

This exhibition brings together the work of six artists, not too obviously linked and yet I sense between them a sharing of as much common as uncommon ground. Meaning is as precariously balanced in curatorial as in artistic practice and the proof of this pudding will be in the eating. My nose says the ingredients are special.

I generally prefer to conceive an exhibition from the work outwards rather than from a theoretical framework inwards. However, the provocation of a specific idea can also act as the catalyst for a powerful exhibition. This one emerged from an experiential base; vividly remembering Debra Phillips' *Colonization of Time-X* steel framed cibachromes at Artspace in 1990, Nicole Ellis' *Arrested Sites* at Hyde Park Barracks Museum in 1993, Martin Sims' *Inkwell* at Ivan Dougherty Gallery in 1993 and *Spectre* at The Tin Sheds Gallery in 1995, Rosemary Laing's *brownwork # 1* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in *Photography is Dead! Long Live Photography!* in 1996, Graham Kuo's *The Golden Route* at Rex Irwin earlier this year, and Virginia Coventry's *Here and There: Concerning the nuclear power industry* at the 1979 Biennale of Sydney.

Graham Kuo's paintings unite at least two worlds, his birthplace China and his chosen destina-

tion Australia; the *From Coral, From Jade* works on plywood and those in progress on canvas in *sextet* encompass a purposeful conflict between free forms and structured traces from a mechanical grid, two worlds potentially in conflict. Yet this is Kuo's understanding of Buddhism in practice: in order to know different levels of softness, you must know hardness. He believes that life in itself is a mistake; that you must learn by it.

He has developed in his painting a methodology consistent with a fertile cultural cross-pollination that has quite recently realised, as Kuo articulates, an integrated understanding from a potentially bifurcating background. "These works deal with the inspirations and influences of the two distinct places and cultures which inform my life, and were painted in response to extensive travels throughout China and visits to the Great Barrier Reef in 1996. On revisiting China I recognised that much of my work displayed a uniquely Chinese sensibility while maintaining an entirely Western format and embracing the saturated colours of Australia; the *Golden Route* works, for the first time, consciously combined these elements of calligraphy, gesture and composition." *Change is the only constant* is a well known Buddhist saying: this artist manages to arrest a moment in which all his worlds unite.

There are a number of artists, generally female, whose practice is cyclical, emanating from rhythms ranging from the bio-

logical to the diurnal; I think immediately of Hanne Darboven and Miriam Cahn, and I think too of Virginia Coventry. Her recent works appear so fresh and yet superficially continue a tried and true open grid structure. Their freedom and intimacy are a result of their real consciousness of self, as opposed to the embodiment of gesture.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* opened a door for the artist in terms of understanding an "ongoing relationship with pre-language cognition. My own experience of the dance of drawing and painting, i.e. as embodied, was now able to be brought into language; having a way of thinking about what I was doing in drawing and painting offered me a way out of the cul de sac of the essentialist language of and about abstract expressionism's use of gesture as some sort of momentarily significant ego-trace."

These paintings and drawings connect with an eternal rhythm an unending stroke that unites comprehension and unfolding, and as effectively as a spider spinning its web. They are a true embodiment of presence.

Nicole Ellis' ability is to reveal, through the stripping off of layers of floor surfaces from industrial and work sites, a true savant's understanding of what has been trodden underfoot and trodden on. Her work elevates the generally unremarked and for most unremarkable floor droppings of woolsheds, sewing rooms or artists' studios to a

status of equivalent interest to any other arrested image. As John Forbes wrote in 1993, "Nicole Ellis' new work continues her pre-occupation with the way we create hierarchies of attention."

Other artists of renown, such as the late Tadeusz Kantor, who brought his Cricot Theatre production of *The Dead Class* to Adelaide and Sydney in the 1970s and had work in the 1979 Sydney Biennale, shared a concern, in his words, "to emphasize objects of the lowest rank, meaningless, without hierarchy or chronology," as well as "the locating of ambition to create near the zero point."

Nicole Ellis does not so much, in this major series of acrylic floor 'liftings', glorify labour and industry as bring a remarkable and focused dignity to daily work wherein 'waste not want not' has real meaning and gravitas, and through her chosen medium are preserved precious traces of working lives in their architectural sites. Graham Forsyth wrote in 1994, "As opposed to the artist as transcendent eye, bringing everything under her control, even Ellis' method of working, patiently scraping the back of what will be the resulting paintings from the floor, presents us with another form of image-making, which is ultimately tactile, embodied, blind but not unaware."

The artist's interest in the generally unacknowledged presence of female workers in the woolsheds is another example of her determination to painstakingly yet

often poetically establish for our understanding another body of suppressed knowledge.

Martin Sims' art might, with some justification, be termed peripatetic. His creative wanderings produce work in a remarkable variety of manifestations; welded metal, clay and ink, stone, steel, marble, aluminium, glass, wood, scaffolding, found objects, and now an assemblage of water filled plastic traffic barriers. Yet there is an underlying coherence and sense of purpose in these journeys. Maybe it was his training in England at the Royal College and at Chelsea School of Art that instilled in him, like some other sculptors from that part of the world, an unerring sense of the appropriate adaptability of all manner of pre-existing industrial and utilitarian objects, and also an iconoclastic attitude towards materials used in the making of sculpture. A recent Tony Cragg exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales reveals work that clearly articulates this understanding.

Jackie Dunn wrote tellingly of *air pressure*, a large installation of scaffolding with discarded satellite dish and emanating white noise at Sydney's Artspace earlier this year: "Our 'modern neurosis' then, for Sims, is to be marked out and opposed wherever possible and if that place of resistance, if that impossible possibility still exists within the art space, then well and good. (That art space might begin to fall, to crack under pressure; and the walls come tumbling down...)"

Sims uses a broad vocabulary, demanding of an observer, as there is little repetition; an unassertive structural underpinning creates work at the very edge of meaning; and yet throughout is a certain intractability, the continuity of balanced and serious understanding, that the alternative to status quo can, at the same time be everyday and uplifting, reassuring and challenging.

Rosemary Laing's industrial based *brownworks* focus on transport, travel, freight; her *greenworks* (what prosaic titles) on travel, sight and simulation. The latter in the artist's words, form part of a recurring theme the work: "how the terrain of technology shifts and alters our perceptual relationship to landscape... landscape here at times is metaphorical and taken to its broadest sense." This series preceded *brownwork*, the first image of which at the MCA I referred to earlier, of an air freighter with its nose opened to receive... a javelin from a perfectly poised female javelin thrower. The symbolism hardly needs explaining; it is a remarkably compelling image.

The two large colour photographs in this exhibition continue this series which began from living under the flight path "I was being seduced by the continuous roar of aeroplanes lapping above my head, brain washed by the continuous reminder of numerous invisible journeys to 'elsewhere' - of my own next plane flight, email, telephone call, cathode flicker..

going for baroque

the owl of minerva flies only at twilight G.W.F Hegel

all from or to somewhere else..." The interior of a 747 freighter with the presence of a suspended surreal abseiler is a very special image, for it is the 'inner depths' that are revealed to us, as ominous and tantalising as witnessing a device deep within Stelarc on video monitors, as confronting as a close up of the uterus or anal passage. In some strange way I am also reminded of the church interiors of Pieter Saenredam, the Dutch seventeenth century master. The second work, a freight terminal corridor in reverse perspective with two distant figures, plays with the artist's notion "that the space of the journey between the parcel's departure and arrival is also invisible - it disappears outside of our immediate range of vision and like a magician's trick reappears at its proposed elsewhere." Like Jeff Wall in that remarkable large photograph of a gust of wind dispersing bits of paper in a landscape, Rosemary Laing's megapictures freeze memory before it arrives. Hobbema's avenue of trees weirdly surfaces; *brownworks* spread their net.

Debra Phillips' *Colonization of Time-X* consisted of eight large cibachromes in steel frames utilising images from Australia's colonial history placed in disturbing infernos and night skies pierced by a cross on fire or in relief; they are at one and the same time quite beautiful and utterly seductive yet frightening and time warping as the fullness of their title implies. Graham Forsyth wrote of the series, it "allows one to see her work as

essentially one of resistance to a society such as ours, based on unmediated closeness, dominated by the collapse of all times into the present and all places into a here."

In this exhibition are works from two different series. One, *Untitled*, is of surveyors markings on pavements and roads for gas and other intrusions; a surgeon's markings before the cut, the incision. It is strange how tantalising can be such seemingly simple notations and yet so often throughout history the most sordid and reprehensible departures have been identified by the simplest and plainest of markings. Much of Phillips' work seems concerned with human traces, the shadows of presence that in their silence are eternal. The *Centennial Avenue* photographs, almost effaced and disembodied, the absolute reverse of pure spectacle, nevertheless provide such tangible evidence of what has been removed, in fact from the house of a friend's grandmother, that the viewer is as close to that loss, that departure as is humanly possible. This mind you, is not delivered on a plate, for unless you allow your perception time to engage, reciprocity will be withheld. But as this artist devotes attention to the often invisible, transgressing conventional observation in the process, so these microcosms become universal.

This is, indeed, a pudding fit for a fine palate.

Nick Waterlow

Hegel's cryptic aphorism is as true at the end of the Twentieth Century as it was at the beginning of the Nineteenth. Any kind of coherent understanding of the age we live in is impossible. It is only with the passing of time that an epoch starts to take shape, to congeal into a kind of form that Minerva, the patroness of history, would recognise as meaningful historical knowledge. Thus the present moment is always messy, uncertain, pluralistic, unstable and chimerical whereas the immediate past is (comparatively) orderly, rational and comprehensively interconnected such that its most distant and contradictory features and events can be read in relation to some grand 'orchestral' score.

That is to say the present is always, in a sense, *baroque* and the (recent) past is always *classical*. We locate ourselves in the world through a process of negotiation between the openness of one and the finality of the other.

Of course the logic of the past is not something that is imminent in behaviour or events; rather it is something that is imposed through complex processes of debate, analysis, contestation, inclusion and omission. Disparate currents are trimmed and cropped until they produce a coherent narrative held together by *Zeitgeist*, somehow construed.

The very fact that everybody that one is likely to meet in the 'art-world' (with the exception of a few elderly conservatives whose opinions are of no interest) is confident that they know what postmodernism is, is, in itself, evidence that

postmodernism is no longer of the present; that its centrifugal energies have dissipated and that it has ceased to live everywhere except in the bowels of the more slow-witted advertising agencies and on the drawing boards of second-rate property developers. The very fact that we understand postmodernism so well is compelling evidence that it is no longer pertinent to the cultural landscape in which we live or, in a more specialised domain, to the works of art that are being produced and shown in the mid to late nineties.

Art critics frequently compete to label new trends which emerge after significant shifts in the cultural terrain and, again, it is only in the twilight that the winners are announced. Thus in the middle of the last decade of the millennium those of us who retain an interest in contemporary art have been asked to weigh the competing claims of, variously, 'scatterology', 'retro-pop', 'grunge', 'post-theory', 'informe', 'abject art' and 'new subjectivity'. All of these terms mean something but it's a safe bet that most of them will not mean for long.

It makes little sense to attempt to locate significant epochal shifts with too much precision, as if, that is, the entire planet ceased to subscribe to postmodern relativism at a particular moment in a manner similar to that in which they might choose to celebrate, say, the dawn of a new year or of a new millennium. Nevertheless 1989, the year in which the Berlin Wall was breached, can be conscripted as a rhetorical marker of changes within the western world that are of more than passing or parochial interest.

The structural re-configuration of late capitalism which commenced

in the early eighties had, by the end of the decade, led to a more inequitable redistribution of wealth at both micro and macro levels. Coupled with global recession this resulted in the emergence of chronically impoverished populations outside the most powerful industrial nations and new underclasses within them. In countries such as America (and, it would also appear, Australia) the disintegration of the Soviet empire removed the source of a presumptive threat which had been used to divert attention from, justify, or mask these structural changes. This resulted in the alternative demonisation of minority or disenfranchised groups. In the United States, for example, certain artists with a penchant for 'obscene' or 'blasphemous' imagery were constructed as an 'enemy within' and the country as a whole moved further towards a class society divided on the basis of race. Closer to home, Asian migrants and Aborigines have been singled out for particular abuse, social services are abolished or recast as 'charity' and Tertiary education is being rejiggered to offer the children of the wealthy a sanctuary from the dispiriting world of youth unemployment.

The buoyant years of the eighties when so many artists managed to fabricate themselves as both entrepreneurs and cultural revolutionaries, the days when an artist's maturity was marked by the appearance of their work on a wall in the background of an article in *Vogue Living*, now seem very remote indeed. State funding for the arts has declined and is threatening to decline further and a generation of Yuppie patrons have long since curtailed their investment in cultural capital.

The six artists in CoFAS 1997 Faculty Show are aged between thirty-eight and fifty-five. They are neither 'emerging' artists nor elderly ones. They have each in their own way established their own range of concerns and their own formal languages but they are all long way yet from that stage where they might wish simply to 'fine tune' a lifetime's work. They are mid-career artists who matured under late modernist or postmodernist regimes and who are in the own different ways successfully making art that can still move, delight or confound gallery visitors at the end of the century.

That they can still do this may be due in no small part to the fact that they are all dedicated teachers as well as practitioners. Of course all art teachers complain that teaching never leaves them with enough time for their own work and no doubt this is true; however teaching - which forces those who might otherwise be solitary to be gregarious, and which produces an ongoing confrontation with the expectations of younger generations - serves to check any inclination towards either complacency or towards the kind of maudlin and paralysing cynicism that time as confusing as ours can otherwise so easily foster.

To paraphrase an Italian philosopher, our own particular 'baroque moment demands of our artists that 'pessimism of the intellect' be tempered with an 'optimism of the will'. The exuberance and sophistication of the work in this faculty show demonstrates that the participants are well aware of this.

David McNeill
School of Art History and Theory

list of works

artists

The artists are faculty members at the School of Art at the College of Fine Arts; they exhibit widely and are well represented in major collections and publications

Virginia Coventry

Interval 1995
acrylic on polyester
152.5 x 244cm

Perspectiva Naturalis 1995
acrylic on polyester
244 x 152.5 cm

Four drawings for J.E. 1996
silverpoint on acrylic on rag
paper
each 18 x 13.5 cm

Untitled (Porous) 1, 2 1996
silverpoint, pencil on acrylic on
rag paper
each 24 x 34.5 cm

Nicole Ellis

Site Work 7 #1 1995
acrylic paint, acrylic emulsion,
paper, found paint, machine oil
271 x 268 cm

Site Work 8 #1 1995
acrylic paint, acrylic emulsion,
paper, found paint, machine oil
271 x 273 cm

Pink Slip 1997
acrylic paint, acrylic emulsion,
found paint, cardboard
13.5 x 27.5 x 26.5 cm

Graham Kuo

From Coral, From Jade
11, # 16 1997
oil, acrylic on plywood
each 25 x 35 cm

From Coral, From Jade
12 - # 15, # 17 1997
oil, acrylic on plywood
each 35 x 25 cm

Work in progress 1997
seven panels
oil, acrylic on canvas
each 30 x 30 cm

Rosemary Laing

Brownwork # 8, # 9 1997
photograph
each 120 x 250 cm

Debra Phillips

Untitled 1 1997
18 black and white photographs
mounted on aluminium
100 x 150 cm

Untitled 2 1997
16 black and white photographs
mounted on aluminium
100 x 150 cm

Centennial Avenue 1 - 6 1997
black and white photographs &
gesso on wood frame
each 37 x 37 cm

Martin Sims

Sea Level 1997
street barriers and charcoal
dimensions variable

sextet

4 - 13 September 1997

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Nick Waterlow

CURATORIAL ASSISTANT
Dominique Nagy

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Irene Scortis

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DOUGHERTY
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VIRGINIA
COVENTRY

NICOLE
ELLIS

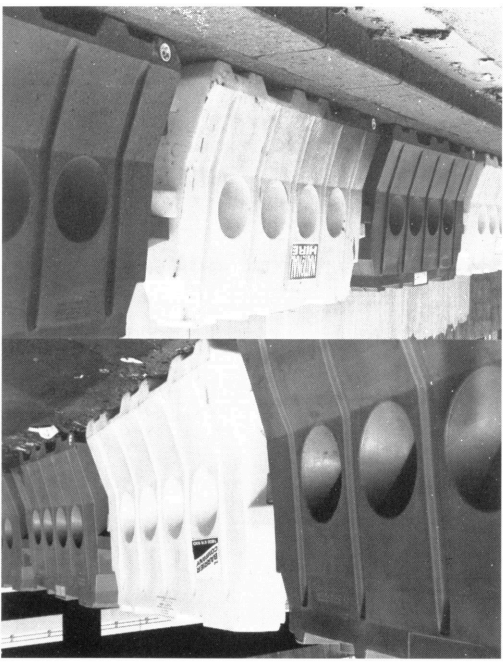
GRAHAM
KUO

ROSEMARY
LAING

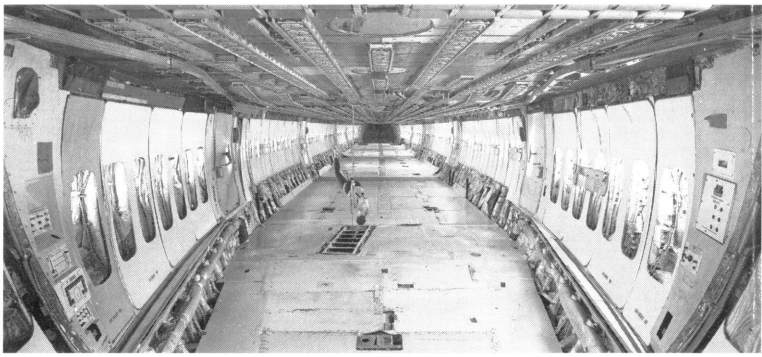
DEBRA
PHILLIPS

MARTIN
SIMS

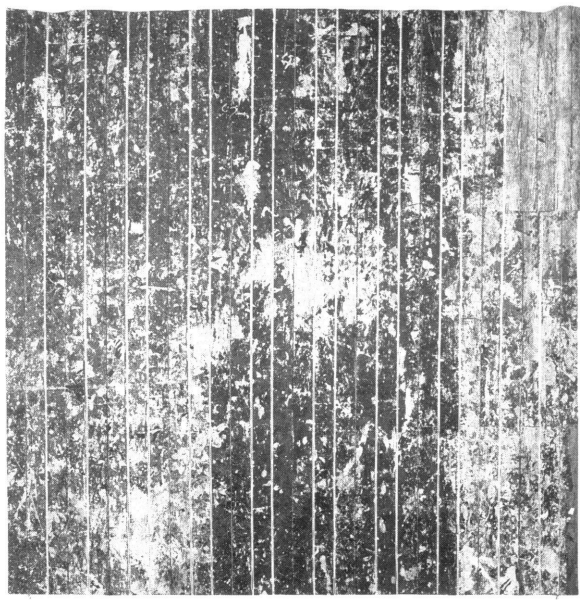
sextet



martin sims
sea level 1997



rosemary laing
brownwork #9 1997



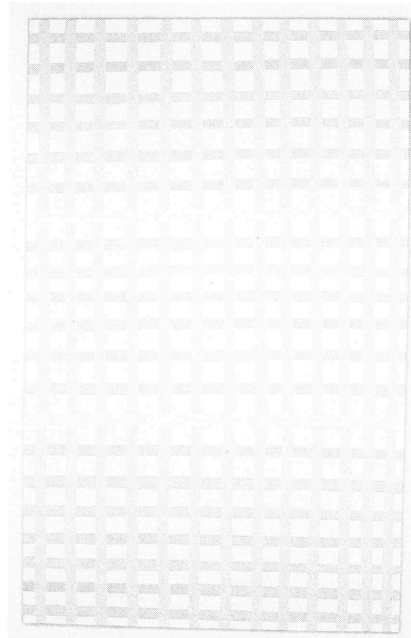
nicole ellis
work #8 1995



debra phillips
untitled 1 1997



graham kuo
from coral, from jade #17 1997



virginia coventry
spectra naturals 1995