Australian 21/9/85

In Japan, art and utility are inseparable

Art

ROBERT ROONEY

I HAVE read, and it has been confirmed by Asian friends who have recently visited their former homelands, that the "ugly Australian" has now replaced his once notorious American counterpart.

Understandably, the insensitive behaviour of Aussie "yobbos" to some of the refinements of Asian life and cultures is an embarrassment to Asians and Australians alike.

Some will say that the "ugly Australian" overseas is symptomatic of the full-scale yobbification of Australia itself. If this is the case, then one would expect the world of contemporary Australian art to have fallen foul of this pervading influence.

Continuum 85, which can be seen in eight galleries around Melbourne during September, is an ambitious exercise in cultural exchange between Japan and Australia.

The idea for this extensive survey, subtitled "Aspects of Japanese Art Today", came after a large contingent of Australian artists working in areas as varied as painting, sculpture, film, video, music and performance were welcomed in Japan several years ago for *Continuum 83*. The Japanese contingent is just as varied, and it is Melbourne's turn to play host to "30 Japanese artists, critics and gallery directors".

By now, you have probably seen coverage of *Continuum 85* in newspapers and on television, but as I write only one Melbourne review has appeared. While not strictly an example of the "yobbo" mentality at work, the review (by Ronald Millar) nevertheless represents the sort of aggressive local reaction I encountered to what is supposed to be a friendly exchange between two distant cultures, in a week of visiting galleries and at the one talk I attended.

Written, it seems, before the event and based on publicity material, it is less a review than a snooty pre-judgment of *Continuum 85*. It begins predictably with remarks about a Japanese occupation and ends with Millar's premature dismissal of "this relentless oriental affair" as not being "very oriental to me. On the contrary, only too depressingly western-trendy".

(Actually, this type of bad-tempered reaction is common in Melbourne art criticism, particularly if an Australian artist's work happens to acknowledge the existence of Europe and America.)

Koichi Tanikawa and his representation of a Japanese railway station koisk

Still, I must admit that one of the recurring problems I found in a week saturated with contemporary Japanese art was the nature of Japan's relationship with Western culture. It is something about which all Japanese artists and critics seem to be concerned.

As if commenting on Ronald Millar's remarks, Shigeo Chiba has written that "It is incorrect to say that art is considered the same the world over. To disregard characteristics in art that cannot be universalised and are particular to different societies is pointless. It has been said that the gods dwell in details: the essence of fine art is contained in such differences."

It is, perhaps, these details and differences which separate the sculptures of Chieo Senzaki (at Pinacotheca) from similar works by Western artists. His ancient-looking boxes and cupboard-like structures (combining wood, sheet glass and branches) have a sense of uncontrived rightness which is easily contrasted with the self-conscious use of materials for effects in the work of some Australian sculptors.

Also impressive, and for the same reason, is Toshikatsu Endo's long black wooden trough (partly filled with water) at the Gryphon gallery.

According to Shinro Ohtake, who exhibits in England and America (but is not in *Continuum*), "being a Japanese artist means being both dishonest and faithful . . . it's hard to explain. It has to do with the current position of Japan in the world. Now, people who are from samurai families eat spaghetti."

Ohtake's statement reminds me of the group of paintings by the graphic artist Yosuke Kawamura (also at Pinacothecal). Inspired by the anonymous "commercial art on the street-labels on cheap packages, billboards surrounding dingy slum areas of town," Kawamura paints amusing visual guides to the correct use of chopsticks, and soap at hotspring baths: the *Atomic Massage*, *Major Credit Cards Accepted*; and *Two Types of Crying – Crying in Sympathy* and *Happy Crying*. Is he, I wonder, gently mocking Westerners who wish to adopt Japanese customs, or modern Japanese who are all too eager to forget them?

The Japanese critic Tetsuo Kogawa believes that "in order to understand the particular relation between fine, applied and popular art in Japan, one should abandon the distinction between 'fine' and 'applied' art. Japanese utilitarian arts are not 'applications' of fine art but a complex combination of both. Art and utility are inseparably related to one another."

The blurred boundaries between fine, applied and popular art are a common feature of many works in *Continuum*. In the sculptures of Shigeo Toya (at Pinacotheca), Toshikatsu Ejdo, Masafumi Maita and Takuji Azechi (at Gryphon gallery) there is the sort of traditional refinement we usually see as essential to the Japanese aesthetic sensibility.

There is, however, in the installations of women artists such as Naoka Yasuda and Noriko Kurashige (at Christine Abrahams gallery) and Tomoko Sugiyama (at Gerstman Abdallah Fine Arts) a curious yet natural dialogue between such refinement and the modern vulgarity of kitsch and popular arts. (Women, it seems, have become a more assertive force in recent Japanese art).

At the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, the gaudy paintings and sculptures of women on motorbikes by Ushio Shinohara – an older artist with links to the post-"Gutai" anti-art movement in the 1960s – are, on the other hand, an out-and-out celebration of vulgarity.

To me, a highlight of *Continuum* was the display of anonymous graphics and the reconstruction of a typical Tokyo station kiosk at the George Paton gallery. A noticeable feature of this compact visual display of saturated information and hard sell (including comics (which I have already written about), newspapers, magazines of all sorts and cigarettes with brand names such as "Peace" and "Hope" is yet another paradox, a conscious uniformity in the noisy variety of what its curator Koichi Tanikawa calls the "grafitti nature" of modern Japan.

One of *Continuum*'s aims is to encourage personal contact between Japanese and Australian artists, and during my rounds I did see some interaction between Australian students and Japanese artists.

As for myself, away from the gallery situation I managed to spend an enjoyable evening with a few of the Japanese visitors. At times I felt as if I were in the middle of one of those crowded advertisements which consist of a few English words in an indecipherable Japanese text.

Yet despite the limitations of language the Japanese I met were able to communicate with warmth something of what it is like to be a contemporary artist in Japan. How different this was from the attitude of cultural superiority which expects nothing from modern Japanese art except that which conforms to the cliche "western-trendy".