

ROBERT ROONEY

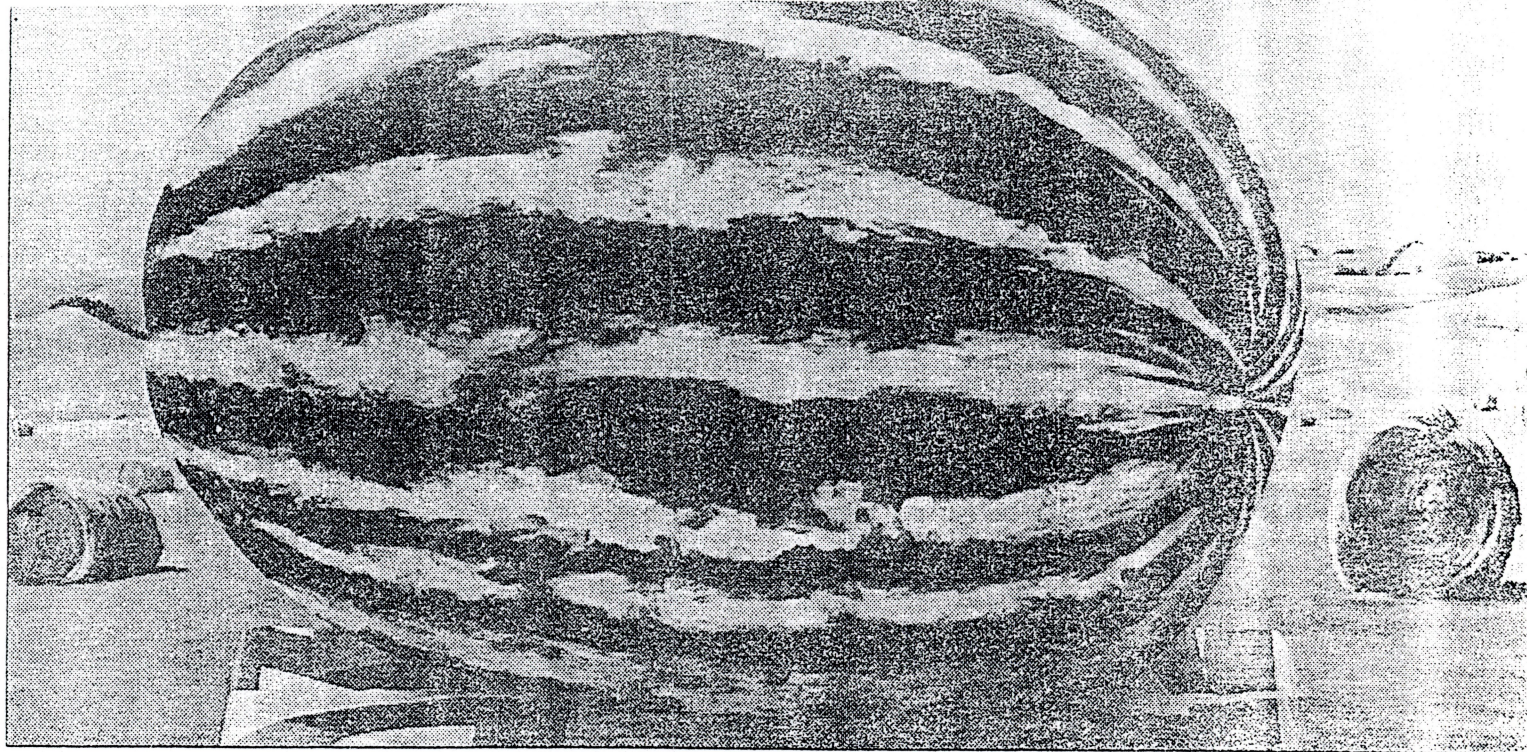
"IF ONLY we could make them breathe," a taxidermist is quoted as saying in the introduction to *Still Life* by Diane Keaton and Marvin Heiferman. The book's title is deceptive, because it is a collection of "promotional colour stills made on and around the movie sets from the '40s to the '70s", and not the expected photographs of carefully arranged flowers, bowls of fruit, jars and bottles.

Keaton says that the photographs she and co-author Heiferman have selected remind her of "those strangely beautiful dioramas at the Museum of Natural History. There's something eerie about trying to recreate life with stuffed animals displayed in nice boxes. It's extremely jarring: nothing at all like anything remotely resembling life".

The painted backgrounds are, of course, meant to look lifelike and suggest the creatures' natural habitats but they always end up looking artificial. By the same token, the carefully posed Hollywood stills are supposed to represent real people, yet they resemble wax-works. There is no sense of movement in their actions and often no easily identifiable reason for the stilled encounters from films such as *Clean's* *Il*, *Susan Slade* and *Parrish*.

Like Keaton, we are also inclined to believe that the "real life" portrait of Lassie on Astro turf could easily be a photograph of the famous canine star's stuffed hide. It is the short life and artificiality of these photographs that makes them fascinating. As one studio publicity director once said: "Our product spoils like fresh fruit."

Still on the subject of films and still life, a couple of weeks ago I was watching *Flight to Mars* on television. As the plot and acting in this 1951 science fiction cheapie were routine, I found myself taking more notice of sets and, in particular, several still-life arrangements in offices in certain early scenes. I was reminded of film director Ridley Scott's remark



Stephen Bush's *Melon* . . . irony through heightened, technicolour realism

that "there are certain moments in movies where the background can be as important as the actor. The design of a film is the script".

By an odd coincidence, a sequence from Ridley Scott's futuristic film, *Blade Runner*, is the inspiration for *Quiddity* (*A Still Life Exhibition*) organised by Louise Neri at the 200 Gertrude Street Gallery. The sequence, in which Harrison Ford uses a computerised terminal to study a holographic snapshot, is seen by Neri as a contemporary metaphor for quiddity — "the essence of a thing, what makes a thing what it is". It is represented in the catalogue by a film still, in whose detailed interior one finds references, not only to still life but to the tiled floors of Dutch interiors and the open doorways in Victorian genre paintings. (The future as the past?)

Quiddity holds together better than most group exhibitions I have seen at 200 Gertrude Street. (It is certainly better than the recent *Gothic* show). There are some works in Neri's selection, which are good in themselves. Therefore, it is not essential for the viewer to

worry whether they possess the "quality of Thing" or "trifling nicety" suggested by alternate definitions of the show's title.

Stephen Bush's work is always interesting. In his painting, *Melon*, a gigantic watermelon threatens to obliterate the surrounding rural landscape. His painting style is a sort of heightened, technicolour realism but the picture has all the artificiality of the interiors among the stills in Keaton's book. *Everything it takes to make you happy* is another of Bush's monochrome grey paintings of men and machines. This time the photographically rendered scene depicts a model prototype of a car (the future Holden?), which takes precedence over the tractor, a symbol of rural prosperity in Bush's work.

Neri states that Bush's ironical still-life paintings recall "something of the sardonic documentary films made by Robert O'Falherty about propaganda of the 'New Deal' in rural North America during the 1920s". To my knowledge, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policy of economic reconstruction originated in 1932, and not the

1920s. Also, I know of no film by O'Falherty which could be described as a sardonic documentary on New Deal propaganda. Weren't they straight contributions to it?

Roslynd Piggott's recent solo exhibition was among the best I have seen so far this year. What impressed me was the subtlety of her fantastic paintings and drawings, and their strength and delicacy. I was struck by the originality of her personal vision: its strangeness and moment of quiet humour. The latter can be seen in the painting, *Eyelashes, Jewel and a Part of Paris*, in which a group of eyelashes are stripped of their exaggerated elegance and become creepy-crawlies.

In Piggott's *Glasses of Water* the images of glasses and liquid, and the fragile wooden shelves on which they rest, seem doomed to evaporate before our eyes. The delicate balance between structure and transparency, the solid and the hardly visible are recurring features of her work.

David Jelton is said to be a fervent admirer of Raymond Roussel's literary methods — his "rigor, precision and obsession for detail"

— which is probably why the magical image of a symmetrical polyhedron on a draped cloth in *Traps for Young Players* is painted in a bland, grubby realist manner, much as Roussel's descriptions of fantastic contraptions are written in a style resembling an instruction manual. Structure and an obsession with detail are also part of Nick Mourtzakis's frosty *Still Life and Sphere*.

The paintings of Elizabeth Newman are an almost Minimalist exploration of her studio environment, while Rosen O'Dwyer takes "previously conceived images", such as Constable's *Wivenhoe Park, Essex 1816-1817*, and represents them in a combination of maps and models. Rozalind Drummond's photographic series, *The Villa of Mysteries*, isolates in separate pictures the dark images of a skull, a bowl of fruit and other symbols of the transience and uncertainty of life found in the *Vanitas* type of still life. As for Amanda Ritson's over-blown painting, *Cold Storage Grapes*, it reminds us again that nothing "spoils like fresh fruit . . . you get no second chance".

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

REVIEWS

Final triumph of bourgeois taste

Art

GARY CATALANO

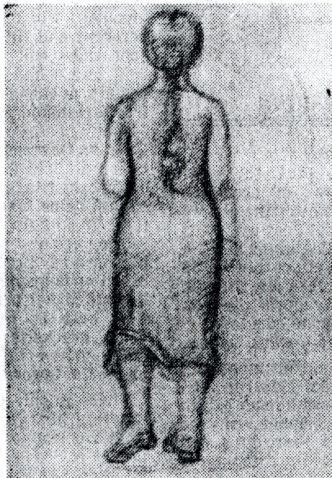
French Masters of the XIXth and XXth Centuries (Tolarno, 98 River Street, South Yarra.); **Quiddity** (200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy; until 11 July); **Clive Stratford** (Roar, 115 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy; until 12 July); **Sean Loughrey and Ewen Coates** (Girgis & Klym, 342 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy; until 14 July); **Three Artists** (70 Arden Street, North Melbourne; until 10 July)

I DO NOT suppose many viewers will be surprised on finding that almost every drawing in Tolarno's 'French Masters of the XIXth and XXth Centuries' is notable for its relaxation and ease of execution.

Such qualities are, after all, the ones you naturally expect to find in most drawings. This expectation is doubly strong, however, when the drawings in question happen to be those of French artists from the years covered by this exhibition. The period which saw the final triumph of bourgeois taste was also one in which relaxation and ease were valued above all other aesthetic qualities.

It may pay you to keep this observation in mind when you view the exhibition. If nothing else, it partly explains the fact that so many of these works are basically statements about the nature of visual pleasure. In these works we can sense that the objective world, far from being valued for the ideas to which it may give rise or the states of consciousness it may induce, is primarily appreciated because of the sensations it generates.

The two drawings which most interested me were Bonnard's 'Femmes en promenade' and a Maillol drawing



Detail from 'Jeune fille a la tresse vue de dos', by Aristede Maillol.

which depicts a striding girl seen from the back. If the contrast between these two works is an easy one to make (one of the two full-length figures in the Bonnard is also seen from the rear) it also happens to be a telling one, for it neatly illustrates the different ways in which painters and sculptors see the world.

Where the dress in the Bonnard hangs down like a sack and is casually raked with horizontal and diagonal lines which, one imagines, are primarily intended to convey the way in which its fabric shifts and stretches in response to the movement of the figure, that in the Maillol follows the contours of the body and accentuates the figure's actual form.

But the most telling contrast between these two figures concerns the attention given to their feet. On the basis of the scruffy marks with which he has rendered them, Bonnard would seem hardly to have thought of such details, but Maillol has carefully specified the lift of his figure's raised foot and the angle it establishes with the ground.

While it could be countered that such registrations should be part-and-parcel of any sculptor's drawing, their occurrence in the Maillol determines the empathy we feel for his figure. She, after all, exists in a bodily world; the Bonnard, by contrast, is just a thing seen.

TALK OF things naturally leads me to 'Quiddity', an exhibition which purports to deal with the still life. Those who have read philosophy will probably remember that quiddity was a term employed by some scholastic philosophers in order to describe the essence of a thing. That which makes an apple an apple is, so to speak, its quiddity.

As I habitually keep both feet on the ground I can't profess to appreciate these metaphysical subtleties, but I do know that a concept almost identical to quiddity has long been central to how we think about the modern arts. Whenever a writer employs the term "the thing itself" he is, wittingly or not, referring to the notion of quiddity.

Just as most of the works in the exhibition can hardly be called still lifes, so few could be said to illustrate the notion of quiddity. Indeed, some show us the very reverse of quiddities.

The glaring examples of this are Rolin O'Dwyer's paintings, most of which show landscapes staffed by toy animals and buildings, and Stephen Bush's 'Every Thing It Takes To Make You Happy'. The latter painting depicts two white-coated technicians making plas-

ter models of a car and a tractor in the open air. Whatever models are, they are not quiddities.

The best works in this show are, I think, Nick Mourtzakis's 'Still Life' and Rosslynd Piggott's 'Glasses of Water'. Both paintings are outstanding and give the exhibition whatever distinction it possesses.

THE THREE other exhibitions reviewed here offer intermittent pleasures. I remember half-liking some of the paintings in Clive Stratford's previous show but fear his work has gone backwards in the past two years. His current paintings, which deal with the bush, do not convey any strong sense of engagement with the thing itself.

Sean Loughrey and Ewen Coates are both in their early twenties and are consequently still finding themselves as artists. Loughrey may be doing so with some rapidity, for there seems a real painter about to emerge in the two works titled 'Gestural Reference'. The tangled and coiling swathes in these two works have a genuine vigor and elan.

While Robyn Burgess's four large drawings are clearly the best things in the Arden Street show, many viewers may respond more immediately to some of Peter Simpson's paintings and pastels of the West Gate Bridge. They may also stand agape before Slobhar Ryan's five large paintings. I can't say I like these extravagant and over-complicated paintings, all of which clearly indicate that Ryan is throwing herself headlong into something.

Where, you may wonder, will it lead? Goodness knows. But as she is shortly to go to Spain, let her enjoy herself while she can. The bone-hard realism of Spair and its art will chasten her more effectively — and more enjoyably — than can.