New exhibits break cultural warp; museums feature England, Spain

By CLINT GOODSON

The severe cultural warp that has gripped Houston since the end of the contrived “Festival of Arts” in October has been temporarily allayed by the installation of new exhibits in the city’s two foremost art museums.

“British Watercolors: 1760-1850”, due to show until December 11, opened Tuesday at the Museum of Fine Arts. A hundred examples from London’s Tate Gallery, including works by Constable, Turner, Cozens, and William Blake, fill much of the second-story exhibition space of the museum. The retrospective show of Eduardo Chillida is still installed in the Cullen Gallery.

If the British watercolors of this period seem of penultimate interest, it should be remembered that they materially influenced the Impressionists. Not that this exhibition needs to be justified by its historical significance. It stands on its own merits: the technique of watercolor gained its respectability in this British movement.

Versatility

The inclusion of many lesser masters emphasizes the versatility of the movement, and in many cases these lesser known artists have produced the more technically virtuous works. The subjects of the watercolors are limited: they are mostly landscapes with a few representations of the city. But even in this limited subject matter they are individual: style varies amazingly from artist to artist.

The two examples of William Blake are surely the most intriguing works on exhibit; although they are not as abstractly mystical as some of his works. His style is very much like that of Khalil Gibran, some of whose drawings hung in Fondren Library in 1964.

Modern Spanish

If, after looking at eighteenth century watercolors, you feel like returning to more immediate cultural concerns, drop into the Contemporary Arts Museum, where an exhibition of recent Spanish art has been installed.

This is a diminue exhibit; there are surely no more than twenty works—but these few canvases are unusually pleasing. Abstract motifs dominate, with some op, but no pop influence.

Contrast

This is stark contrast with the “Art Across America” exhibit that just closed at this same museum. Pop influence literally overwhelmed all others in that exhibit.

Taken with the “Made of Iron” exhibit at St. Thomas University, these two shows (and the Chillida retrospective) comprise the best cultural entertainment in town right now, excepting, perhaps, Lightnin’ Hopkins and “Marat/Sade.”