



Kirschen, 1983, and The Hat (Freud), 1984, by Wolfgang Koethe

Waldemar Januszczak on work by Wolfgang Koethe

Hail the new gladiators

I WONDER if to enjoy Wolfgang Koethe's paintings — I mean truly enjoy, enjoy profoundly, as I did — you need to have been a schoolboy. Certainly you need to have started a scrapbook of sporting heroes or yearned for a famous autograph. At the very least you need to have been taken to a football match but a kindly uncle and spent the following night dreaming in the colours of the home team. In short you need to have experienced a sporting occasion as a powerful intoxicant.

Koethe's paintings have long, colourful memories. They remember the arrival of the Mighty Magyars at Wembley when a squad of Hungarian assassins took care of the hitherto invincible English. They remember the Blue Dynamos, or at least they remember the spectacular impact of their strip. And of course they remember the 1966 World Cup Final when an alien red played Koethe's native white — and the red won.

If Koethe's paintings recalled all this literally, as facts, faces, figures, then we

would be dealing with an adolescent fan who never grew up. That we would ignore, and the impact of his art would be as superficial and transient as Northampton's arrival in the First Division.

But these paintings don't deal with the details of a sporting occasion, they deal with its profound impact on the nether regions of the imagination. Koethe names no names and remembers no faces. Deep, deep into extra-time, long after it has forgotten the final score and the appearance of the final scorer, the imagination is still haunted by atmospheres and colour-combinations, the smell of defeat and the sweet scent of victory.

His snooker, players are the sinister inhabitants of the darkness which lies outside the green baize. His racing drivers peer through the slits of their crash helmets as if they were preparing for Agincourt rather than Brands Hatch.

These are dangerous moments. Koethe's art recognises that the modern football pitch is a descendant

of the medieval jousting field and the gladiatorial arena. In these sporting pictures there is no such thing as the truly sporting colour. The black of the referee denotes rank and position, and marks him out instantly as the enemy. When the Mighty Magyars came to Wembley they wore a treacherous maroon which was always going to double-cross the innocent white of England.

On the surface such paintings deal with the imagery of sport. Beneath the surface they deal with tribal urges peculiar to the male of the species. Koethe's faceless gladiators parade, preen dribble and shoot in our name and our colours. These are our heroes fighting our battles. Wembley, it seems, is our Colosseum.

As if to provide some further clue to the eerie, psychological power of his images, Koethe includes a rather incongruous portrait of Freud among his footballers and racing drivers. Like all his pictures, it is quickly, firmly painted but with none of the frenzied lack of control which characterises the

work of so many of Germany's born-again Expressionists. Clearly taken from a photograph — as I suspect are most of the sporting pictures — it highlights the artist's ability to personalise the impersonal. This massive iconic Freud, his features blown up to scoreboard size, has a face as warm and worn as an old pair of football boots.