogue. There is, as they say these days, a sub-text. We have been warned.

On the surface, the exhibition is extremely enjoyable, for Miss Miller has chosen some beautiful and extraordinary things. Side by side sit early works by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth from around 1929, when the artists were still on close professional terms. And already the Moore reclining figure has an idealised, hieratic quality, that makes the Hepworth by contrast the more intimate and personal. Under the same heading, *Women and Power*, comes Reynolds-Stevens' lifesize bronze allegory of Elizabeth I and Philip of Spain at chess, "A Royal Game" (c.1911), a strange and splendid piece: she is arrogantly sidesaddle at the table, he is more thoughtful, even worried.

Woman as Artist and Muse has fine self-portraits: of Mary Beale (1666), self-confident within the rich pictorial conventions of the time: of Artemesia Gentileschi: of Angelika Kauffmann (c1794), caught between the muses: and of the enchanting Elizabeth Vigée le Brun (c1782), consciously inviting comparison with Rubens' "Chapeau de Paille". *Woman & Child* includes a tiny Bonnard, of



Testing Valves, by Arthur McCormick : from *Women at Home and Work*

EXHIBITION

The second sex

William Packer looks at Images of Women

grandmother and grandchild, a Bellini Madonna, and an equivocal Spencer portrait of his first wife, Hilda, with their daughter Unity and her dolls.

Woman at Home and at Work includes a bed-sitter interior by Harold Gilman, and several fine war-time commissions: Wrens testing valves by Arthur McCormick and mending sails by Stanhope Forbes from the First World War; a Hurricane assembly plant by Elsie Hewland; and Laura Knight's portrait of Corporal Pearson, GC, WAAF, from the Second. In the Garden of Eden contains images of courtship - Arthur Hughes, Alma-Tadema and Hugh Riviere - and of sexual promise or encounter - Gaudier-Brzeska, Jan van Scorel, Eric Gill with his garden roller. With *Woman and Man* we come at last to the age-old, inevitable confrontation of the

sexes, with its promises and possibilities, frustrations and misunderstandings.

So far so good. The material is rich enough, and its discreetly pointed presentation in a fresh light is no bad thing. But the feminist reading of art history cannot leave it at that. In her essay in the catalogue, Griselda Pollock, of Leeds University, writes off that most complex period of social and political upheaval with the statement that for women, the French Revolution "did not lead to greater freedom, but less". "A new and very limited definition of women was invented," she continues. "Women were to be exclusively domestic bodies, housewives and, above all, mothers. The division of the sexes, which today we inherit, was formulated as a quite new idea in the late 18th century. Men were to

be intellectual, political and active; women emotional, domestic, passive."

She looks at the Vigée self-portrait and sees "an immensely successful painter working for the Queen . . . Yet she presents herself as an artist in a way that completely contradicts the woman artist whom we know worked hard and regularly . . . Instead we see a spectacle of femininity, a woman offering herself up to be looked at . . . Yet it is her exceptional skill as an artist which . . . has taken on the impossibly difficult shadow first used by Rubens . . . The painting is an ambitious painterly challenge to one of the great masters triumphantly carried off." Self-exploitation or brilliant challenge? How difficult it must be for Miss Pollock to know what she thinks.