

USA in Super Rodneyvision

"LEADING American Contemporary Artist Visits Australia," shouts the heading on the press release for Rodney Alan Greenblat's exhibition *Familiar Frontiers*, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne.

Rodney who? If you don't know, then you obviously haven't been following the deluge of articles on New York's East Village art scene which have appeared in art and fashion magazines from the Big Apple to Tokyo in the past year or so.

Art

ROBERT ROONEY

A "leader" visits Down Underland. But back home, isn't he just another young face in the crowd? Well, not quite. Apart from the much celebrated big shots like Keith Haring (whose work recently died of over-exposure in Melbourne) and Kenny Scharf, Greenblat, along with Mark Kostabi and Rick Prol, is among the Village artists who have attracted more than my passing interest.

In their different ways Kostabi and Prol represent the aggressive face of East Village art, but Greenblat, like a lot of others, just wants to have fun. At least that's the impression I get from the paintings, drawings and installations resulting from his short stay in Melbourne as visiting artist at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

Funny art is not easy to make, and even when successful it is often treated with suspicion, particularly by those spoilt brats who seem to think that quality belongs exclusively to "serious" art. However, if you think that fun is not a dirty word and you can accept that art can be humorous, lightweight, whimsical and unashamedly nostalgic, then Rodney's the guy for you.

Although Greenblat's Melbourne room is less elaborate than, say, the marvell-

ous living room he created at Gracie Mansions in 1983, it nevertheless contains all the Rodneyisms we have come to expect in the short, much-publicised career of this 25-year-old artist.

Avoiding the sneeringly superior attitude some artists have towards kitsch, Greenblat compulsively transforms everything in sight — chairs, a mirrored vanity, a roll-top "musical cabinet", a wardrobe with walking legs and other op-shop bargains — with brightly coloured patterns and cartoony figurative images.

Painter who just wants to have fun

The floor of his room is covered with a grass green carpet, while on the baby pink walls he has outlined in orange curtains an assortment of objects. Above is a frieze with a cloudy sky.

Like an artworld Simon the Likeable (remember him from *Get Smart?*), Greenblat makes and paints things you want to resist but just can't help liking. When he is not busy making or designing his fantastic Rodneytronic "Brainturbine Vehicles", such as the *One Rotor Go-Pod*, he is gently parodying the familiar frontiers of Middle America as seen in the formularised economy of a Hanna-Barbera cartoon or

the nice pictures in *A Little Golden Book*.

His is an American dream world brought to you in glorious colour and Super Rodneyvision, and it is rendered with all the skills of a professional illustrator. Although the time is uncertain, the location and the cast of characters are very familiar.

There is also a curious, though not always obvious, mixture of past and present in a painting of a young Davy Crockett in front of a Toyota wagon, or in *The Enchanted Harp*, in which a boy troubadour plays an amplified lyre for a dog.

Greenblat's pictures are peopled by happy dogs, frogs and button-eyed relatives of Little Lulu-boys and girls who live in smiling cabins not far from McDonald's.

Like Kostabi, Greenblat has also incorporated bits of Australiana into his paintings. For instance, there's *Whirlyboy and the Birds*, a picture of an American tourist surrounded by assorted Australian birds, including, of all things, a flying lyre-bird.

Sometimes things go wrong in this "Land Where Everything is Available". There is, for instance, *The Day the Bank Exploded*. The collapse of American capitalism? Probably not, because, as Wally and the Beaver always found out, before you can say "Granny Greenblat", everything is sure to be put right in time for the happy ending. Still, enjoy yourself Rodney, it could be later than you think.