

The Age 20/8/86

# Abstracts filled with emotional substance

**T**HE belief that abstract or non-representational works of art have no content to speak of is a widespread and enduring one. Its currency may well be responsible for the limbo in which many abstractionists find themselves.

This limbo is indeed a curious one. Though abstract works of art are still enthusiastically acquired by the curators of public museums and by those who decorate the lobbies of public buildings and the offices of large corporations, their creators have won no substantial place in the world at large.

"That's nice," people will say of their works. Then they will scratch their ear and add "But what does it mean?" Like a secret guilt from which there can be no escape, that comment must haunt the consciousness of all non-figurative artists.

Any viewer who doubts the capacity of non-representational art to deal directly with human concerns should visit Michael Johnson's exhibition at the University of Melbourne Gallery (Old Physics Building; ends 30 October) and look at the group of paintings Johnson produced during his period as artist-in-residence at the university. These works, along with the dozen or so which document the earlier phase of the artist's career, all bear directly on one basic and necessary emotion.

I don't like to take issue with my fellow critics, but Terence Maloon doesn't get it quite right in his lengthy catalogue introduction. And not, I might add, from want of trying. Maloon's idea that Johnson's paintings are basically about the heroism of the human image is manifestly absurd — and also close to the mark. But first a description of Johnson's most pertinent, and most recent, works.

What the artist has done here is really quite simple. On blocking in a ground plane generally composed of three or four tiers of color, Johnson then lays down a further plane composed of roughly horizontal and vertical lines which are squeezed directly from the tube. Every gesture the artist has made in these works unequivocal-

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## ART

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GARY CATALANO

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ly affirms the tactile reality and the physical presence of the surface.

Yet the optical effect is something else, for the different way in which these two levels have been stated acts to magnify the surface's inherent capacity to evoke a sense of expansive depth. In works like 'Buji' and 'Ortoguit' (you can tell that Johnson began his exhibiting career in the '60s from these titles) the surface is literally filled with a billowing and intangible space.

To my way of feeling, the sheer expansiveness of this space and the sense of freedom with which it fills one are sure signs that Johnson's paintings are directly concerned with the life of the emotions. Indeed, the alacrity with which they transform their material nature is an analogy for the way in which, say, the feeling of confidence can transform one's whole being. Johnson's paintings, I suggest, are explicitly about confidence and the expansive spirit which it engenders.

Few viewers are likely to be troubled when identifying the concerns of the seven young sculptors grouped together in 'Gilding the Lily' at 200 Gertrude Street (Fitzroy; ends 6 September) or of Stewart MacFarlane's paintings at 70 Arden Street (North Melbourne; ends 30 August).

From Loretta Quinn's exceptionally impressive and evocative 'Where Have All The Flowers Gone' in the front room to the three small works by Richard Stringer in the furthest corner of the gallery, the first show is packed with objects which strive to become adored or compelling icons. After a lapse of decades the mysterious, the exotic and the gaudily extravagant have once again become admired artistic qualities.

Apart from the Quinn mentioned above, the pieces I found most rewarding were Stringer's 'Miss Universe' and Philip

Faulks's 'The Flying Man'. The absolute frontality of both of these works (the first stands before a wall and the second hangs on one) is crucial to their effect.

MacFarlane's paintings, which improve greatly on a prolonged viewing, generally concern themselves with the kind of situations which have long been the staple fare of movies or TV soap-operas. Almost without exception, his paintings deal with murder, suicide and aberrant or merely illicit sex.

Though they vary in quality, the best are notable for the deftness with which their minor compositional details uncannily reinforce or contribute to their dramatic effect. To see what I mean, look at 'The Out-Skirts' and try to imagine it without the toy truck half-hidden under the bed or the car cruising past in the window.

Three other shows worthy of visiting are Harry Rosengrave's ostensibly naive paintings at Niagara (245 Punt Road, Richmond; ends 26 August; Deborah Walker's prints and drawings at Gerstman-Abdallah (29 Gipps Street, Richmond; ends 29 August); and Noel Rollinson's paintings at Roar (115 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy; ends 30 August).

Whatever you do, don't miss Walker's 'Marriage', a small lithograph which shows nothing but a cheese grater. That, I'm compelled to say, gets something right.

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## BRIEFLY

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**T**HE UNICEF Victoria Youth Art Exhibition, in association with the Ministry of Education and the International Year of Peace, is holding an exhibition of art until 9 September at Caulfield Arts Centre, 441 Inkerman Road. Student art from schools and TAFE colleges in the South Central and Westernport regions, on a theme of 'Children, Peace and the World', will be displayed. The exhibition moves to Frankston Primary School from 15-26 September, and to the AMP Foyer in Melbourne from 27 October to 7 November.



# Visionary young sculptors

**GILDING THE LILLY**  
Sculpture by Brett Ballard, Philip Faulks, Tim Jones, Luanne Noble, Loretta Quinn, Guisepppe Romeo, Richard Stringer, 200 Gertrude St, Fitzroy.  
Until September 6  
Review:  
JOANNA MURRAY-SMITH

## GALLERY

In "The Doors of Perception" Aldous Huxley refers to the visionary and transporting powers of art and nature which take us "out of the every day Here and towards the Other World of vision".

The doors of perception currently at 200 Gertrude Street are opening up the other worlds of seven visionary young sculptors.

This is an opulent territory, populated by icons and symbols that are both repulsively and embracingly mystical.

Whether they are diabolical or fanciful, these are grand, talismanic pieces with idiosyncratic power.

The gallery floor is a forcefield of bewitching, generally organic forms, growing out of it with a

crusading confidence.

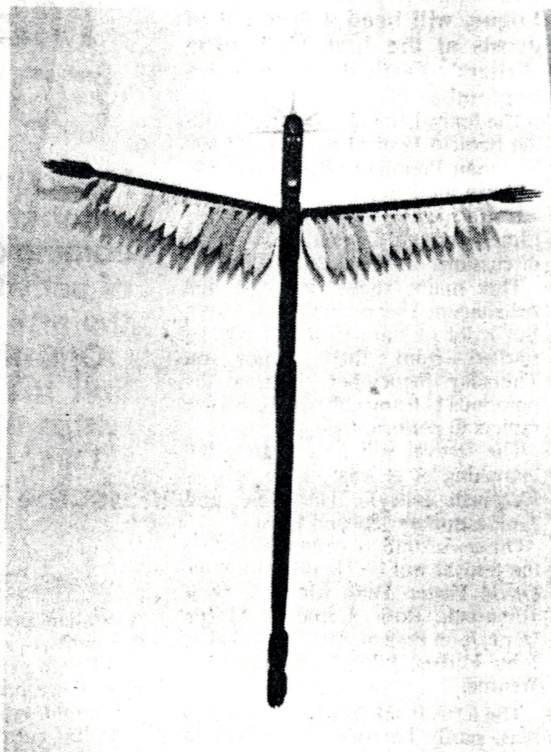
Guisepppe Romeo's "The Immaculate Consumption" is a sculptured procession. A dragon-camel sits on carved wheels, embraced and engulfed by flame-headed and flame-breathing figures, snakes, ducks and Carmen Mirandah fruit platters. It is a colourful entourage, dripped in gold and energy, moving in every direction while standing still.

Luanne Noble's "Chest" is a glittering, glazed plaster juke box, studded with fragments of ceramic and glass. It lurks in a corner of the gallery like a conjured figment of the fifties, waiting to be activated like Christine (the car who came to life).

Loretta Quinn's "Forgotten Dreams" are papier-mache pinnacles, electrically lit from within like glowing islands.

In the same ocean of gallery space is Richard Stringer's "Miss Universe". This is a bewitchingly ugly altar, personified by a blue-winged headless mermaid bound within the wooden waves of a heart-shaped sea.

It is overwhelming in its dimensions and its outrageous combination of pious formality and



Philip Faulk's "The Flying Man", a sculpture on display at 200 Gertrude Street

lurid fetishism. These qualities are less obvious in his delicate "Series of Three": tiny trees and vines like fairy sculptures in a giant's gallery.

"The Flying Man" is Philip Faulk's skinny totem crucifix. Spread arms dripping with golden leaves, it is a stunningly stark, neatly balanced sculpture in wood and sandstone.

Its beautiful composure is both intensified and upset by the disconcerting detail of carefully defined clenched teeth.

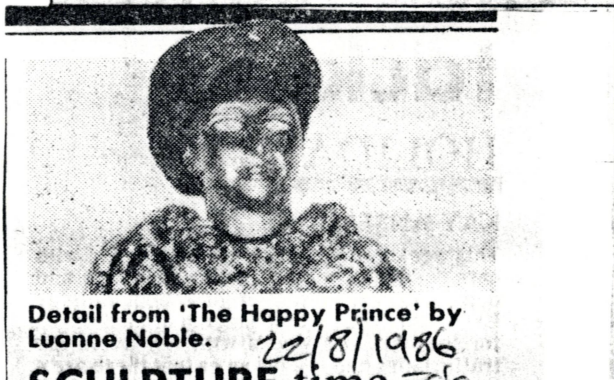
Tim Jones' "The She Goddess of Maddest Sadness" is representative of the arrogance and success of the exhibition as a whole. It is a

sarcophagus composed of blue-painted kindling, nailed and stapled like a haphazard cage of death.

Like tripping chemists, these sculptors have created images which (like conventional icons), inhabit a religious luxury that is ostensibly alienating in its scale and self-reverence.

But also, like conventional icons, these exhibits inhabit an accessible charisma.

Their boldness reaches out to be celebrated and is confident enough to inspire confidence. Their wildness and magnificence gives the viewer the freedom to revere or to laugh.



Detail from 'The Happy Prince' by Luanne Noble. 22/8/1986

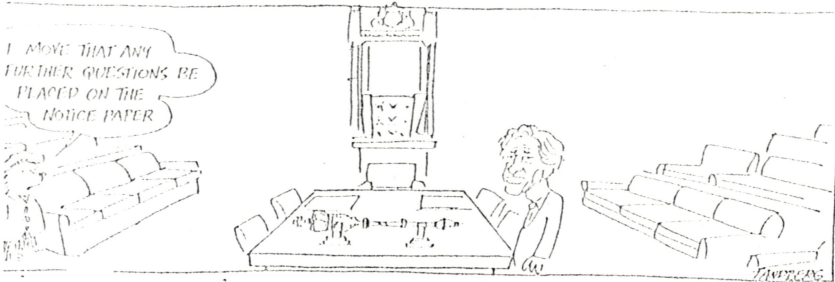
## SCULPTURE time EG's CHOICE

Sculpture doesn't get much of a guernsey these days, but 200 Gertrude Street, a Fitzroy gallery with an affection for young artists, has put together an exhibition of elaborate, decorative sculptures called 'Gilding the Lily'. It features the work of seven Melbourne artists who have given their pieces intriguing titles such as 'Glint', 'Infanta's Birthday Dress', 'The Immaculate Consumption', 'Miss Universe' and the enigmatic 'Untitled', a popular choice. The gallery is open Monday to Friday from 9am to 6pm and Saturdays from 1pm until 5.30pm.



# EG's Choice

EG Editor  
Eileen Cooke  
Designer  
Robin Cowcher



Bear: finally free of the Mick Young affair.

## DAY Kids

That time of year again: bits of playdough hurtle past your head as fingerpainting on the bedroom walls. The smallest residents of are complaining that there is nothing to do. Teach them to read them in this direction.

ton Bear, who has finally shaken off the bad publicity during the g Affair, will be back in town this Wednesday at the Athenaeum Collins St, for the hols. Colorful costumes, catchy music and a strong s assured) will merge with the direction of Gerry Ginivan, who is re from 'Cats' to tackle the bear. Shows until 6 September daily at 7pm. Bookings for tickets at \$9.50 (grown ups) and \$7.50 (ankle- \$1500.

e Film Centre in East Melbourne has rallied around the flag again



Detail from 'The Happy Prince' by Luanne Noble.

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Frank Sinatra: who, mo?

## STYLE file

The Metropal Hotel in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, (where also? we ask plaintively) is laying on the charm with the opening of their Saturday dance club, Blah Blah, tomorrow night, with music by Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, the Cramps, Kid Croole and Prince. Hayyy, now that's eclectic. (you haven't put the dictionary away, have you?) Guest artists will be The Trio, a splinter