

## ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

# A paradox of illusion

**THE TITLE** of Merrin Eirth's first one-person show epitomises some of the qualities of this impressive collection of paintings and drawings.

"Paradise" evokes the richness, the exotic, the medieval which can be seen in the paint qualities and the iconographic and stylistic sources. "Paradox" suggests the intrigue, the ambiguities, the illusions which bind the work together.

Not to mention the poetic ring which promises sound and fury, pomp

## GALLERY

**MERRIN EIRTH - Paradise in Paradox**  
200 Gertrude Street  
Fitzroy

'Til 11 March  
Review: JANINA GREEN

and splendour, but ends up with Miss Piggy, "the Vulgar Boatwoman" or "the Hostess with the Leastest".

Strangely, even though the work is steeped in medieval, naive and primitive conventions, it

very much captures the flavour of the art of the present time. Critics like Craig Owens and Donald B. Kuspit will tell you that artists today are in a historical situation, having access to all past styles, and by turning known principles against themselves they can create an ironic, uncertain effect - promising metaphor and meaning, tantalising and teasing, but not delivering in a focussed, clear way.

They say that artists are recreating a surface rather than generating an intention, presenting "empty organisms" with no consciousness. That what is new about the freedom of post modernism is "the loss of inner necessity". In this show, the seriousness of the central Christian myth is turned into an absurd vaudeville comedy. You can experience the agony and the ecstasy in one hit.

In Eirth's shows you will probably be struck by the stylistic references to Byzantine, Persian, Rajistani and Flemish art, by the pre-Renaissance modesty and awkwardness of the figures, by the way the figures act out many facets of a story in one tableau, by the way the perspective is piled up to flatten the depth of the picture plane and by the frenetic patterning, filling any possible inactive space. The heavily-crowded surfaces have a mesmerizing effect on the viewer.

Merrin Eirth creates a kind of sculptural painting: "a paradox of illusions" is created by painting objects illusionistically into the picture plane. In moments of reflection the sole of a shoe can become the head of Christ. Crushed paper cups, buttons, cigarette butts, metal shavings, cane bag handles and electric jug chords turn into bits of paradise, depending how engrossed your eye gets in the story or how easily it gets disenchanted with the leap of faith.

# Farc

**SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM**  
talks to director  
**Jean-Pierre Mignon (right)**  
about a genre not  
often seen in  
Melbourne.

**"T**HERE are those who will leave, nothing but full latrines behind them". So said Leonardo Da Vinci, and he was right according to the new play at the Anthill Theatre.

*Da Vinci was Right* was written by Roland Topor, a strong figure in contemporary French art but not so well known in Australia.

It is a French farce, a genre not often seen in Melbourne theatre. The style is known for its fast pace and a stream of entrances and exits throughout the performance.

However, as the cast of *Da Vinci* told me, Topor has taken the form of the farce and injected it with new content. While it retains the humour, it also operates at a deeper level.

The plot revolves around a weekend in the country house of Police Commissioner Alan Maroney, who is married to Carol and has a retarded son Robert. There is of course a Swedish maid.

A couple arrive to stay the weekend, the toilet is blocked, and then, to everyone's horror...

But no. As director Jean-Pierre Mignon said, "It would be a pity to remove the mystery from the expectation of the audience."

It might not be giving too much away to quote Christian Manon who plays the police commissioner: "What is to be found is more shocking than corpses."

The cast consists of Ruth Bauer, Gary Field, Christian Manon, Adam Saulwick, Gillian Seamer and Mary Sitarenos - all

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## ART

GARY CATALANO

# Impressive first show in the Beckmann style

**A**LTHOUGH it is more than likely that Merrin Eirth has not been subject to their influence, the paintings and drawings in her show at 200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy (ends 11 March) are strongly reminiscent of both the early 40s paintings of John Perceval and Arthur Boyd and the early 60s works of the Imitation Realists.

Eirth shares with these artists a copiousness, a zest and an abundant and profuse imagination. Her work quite naturally belongs to what is the most vital and enduring strand in our national tradition.

Eirth's large exhibition has the awkward title of 'Paradise in Paradox', and most of its 56 works apparently deal with the central Christian myth of the Fall. She has been strongly influenced by Max Beckmann, one of the few modern masters to concern himself with religious themes.

Beckmann's influence is most apparent in drawings like 'Two Sisters' and the three titled 'Imaginary Column'. In submitting herself to Beckmann's influence, Eirth has inevitably come to pursue the same themes that Beckmann did throughout his career.

Yet something else is also going on here. If you look closely at the drawn and painted figures embedded in these compositions, you soon notice that Eirth's real concerns are sharply at odds with her apparent subject matter.

Her works live most vividly when they contain scenes in which people cuddle pigs, or when they disclose images like winged cats and serpent-prowed boats with wheels at their sides. In short, Eirth's imagination is most engaged by the classical and pre-Christian belief in the unity of all created life. This is her sustaining myth.

This same belief, or something akin to it, has underwritten her extensive use of collage. Eirth has a Leviathan-like passion for incorporating into her works anything that comes to hand, be it an empty paint-tube or a cigarette butt, a coconut shell or an apple core.

I think the range and variety of these affixed elements is significant. Not only does it demonstrate an admirable openness to the world, it also makes her art essentially a reparative one. Here we have a vision explicitly concerned



No. 22 (1985), by Merrin Eirth: an abundant and profuse imagination.

with healing or abolishing divisions.

Eirth handles her collaged or affixed elements in an inventive way. For the most part she rarely uses them in their ordinary state. Thus clumps of fur are roughly daubed with paint, while those empty paint-tubes are half-buried in a thick pelt of pigment.

When this is not the case Eirth will deploy these extraneous things so that they are made to lead a double life. A butterfly paper-clip will form the heart of a rose, a can-opener which sprouts a few metal-shavings will turn into a silver bouquet, and a pair of apple-cores resting in a clump of metal

shavings and placed within a gutted tin-can will become a king and queen seated on their double throne.

The wit, alertness and geniality of these works are hard to avoid, and their presence makes this exhibition a very impressive debut.

**T**O move to Hilarie Mais's sculptures at Christine Abrahams (27 Gipps Street, Richmond; ends 7 March) is to enter a more astringent and recognisable modern artistic world. In contrast to Eirth's show, buoyed as it is, by what are regarded as archaic or vestigial modes of feeling, Mais's 10 objects and seven reliefs all dis-

close a more familiar and acceptable sensibility.

Her reliefs form the stronger part of the show. Like head-dresses, crowns and other ceremonial objects, these works generally present us with a very simple form shaped around an empty, cup-like centre or heart. Although invariably visible, these centres can only be approached with caution, for the shells or forms which enclose them generally bristle with protective studs.

It seems fair to assume that these polychromed objects are vessels of projection. Both inviting and off-limits, they incarnate the ambiguities of sexual alertness. 'South', a tall shield-like object with a group of knobby and spear-like protruberances emerging from its central slit, is the most impressive of these reliefs.

Mais's standing works are less consistently aggressive in their address. Some are reminiscent of art-deco architectural details; others recall exotic fruit or the creations of a master chef.

These works are generally the more inventive in their use of color. Witness 'Manna 2', a circular plane whose centre opens to disclose a stepped void. A very odd tension is set up by the contrast between the light-green plane and the orange and red of the interior space.

**J**OHAN SCURRY'S paintings at Powell Street (20 Powell Street, South Yarra; ends 6 March) are marked by an extreme detachment. These still-life arrangements set in an artist's studio are really non-representational paintings in disguise. Look at the way in which the wall (its plaster-board panels form a grid for everything leaning against it or standing before it) invariably runs parallel to the picture plane, and notice how one's eye is continually directed to the two sides of each work.

Here and there Scurry tries to inject some interest into his arrangements. A pear teeters on the corner of a table, and a half-decayed mynah bird and a paintbrush poke out of a tin-can in one work.

I like 'Box with Red Socks', in which everything is set at a tangent, and 'Red Slipper', the one painting here in which you feel that the artist is actually attached to what he has painted. Scurry looks at things with a very cold eye.