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Life still in the still-life

EXHIBITIONS with special themes seem to bring out either the best or worst in artists and promoters.

I recall a bizarre show during the Sixties for which painters were required to paint only about the local wine scene; abstract artists abandoned their normal obscurities for the occasion in favor of showing pioneer wine-makers peering hopefully at the red in glass tulips; landscape painters did their usual thing with the clouds, but with a famous winery highlight in a break through the Hunter Valley cumulus.

Official theme shows since have been just as hilarious, because more pretentious. Artists are often selected specially to endorse some curator's idea of what the fashion is, was, ought to be.

Powell St. Gallery (South Yarra) has a better idea. The directors have invited 26 artists to show a still life or interior. Lots of flexibility, just as much as for the landscape theme this gallery had some time ago. And no need for artists to cook up something they would not normally paint.

For any such show to look good, variety and quality are the key words. So, at Powell St., no boring conformity of style, no obvious weak links or artistic passengers.

The artists here are given a sensible latitude with the

Art

By RONALD MILLAR

John Scurry's still-life at the Powell St. Gallery.

categories. Does Bob Jenyns's witty little cutout of Kevin Bartlett's footy sweater qualify as still-life? If not, then what is it? Guy Stuart has two large portraits, one (the man) very fine; they are both posed indoors: interiors.

Geoff Lowe, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, does a dry and anti-heroic analysis of a skull, with medical labelling. Skulls are traditional; but this year, death is really in.

John Scurry's careful studio composition works on associations — cactus, succulent pear, skeleton — but compresses the shallow space between furniture and wall in a peculiar way.

Fran Van Reimsdyk's grey work looks like an ancient excavation-site.

Westwood's exotic bulbs are dead-pan specimens stuck out of context against a blank wall; and Peter Ellis (Kitchen Domestic with Slug) makes a parody of Alice, complete with bottle of sinister liquid.

Len French and Sam Fullbrook show strong paintings. Brack and Senbergs their usual powerful drawings, and many other fine painters

are represented by major works in this high-class exhibition.

The still-life, a convention that began before the Romans, is still a valid and fertile form of art for anyone with something special to say.

MELBOURNE'S new Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (a pompous title in the circumstances) in Dallas Brooks Drive, the Domain, South Yarra, funded by the Visual Arts Board and the Ministry for the Arts, is just a useful and pleasant space, quite small, in a garden setting. Nothing much has happened there yet. It started with PR fanfare but a very modest selection of works recently, and it badly needed an exciting solo exhibition to establish its credentials.

Unhappily, its second show has neither the zip of novelty nor does it pack the visual power that might lend the centre any more status than a minor commercial venue.

Michael Mulcahy, a visiting Irish artist who shows his Australian pictures here, paints in

the coarsely figurative mode familiar to any art-fashion watcher. Totemic forms, tribal signs, interaction of cultures, time, place; mystery of The Outback, mystery of The Spririt. Alienation.

Two or three works are promising, no more: *Edge of The Forest* (dark figure emerging from trees); *Conflict 1* (pale figure in the bush); *Central Australia 3*. Mulcahy's is not the most sparkling version of all this we have seen; and too many pictures here look hastily conceived and superficial.

PHYL Waterhouse (Leveson Gallery, 130 Faraday St., Carlton) goes about her mild impressionism in much the same way as ever.

Children lean into the breeze, the skies glow, the water shimmers; all is intimate and non-threatening. There is still a place for this delight in the paint, this affection for the moment.

The large folding screen, painted high-key, seems like an experimental departure and looks unfinished but worth working on further.



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