Bewilderment in suburbia

Art

ROBERT ROONEY

"VISUAL Tension" is two things: a special artists' issue of the magazine *Tension* and an exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, which are jointly edited and curated by Ashley Crawford and John Buckley.

It always seems like a good idea to hand over sections or entire issues of a magazine to specially commissioned artists' pages, but the actual results, to judge from past examples, rarely live up to expectations.

"Visual Tension", in its printed form at least, is no exception. In this type of project a lot depends on the nature of the artist's response and his or her understanding of the processes of graphic reproduction.

Too often the artists are content to supply trivial works or existing material without giving much thought to how it will look in print.

The most successful works in "Visual Tension" tend to be those ones which were done for the magazine (a number of the artists such as Howard Arkley, John Nixon, Imants Tillers, Peter Tyndall and John Young have already worked in a magazine format), although it was not necessary to favour ink or black acrylic on paper, as is shown by the paintings of Linda Marrinon and Vivienne Shark Lewitt.

Fortunately, the photo-offset process is flexible enough to accomodate the variegated washes of John Young's *The Cat* (after Andre Derain's portrait of Georges Garbory), Richard Dunn's *Typewriter/X* and Gareth Sansom's combination drawn and photocollaged elements.

Of the many contributions, Peter Booth's oil pastel is the one that suffers most in reproduction. A better choice would have been a pen drawing or one of his more dramatic works in chalk.

"Visual Tension" is basically a picture book and as such Crawford and Buckley have limited their written texts to a short piece of poetic waffle which reads like a reject from a creative writing course. ('*We pursued the raggle taggle through the dark alleyways of the city, slipping on wet cobblestones that reflected the moon*') and a statement outlining their aim to reach a wider audience, "to encourage a degree of demystification", to "strike bewilderment into the heart of suburbia" and create "potential confusion in the newsagency".

However, it seems unlikely that their audience will expand much beyond the art world and *Tension*'s usual readers.

The exhibition itself is greatly helped by the inclusion of extra works, often larger paintings, which are better suited to the gallery's spaces. Some of them are familiar from recent exhibitions, but this does not matter b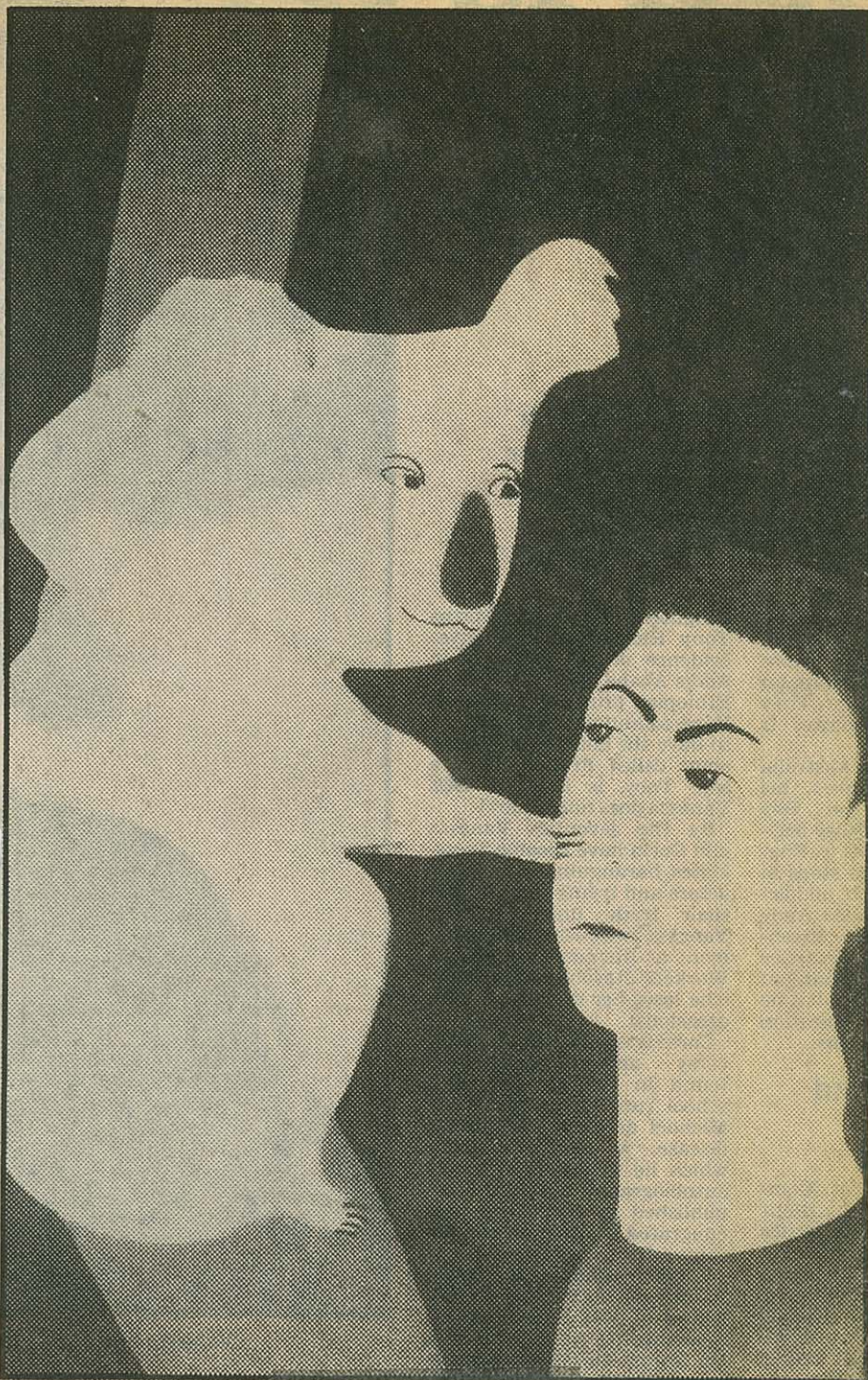ecause in most cases they are related to the lesser known graphic side of the artist's output — Paul Boston's large painted relief and ink and charcoal drawing, for example.

All the works, even the most abstract by Peter Cripps and John Nixon, are figurative, with particular emphasis on a single head or face in the paintings and drawings by Sansom, Shark Lewitt, Geoff Lowe, Arkley and Maria Kozic. There is also a tendency among the artists to borrow (more acurately, steal) images from the mass media or the art of the past.

In her portrait of *The Brady Bunch*, Maria Kozic uses a corny op-art device (as in Agam's multi-image corrugated reliefs) to fragment the faces of TV's Bradies; when viewed from an oblique angle, they are instantly converted back to those of a "normal" American family. It proves again that Kozic is best in works containing three-dimensional elements.

□ □ □

Untitled by Linda Marrinon.