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# Clayton's centre of the absurd

Art

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THE longer I am involved in the art scene, the more I am convinced that laughter is the best policy when dealing with the crazy conflicts and controversies of art politics. Take, for example, the creation of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art which opened recently.

Observers less cynical than myself view the centre's development and eventual choice of location as a drawn-out pantomime. If my visit to the "inaugural exhibition" is an indication of the centre's idea of presenting contemporary art then it would seem this ragged performance is far from over.

It was in the early 1970s that I first heard of the need for a special place – preferably a large warehouse – to be used for the experimental forms of art and performance prevalent at the time. Nothing came of it, but a few years ago there was talk that an empty inner-city building would become a contemporary extension of the National Gallery of Victoria. That failed too.

Last February *Art Almanac* published a statement announcing that a Victorian house near Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens was to be converted into the "long-awaited and much-needed" Centre for Contemporary Art.

The centre could develop "as soon as possible over the next few years into a national venue for contemporary art and one which, in Melbourne, will complement the activities of the National Gallery of Victoria".

Critics who might complain that this was like getting a shoe-box when you asked for the whole factory were assured that "ultimately" a permanent home would be found. So here we had the absurd situation of money being channelled into a temporary exhibition space.

Since then, the centre's involvement in the visit of American artist Keith Haring and the exhibition of Philip Guston's paintings at the National Gallery of Victoria has given new meaning to the term "homeless representation" – earning it the nickname of the Clayton's centre (the Centre for Contemporary Art you have when you're not having a Centre for Contemporary Art).

Several days after the official opening I arrived to find wet paint signs and general disorder. It was more like a "cottage for contemporary art" with three small exhibition spaces.

The official invitation to the opening gave no indication of the artists chosen for what I imagined would be a visual demonstration of the centre's philosophy. In a way, this oversight is perhaps consistent with the centre's unpreparedness.

In the larger space, the English sculptor Bill Woodrow has taken the detritus of modern living – abandoned washing machines, electric toasters, parts of wrecked cars and broken furniture – stripped them of their original purpose and fashioned them into totem-like images.

## Expert

No routine assemblage artist, Woodrow transforms his objects into highly-charged, inventive sculptures, sometimes creating new objects by cutting sheet-metal patterns from the outer "skins" of white goods.

After the cramped confusion of the Centre for Contemporary Art it was a relief to see the expertly mounted survey of John Dunkley-Smith's *Interiors 1979-1984* at the Melbourne University Gallery.

Like Robert Hunter's recent exhibition, Dunkley-Smith's installations present the receptive viewer with a contemplative side of contemporary art; one that has less currency in the present period of noisy self-expression.

Each work was made for (and about) a specific site and consisted of a projected sequence of images – mostly studio and gallery interiors and views through windows in which barely perceptible light changes occur over long periods of time or through the systematic adjustment of exposures.