

Untitled by Peter Booth: a command of abstraction.

Curator who's all at sea

IF I had to add an extra line to the carol The Twelve Days of Christmas it would be "13 curators curating". Lately, it seems that everyone from artists and critics (including yours truly) to commercial gallery directors is busy putting together some sort of survey exhibition.

In the past, and there is no reason why the present is any different, many a fine arts career has been built on the timely resurrection of some forgotten, neglected or obscure Australian artist - and a few famous ones, too. Once you have cornered the market, so to speak, you are set are inclined to be a little slow for life. But why this flurry of curatorial activity? And why the involvement of artists and others in addition to professional curators and fine arts

High on the list of reasons, I think, is an impatience with

Melbourne Galleries:

Shipwrecked: 200 Gertrude Street Gallery Peter Booth:

Works on Paper Powell Street Gallery

ROBERT ROCNEY

academics. They are often seen as people obsessed with tiny pockets of the past, who off the mark when it comes to recognising that despite its theme: it could be dogs, cats. short history, Australian art still presents a wealth of untapped material. This is particularly true of the post-war best if it contains two words decades. (Although there is among younger fine arts and "Fears and Scruples", for

people a growing interest in unravelling the complex developments in the '60s and early '70s, there is still much to explore in the art of the decades preceding them).

Artist's retrospectives are fairly common, but "theme shows" are without a doubt a current favourite with almost everyone. The main problem with the latter, at least at the beginning, is to find a subject nobody's grabbed already, and then to select a suitable title. Movements and artists' groups have possibilities, but a more common approach is to assemble a selection of works depicting the same children, flowers, or my favourite, the foot in Australian art. As for the title, it is "Meaning and Excellence"

example. Failing that, one word will do.

The latest theme show to raise its hydra-like head is Shipwrecked, curated Memory Holloway, at the 200 Gertrude Street Gallery.

It is not, as I first thought, an exhibition of paintings. prints, drawings and sculpture by artists who have reached that stage in their careers which is best described as being "up the creek without a paddle". To quote Holloway's introduction, it is a selection of works in which the shipwreck theme "is often expressed through the literal image of the ship or raft. The idea of being in transit, of being between places even i. only in the imagination", and, above all, "the notion of being in passage between Australia

As a theme, Shipwrecked has everything a curator could wish for: not only can it be related to Australian history - shipwrecks off the coast and the passages of migration from the first settlers to the post-World War II period - but it is also rich in symbolism, with numerous and painting. To support her selection of works by contemkes the names and paintings of such notable exponents of European Romanticism as Turner, Friedrich, Gericault and Delacroix.

Although in actual practice all the works on display are seen to exist on a less exalted plane than the ones by older Europeans cited by Holloway, they are not without interest

the context of her I have a vague suspiiat Shipwrecked was round the paintings of

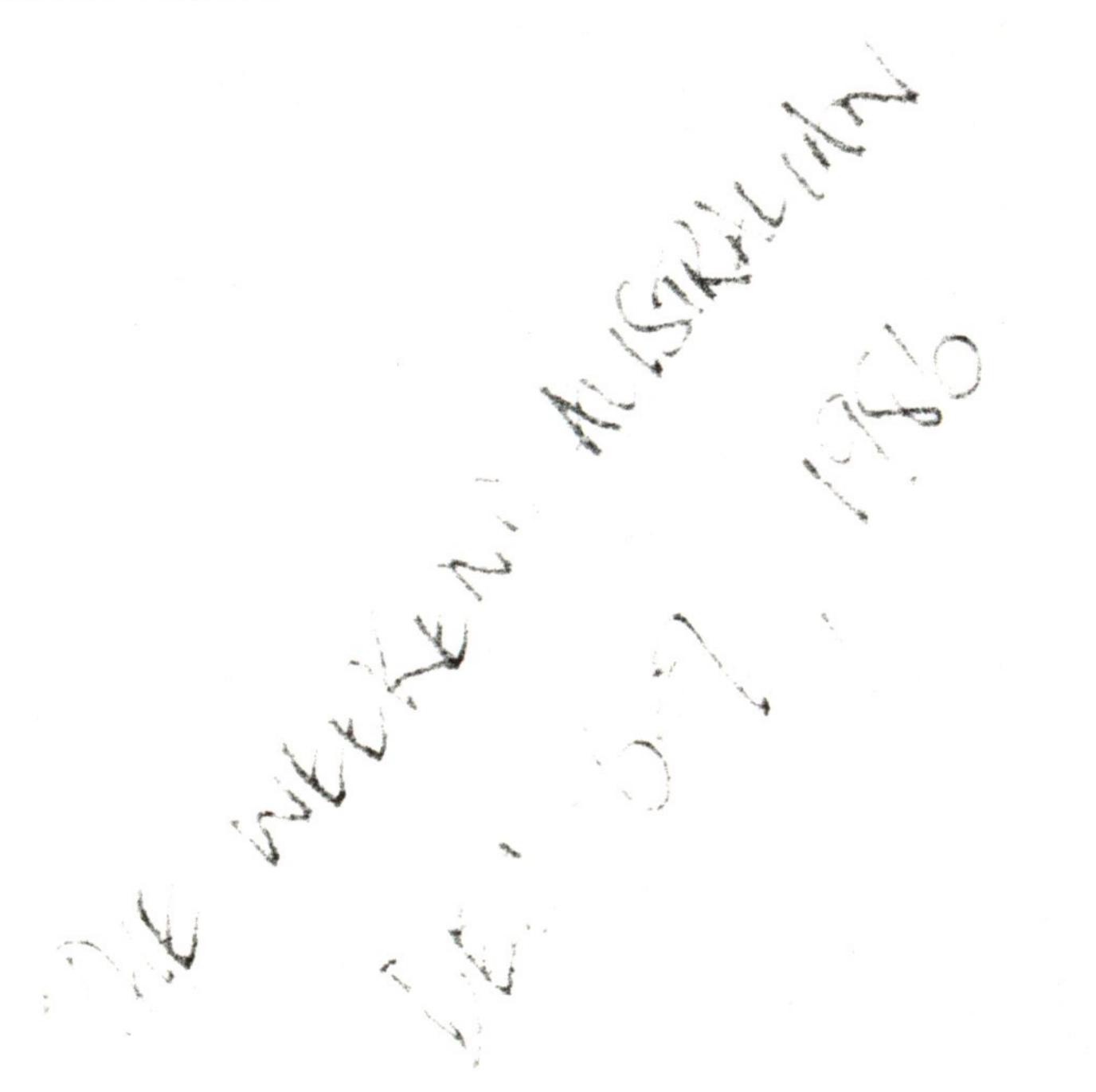
ted by a "plank" painting of a raft and a picture of an empty boat "framed" by a painted sea, and Jeff Lowe's Lifeboat, which, to judge from the number of times it has been exhibited in the past year or

so, is a painting for all themes. Most of the works can be divided roughly misty, Whistler-like miniatures (Lynne Boyd), abstract impressionist seascapes (Ian Parry) and various types of illustration. Among these types are the pseudo-medievalism. of Merryn Eirth's Odyssey of Souls and Micky Allan's flabby transcription of a 19th century engraving's mechanis cal precision in Shipwreck, which Holloway thinks is

sculptures Among Anton Hassell's riveted metal mini-submarine is given and beached wooden yacht, which has sharp teeth, a shark's fin keel and patched red sails. adds a bit of body to the show.

With all the recent rumours about a pre-exhibition sell-out and slow collectors paying up to \$40,000 for paintings they could have acquired cheaply a few years ago, there has been references to poetry, novels some speculation as to whether success would spoil Peter Booth. Certainly, some porary Australian artists, of the smaller paintings I many by courtesy of 70 Arden have seen in the office of the Street Gallery, Holloway invo- Powell Street Gallery have been pretty weak, but in Works on Paper, his latest exhibition, we see that Booth is at his consistent best when he forgets the figure and concentrates on that curious world of his creation where plants, insects and heavenly bodiesseem interchangeable.

If anything, these works show Booth's command of abstraction, which is something conspicuously absent from his large figurative paintings in recent years.



Sea images fail at the primary level

T IS, I think, the fact that so many of its 33 exhibits fail to offer any genuine visual pleasure which irritates me most about 'Shipwrecked' at 200 Gertrude Street (Fitzroy; ends 20 December).

Curated by Memory Holloway, this exhibition purports to document the way in which many contemporary Australian artists have been moved to explore the image of the ruined ship or raft in their works. The 14 artists the curator has chosen to bear witness to this recurrent image range from the 48-year-old Brian Dunlop to the 22-year-old Andrew Gorsuch.

In both literary and pictorial works of art, the shipwrecked or imperilled boat is an image which has carried a range of significations throughout the centuries. Memory Holloway notes many of these in her lengthy catalogue introduction, yet fails to comment on what the image is likely to suggest to a contemporary audience. Surely we see in the wave-tossed, broken or grounded boat a symbol of the artistic tradition itself.

Holloway's main idea is that in contemporary times the recurrence of this boat or raft signifies a widespread interest in the theme of travel. The 14 artists in 'Shipwrecked', she contends, are all concerned with "the notion of being in passage between Australia and an undesignated place". On one simple and all-too-obvious level, these artists have turned their backs on the local landscape and its familiar sights.

I can see something in all this, but it also troubles me that most of the images Holloway has chosen fail to grapple with the primary level of the theme in any complex or sustained way. If you bother to look closely at contemporary paintings and are able to dwell on their nuances and implications, you are much more likely to find that this interest in travel and mobility is most apparent in the work of abstract or semi-abstract artists. It is in their works that the active human subject is literally in motion.

At a more plausible level, 'Shipwrecked' can be viewed as an exhibition basically concerned with various aspects of the sea. The way clouds shift and mass above a flat and placid sea at evening is explored by Ian Parry in

ART

GARY CATALANO

some of his works here (Parry also contributes one work which deals with an actual shipwreck), while Katherine Hattam's large drawing, 'Adrift Off Melbourne', pictures the placid waters of a bay from an equally placid domestic environment.

The only ominous detail in the latter work is the fireplace in its lower right-hand corner.

I think it is these works, along with those of Chris Dyson and Vic Majzner, which offer the most pleasure in this exhibition.

Rhumbaralla's 'In the tradition of the Heidelberg School 9 by 5 show' is by far the most engaging of the various end-of-year exhibitions currently on view in the commercial galleries (342 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy; ends 22 December), Shukri Girgis, Rhumbaralla's director, and Dynamo House Pty Ltd jointly invited 17 artists to produce works on the tops of tea-chests.

Apart from Sean Loughrey's sequence of 12 works, which progressively creates a more abstract and gestural image based on Gericault's 'Raft of the Medusa', the works in this exhibition are basically light-hearted and convivial ones. Many of these artists originally began their exhibiting careers at Roar, and the charm that their best works possess is clearly attributable to the same set of factors.

You would be hard pressed to find at least one work by any of these 17 which does not picture a fable-like confrontation between animals (or animals and people) and does not employ the simplest and most direct of styles.

I especially liked Stefan Mager's 'Painter with Dog' and John Graham's 'Monkey and the Clown'.

Two further end-of-year exhibitions worth visiting are the stock shows at Tolarno (98 River Street, South Yarra; ends 22 December) and at Niagara (245 Punt Road, Richmond; ends 24 December). The Tolarno show includes two superb paintings by Charles Blackman from the early '50s and a fine recent work by the Sydney painter, John R.Walker.

The flowering of Peter Booth

likely to receive on entering Peter Booth's exhibition at Powell Street (20 Powell St, Sth Yarra; ends 19 December) is that each of the 27 works on display is filled with an incredible energy.

For wherever your eye happens to turn among these drawings, it is generally met by forms which seem as if they have been torn apart from within and are now in the process of exploding outwards with all the force and fierce speed of an erupting volcano. This impression of energy is so overwhelming that it is hard not to resist the appeal of Blake's celebrated apophthegm, 'Energy is Eternal Delight'.

It should be understood that Booth is a lyrical artist in the full sense of the term. At their most characteristic, his works demonstrate the visionary intensity one's perceptions can acquire when one is in the grip of certain transformational states. It is during these states that one experiences the illusion that any object, no matter how transient or insignificant it may be, can adequately represent the totality of the created world. The world we discern in or through a lyrical work of art is always a transfigured world never the commonsensical one.

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ART

GARY CATALANO

become more apparent in recent years, that is largely because he has finally evolved a set of working procedures which are wholly sympathetic to his talents. For a number of years now it has been his practice to visit certain natural places and allow them to initiate (and provide the "studio" for) the bulk of his graphic output. While these drawings rarely picture or represent the places in question, they do seek to convey something of their energy or spirit.

Those viewers who are in the habit of looking closely at exhibitions will quickly acknowledge that Booth has followed this procedure in his current works, for almost all of these 27 drawings contain at least one image which is clearly derived from an observed scene. Whether it be the spear-like tree-stump visible on the right-hand side of catalogue No. 6 (all of these works are untitled) or, indeed, the cactus-like forms which dominate No. 21, these images all underline the fact that Booth's works are



An untitled drawing (catalogue No. 15) by Peter Booth

in a passionate curiosity about the natural world. Any viewer who wishes to appreciate these works fully must first understand this fact. Nature utterly consumes this artist.

The other thing which needs to be emphasised about these works is that in them Booth has made use of three distinct graphic procedures and approaches to form. Booth's inventive fertility is in some measure due to his command of these graphic procedures.

The first and perhaps most immediately identifiable of these three is that sculptural definition of form evident in No. 21 and in some of the charcoal drawings here. Whether they are invented or not, the rounded and modelled forms which we find in these works are clearly tangible entities and are all understood to possess a perceptible weight and volume. For the most part, it is in such weighty drawings that one tends to find Booth's most compellingly mysterious images.

The second procedure which Booth has employed is the antithesis of a sculptural approach, for it is wholly concerned with defining forms simply in terms of their outlines. In some of the works here

some of the gouaches here. One only has to glance at these works in order to see that they have been created by a semi-automatic process, for in them Booth has spontaneously laid down areas of color and then used the resulting configurations to suggest or determine the final form of the work. As No. 16 and No. 24 indicate, the splintery and wedge-like shapes which most of these works contain have been "carved" from their shifting grounds with the aid of a thick black line.

There is much more which could be said about these procedures, but the point that needs to be made here is that each one of them is essential to the articulation of Booth's distinctive vision. Most people still have the impression that Booth's vision is wholly a pessimistic one.

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The second procedure which Booth has employed is the antithesis of a sculptural approach, for it is wholly concerned with defining forms simply in terms of their outlines. In some of the works here the image is actually composed of layers of such outlined or written forms. The tangled and interlacing web of lines (and I think No. 3 is the best example here) which this procedure issues in implicitly affirms not the mysteriousness but the transparency of the world.

The third and final graphic approach is most purely seen in

some of the gouaches here. One only has to glance at these works in order to see that they have been created by a semi-automatic process, for in them Booth has spontaneously laid down areas of color and then used the resulting configurations to suggest or determine the final form of the work. As No. 16 and No. 24 indicate, the splintery and wedge-like shapes which most of these works contain have been "carved" from their shifting grounds with the aid of a thick black line.

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John Ryrie's woodcuts upstairs at Powell St Graphics (ends 18 December) are also necessary viewing, as are Kevin Lincoln's paintings and pastels at Gerst man-Abdallah and "Shipwrecked" at 200 Gertrude St Lincoln's show will be reviewed here on Friday and "Shipwrecked" sometime next week.