

Escape to the world of subtlety

ANNE FERRAN
— PHOTOGRAPHS
"Scenes on the
Death of Nature"
Australian Centre for
Contemporary Art
Dallas Brooks Drive,
South Yarra
Until April 19
Review:
JANINA GREEN

GALLERY

TO ENTER Anne Ferran's installation is to enter a commemorative tomb celebrating the esoteric idealist poetics of Julia Kristeva and Lucy Irigaray, French Feminists who are known for their exploration of female sexuality and their description of female pleasure.

Anne Ferran's funerary artifacts, three pedestals and four large glassed-in freize-like photographs of draped and reclining young women set in the stillness of the archaic world, provide an elegaic hymn on the death of unspoilt uncorrupted "nature": an ideal of the

classicizing tradition. "Nature" — the beautiful young woman — the modern Kore.

Using Winckelan's ancient advice, "The only way to become great is to immitate antiquity", Ferran cloaks her photographs with the elevating aura of classicism.

This is not an exhibition for the uninitiated. It is intellectual, theory-based, elitist and puzzling. Much of the work's interest comes from the intellectual ramifications — the catalogue notes, Adrian Martin's enthusiastic essay in Photofile, the feminist fervour in the Sydney scene, the aesthetic problems of new photography, and so on. And it exercises your ability to battle aesthetic mystification.

On a formal level, the scale of the four large photographs is commanding. The composition of figures and drapery under even lighting controls and consolidates light and dark tonal qualities which



makes the forms look like marble reliefs.

The matt charcoal surface of the photographic paper adds to the look of refinement and quality. The tableaux stillness of the poses refer both to early photographic tradition and to the cameras ability to "kill" the image in recent writings.

On a banal level, the models can be seen to look like bored, boarding school girls, dutifully acting out scenes from classics lessons.

Ferran's directs her adolescent models in overtly "passive and unresistant" poses, pushing the idea to its limits so that the work is almost a

kind of celebration of passivity and compliance rather than an examination of it. Regretfully the ironies and ambiguities in "Scenes On the Death of Nature" seem too subtle to subvert conservative readings. What this suggests is the artists preference to escape from mundane political action to an idyllic "other" place.