

# A Celebration, Figuratively

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN, July 23 - 24 1985

## ART

Melbourne galleries:

A Celebration: Selected New Works by

Gallery Artists

Realities Art Gallery

Master Prints

Stuart Gerstman Galleries

Bone

200 Gertrude Street Gallery

ROBERT ROONEY

**I**T wouldn't surprise me if the purpose of the exhibition, A Celebration: Selected New Works by Gallery Artists, at the Realities Art Gallery is to pacify those artists for whom there is no room on the gallery's stand at the First Contemporary Art Fair which opens today.

One of the main objections I can see to the Art Fair, particularly among galleries with large stables of artists, is the discontent such a limited representation may breed. We all know what most artists are like in matters of public exposure.

More positive, however, is the chance it gives interstate members of the Australian Commercial Galleries Association to show their wares in Melbourne, although perhaps it would have been more to their advantage if local galleries with large spaces opted to share them with their Sydney or Brisbane counterparts.

As the Art Fair is on for one week only, a comparison between its contents and those of the satellite survey at Realities is not possible. Certain comparisons, however, between A Celebration and the group show at Pinacotheca (reviewed last week) are still in order and, given the reasonable proximity of the two galleries, inevitable.

The works on display at Realities are predominantly figurative, with abstraction as something for older, so-called mid-generation artists to hold on to - David Aspden, David Rankin and John Robinson for example. This rather basic division is also apparent at Pinacotheca, except that there the abstract painting is confined to history rather than representing a continuing concern among artists who made their names in the 1960s and early '70s.

Aspden's *Lands Edge* was shown last month in his weakest show to date, while Rankin's *Between One Art and Another* has a calligraphic economy that is preferable to the chintzy landscape-based paintings in his past solo exhibitions.

Robinson's *Seeking the Way* is a characteristic painting of energised streams that scatter like multi-coloured chaff. Stronger by comparison with all three is John Beard's *Descendants* where semi-figurative forms are suggestive of wet, wrung cloths.

Although some of the figurative works - especially Jan Murray's *Darkness*, a picture of a blank frame and a curtain, and Jan Nelson's pairing of finite and infinite images in *Beauty* - project an air of mystery by means of juxtapositions, most tend to belong to one or



Max Beckman's self portrait of 1917: expressing cool objectivity

more of the stylistic tributaries of recent expressionism, or make visible the artists' personal fantasies.

Typical of the latter is Jon Cattapan's *Hazy Days (Seer)* in which a group of tiny, silhouetted figures appear to be dismantling the large body of a crouching man as if it were an old VW.

Then there is Victor Rubin's *Hat Trick*... a painting where the staginess and wiry outlines are stylistically reminiscent of the post-war French ballet sets for Roland Petit.

In Susan Rankine's *Coming Home* for

*Christmas*, a body-like apron with twin-pocket breasts and a Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer head is surrounded by paintings of nature's networks and images of travel.

**T**his and other works in A Celebration are relics from recent solo exhibitions and, in more than a few cases, a single painting in mixed company is preferable to whole shows of them.

Better than suggesting a type of mixed company

emotionalism consistent with popular notions of German Expressionism, the Master Prints at the Stuart Gerstman Galleries reveal that, in the graphic works of Erich Heckel, Max Beckman and others, everything is under control.

The matting together of Lyonel Feininger's crayon drawing, *A Country Road* (1910), with a 1922 etching of the same title is a good way of proving that time is no barrier to simulated spontaneity. Other comparisons are to be made between Erich Heckel's etching *Am Tisch in Tanzcafe* (1908) and his woodcut *Two Men at the Table* (1913), a subject from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*.

In *Two Men at the Table*, the Art Nouveau-like curves have been blunted by the addition of drypoint, while the woodcut's dramatic contrasts and harsh, angular forms are more in keeping with the hack-it-all primitiveness of early expressionist block prints.

In more than a few cases, one painting in mixed company is preferable to whole shows of them

Drypoint is an ideal technique for Max Beckman's three aggressively incisive comments on German society, but it also is capable of expressing cool objectivity, as in the 1917 self-portrait.

Of all the etchings, perhaps the finest and most striking is Emil Nolde's *Hamburg Reihersstieg* (1910), in which a sailing ship and a big steamer are silhouetted against a wire-wool sky.

Susan Rankine's group show, *Bone*, at the 200 Gertrude Street Gallery is a kind of curate-and-run affair with literary texts by John Ashton, Sam Sejavka and Hugo Race (an extract from his cinenovel *Luther Strong*).

Rankine's contribution is the catalogue cover photo of a splashy Richard Hambleton-like silhouette on a brick wall.

I have read that "bone" is old thieves' slang for "good" or "excellent", but this seems out of place in an exhibition like this. In the Bicentennial year, I'll have to go for "bone" as in "to point the bone at". This is an "issues '88" type of art show that mixes humour, protest and social comment with doses of yawn-making concern.

Against a backdrop of a powerfully elegant poster for the International Year of Peace (1986, in case you forgot), Annette Douglas's cut-out and camouflage steel sculptures demonstrate that, while peace is desirable, war provides the best imagery.

In Kevin Wilson's colour photos, the obscuring of *Australasian Post* cover girls with archaic images of family life focuses one's attention on the marvellous absurdity of the magazine's contents.

Media images of women are also prominent in Bonita Ely's pair of cut-out assemblages in the shape of dresses. In these these works, which remind me a lot of 19th century domestic screens, one image stands out. It is the androgynous figure of Masami Tsuchiya, leader of the

ers of big upheavals at the Aboriginal Arts Board, of Nixon as trouble-shooter, of even of removing the board from the council's jurisdiction. Much of the strife can be g decisions by whites. But the board will lose prestige the council.

t the judges of the Sydney Competition, now rushing climax at the NSW Com, y secret ballot and never ns with each other? The ially considered the most t should be known late ow at 2.30pm you can hear including the winner, dney Opera House.

has been some talk of the Trust changing its name. rently is the word Eliza-osen in the 1950s when the o honour the Queen's first Some say it is no longer Isn't she still Queen? But ut it, perhaps they might sn't so much the name that he institution itself. Surely as left (collecting tax-free r companies, running the d Ballet's Sydney orchestra ws that flop rather often) bed by other organisations. ve some taxpayers' money

press releases on Festival arrived stapled together in nounces the appointment. anager. The second runs to dorse "The Real Version". e announcement followed his position has not existed exist much longer." Most

reader reports that Peter at fine Sunday afternoon am, made quite a boo boo tributed *Madama Butterfly* old have been pleased.

the arts have blossomed in because the country has financially. Young talent is are generously subsidised. a shock at the stimulating l Piano Competition Forum away line from the Soviet that there is now a move- the arts pay for themselves. no way that something like tion without subsidies.

r was rather intrigued at a vision section of two local lity Masterclass". When he d to be the Masterclass for ith Sir Georg Solti - pro-

ossip is that three major after the same part in the an production of Roger ing Broadway musical *Big*

## Film offers statements of magic

REVIEW

Neil Jillett

NEIL JILLETT

Milagro (Russell).

ing sociology student from New York, young, naive and Jewish. Amarante gives Herbie what turns out to be most practical instruction in the correct way to pray to Roman Catholic saints and to observe pagan superstitions.

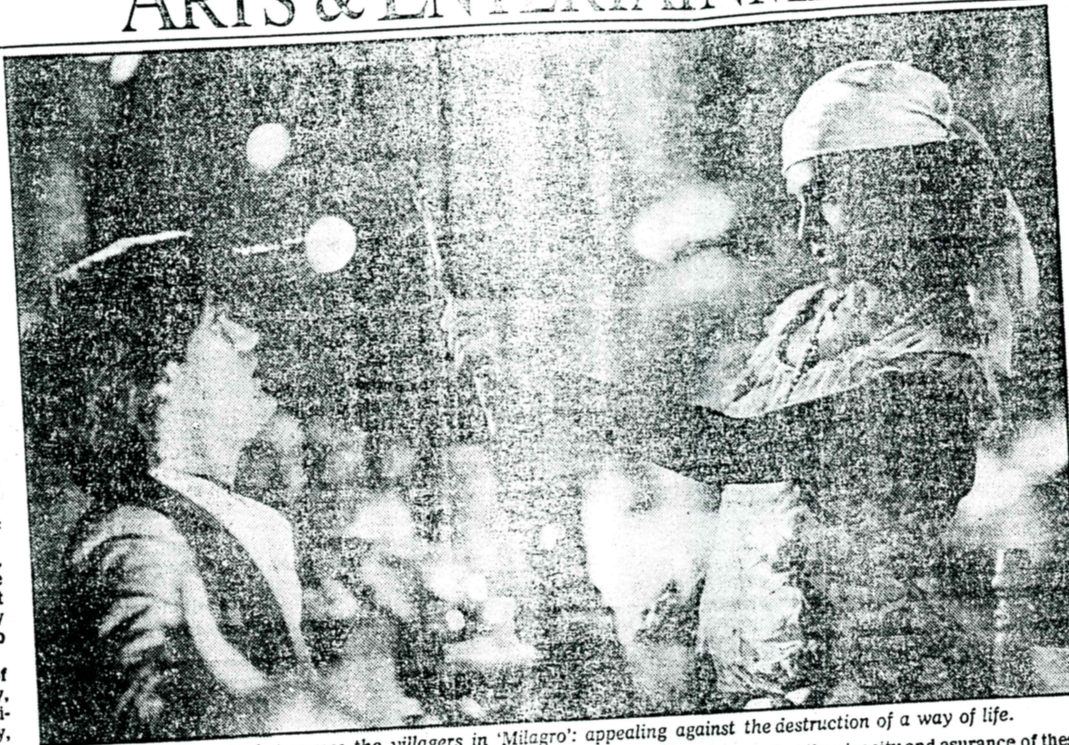
So 'Milagro' is a very mixed bag of ingredients — supernatural and earthy, comic and tragic — and there are political statements threaded into the story, which at one point turns into a gentle parody of an old-fashioned Western.

Redford, here directing for the second time — the first was the Oscar-winning 'Ordinary People' (1980) — is not always at ease with the film's diversity. A violent act is awkwardly used to shape the plot, the final showdown and back-

are muddled, and at some points the film gets sluggish. But Redford does blend fantasy and realism in a way that never succumbs to the potential for tweezeness, and the film glows with an unmaurkish sincerity and an affection for people who love the land they have owned for centuries. Even Dave Grusin, who has written some of Hollywood's sickliest scores, provides bubbling music that is just right.

The cast of minor US stars and big-name Latin American actors give fine individual and ensemble performances, with no attempts at upstaging. The outstanding contribution is by Panamanian singer and lawyer Ruben Blades as Milagro's bemusedly pragmatic sheriff.

As producer-director, Redford really sought to shoot Milagro in a New Mexican town other than the one he eventually used. But the people in the first town, as if reflecting the story in Nichols' novel, turned him down. "I didn't feel bad about it," Redford said; "I kind of admired it, because it was a stand against the obvious profit of a film company. I suspect if I was living there, I'd take the same attitude."



Sonia Braga (Ruby) rouses the villagers in 'Milagro': appealing against the destruction of a way of life.

## Gabrieli Quartet fails to excite

REVIEW

Music

KENNETH HINCE

Gabrieli String Quartet, for Musica Viva (Concert Hall, Tuesday and Wednesday).

NEITHER of these concerts showed the Gabrieli Quartet in peak form. Although I can say how, I am lost for an answer to why; and perhaps it is in the nature of things that this is a question a critic should neither ask nor try to answer.

I heard four of the six works played by the quartet, and in every one you could hear the signs of fine chamber music playing.

The ensemble was firm and stable. There was an air of civility between the parts, and usually a feeling of familial intimacy which is found only in the best chamber music players.

But in only one of the works was there any approach to the tension and excitement which belong not only to fine chamber music but to the performance

of any kind of music.

Significantly, this came at the end of the second program, in the Piano Quintet of Shostakovich, and it seemed to me that the excitement sprang from the quite splendid playing of the pianist Stephen McIntyre, and that the uncanny accuracy of his perceptions of the music dragged the playing of the quartet in its wake like the tail of a comet.

I have rarely heard anything second-rate from McIntyre, but I can remember few things better than this Shostakovich, which was riveting from start to finish. The delicacy and variation of touch were admirable, the weight and balance of tone polished to the last degree of refinement.

The string players gave him decent support in this Quintet, but little more. In the other music their work, while thoroughly expert, was quite unexciting.

They gave Mozart and Haydn, neither the crispness nor sharp edge it deserved. Dohnanyi may have been a case in dispute: it is a dull overlong work, and I suppose you could argue that it would not have been improved by taut forward playing.

Overall, in spite of the fine and practised ensemble, these concerts were an indifferent advertisement for the reputation of the Gabrieli Quartet, marred again by small faults of intonation in each of the voices.

But the vivacity and assurance of these marks tell us something else. For by flowing so easily from the artist, these lines could almost be understood as his signature. This, they say, "is how I identify myself".

## Weighty music in intimate surrounds

REVIEW

Music

CLIVE O'CONNELL

Eric Raymond (Federal Republic of Germany Consulate-General, Wednesday).

THIS young pianist recently came to public notice by winning the inaugural Melbourne Chopin Competition this year. For his Klavierabend, he paid tribute to his hosts with a program of Bach, Schumann and Beethoven in a library of the German consulate.

The two preludes and fugues that Raymond gave from the second book of Bach's 'Well-Tempered Clavichord' worked well in this environment: intimate music in a well-panelled setting. Even more successful was a carefully thought-out reading of the Schumann

'Scenes from Childhood'. This was a splendid realisation of deceptively simple music which Raymond handled with care and a wide expressive range.

Fred Hoyle wrote that a big Beethoven work like the Diabelli variations should be played in nothing larger than a big room, so that the player and listeners are in close contact; the better to communicate the music's weighty vitality.

Raymond gave us the mighty sonata in F minor by Beethoven with a quite unreserved dynamism and strong attack. There were a few flaws, chiefly due to the player's occasional attempts to force the pace. But he clearly has the work under his belt and, with the audience almost sitting at the instrument with him, with every note significantly audible, he coped with pressure as few musicians his age could, displaying energetic aplomb as each problem reared up.

He is a musician to watch. There is a determination about his playing that is attractive and impressive. We will certainly hear more of him.

## Walker calmer and very much cooler

REVIEW

Art

GARY CATALANO

John R. Walker (Tolarno, 98 River Street, South Yarra, until 30 July). Ann Thomson (Australian, 35 Derby Street, Collingwood, until 1 August). 'Bone' (20 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, until 30 July). 'Artisans' George Paton (University of Melbourne Students' Union until 4 August).

THE 13 paintings in John R. Walker's show at Tolarno are a far cry from those with which he made his Melbourne debut at the same gallery three years ago.

Walker's earlier works were intensely romantic and generally dealt with moments of high drama. That Walker wanted us to experience these dramas as nakedly as we could was evident from his handling, for his figures often looked as if they had been flailed on to the canvas.

The current works are noticeably calmer in both their subject and their execution. Indeed, these studio interiors and carefully posed nudes all tell us that Walker's artistic temperature has dropped a good 10 or 15 degrees. His fevers have abated.

Walker is a diligent draftsman. He has a model in two or three days each week and draws for hours, crouching on the floor with a calligrapher's brush in

one hand. Although his current paintings are not produced with the aid of a model, they are in some way deeply concerned with the act of drawing.

They certainly advertise his skills as a draftsman. You only have to glance at 'Snjeza' to see that Walker knows how to translate the three-dimensional nature of the figure into a rhythmic sequence of interlocking curves.

But the vivacity and assurance of these marks tell us something else. For by flowing so easily from the artist, these lines could almost be understood as his signature. "This," they say, "is how I identify myself."

If this is an accurate observation, we can only conclude that Walker is still very much a romantic artist, though one who now refrains from invoking the tragic. In these less feverish days the self declares its presence in another, more subtle, way.

Ann Thomson's exhibition is equally romantic, yet in a far different manner. A semi-figurative artist who studied with Passmore and Olsen in Sydney in the late '50s, Thomson seems wedded to the idea that art must get beyond appearances. In her paintings the world of discrete and clearly apprehended things is replaced by a world forever in flux.

Anyone cognisant of the taste of the late '50s is likely to experience a strong sense of *deja vu* on viewing her show: the works on paper, with their horse-and-rider configurations, naturally summon up echoes of Marino Marini, while the feathered presence in the top left of 'Dream Cargo' reminds us that 30 years ago Sydney had a gallery which was largely devoted to Sepik Art. Ann Thomson is very much an artist of her time.

Her large paintings, if only because of their shifting and indeterminate space, are much more successful than her smaller works on paper. The sense of mystery they allude to may just be credible.

Neither 'Bone' nor 'Artisans' are of great moment. The first, which was created by Susan Rankine and allegedly brings together art which opposes the local mainstream, is simply of sociological interest. If skill and imagination are at work here, their presence escapes me.

Skills, it must be said, are also largely absent from the inappropriately named 'Artisans', though not the imagination. Of the five installations it contains, I was most intrigued by Anne MacDonald's and Sean Kelly's 'Eros/Thanatos' and by the sort of grotto created by Geoff Lowe and Stephen Bush. Times being what they are, both projects are of course concerned with representation.

That subject, I must say, has little interest for me, but who am I to argue against the times? Dare I dam: Derrida?