

Decorative touch in 'Suburban Pavilion'

MUCH of what is happening in Tony Clark's exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (Dallas Brooks Drive, The Domain; ends 9 June) can be understood by contrasting the earliest and latest works.

The earliest is a small painting called 'The Suburban Pavilion' done in 1981. Its image is rudimentary to say the least, for it shows nothing more than a Greek temple placed directly in the centre of a roughly daubed red and green ground. Apparently the columns of the temple have been squeezed on to the canvas with the aid of a cake decorator, a detail to which we shall return.

This is not the first time this painting has been shown here in Melbourne. Along with a number of equally small canvases, the work was exhibited under the general title of 'Technical Manifesto of Town Planning' in Clark's first exhibition, which was held at Art Projects in 1982. This original title recalls Boccioni's 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture' of 1912, one of the key documents in the history of modernism. The Australian-born Clark grew up in Italy and is steeped in Italian culture.

The latest of his works is no less Italian in its general references. Titled 'Third Style, Third Rome' and produced in the past few months, this three-part work contains two small landscapes framing a larger monochromatic field. The two side landscapes have the same building in their middleground.

Unlike the buildings in the majority of Clark's paintings, however, this one is of recent construction. Completed in 1942, this multi-storey structure (the Palace of Italian Civilization) belongs to the short-lived fascist imperium.

Clearly enough, a number of thematic concerns are tightly interwoven into Clark's more recent works. His interest in architecture as a discipline in itself is matched by equal interests in its pictorial uses and its suitability as a vehicle of longing and nostalgia. And complementing these concerns is a fur-

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ther one for the look of Old Master paintings.

It is the latter interest which separates Clark's earlier and more recent works. Where the early ones often show nothing more than an architectural subject sitting alone in the centre of the canvas or, less commonly, slipping below the lower frame (the fate of Palladio's Villa Rotonda), a later work like 'Third Style, Third Rome' embeds its architectural subject in a composition which recalls those of Poussin and Claude. In short, in both of its appearances the palace is framed by dark foreground trees which even manage to look, albeit vaguely, like quotation marks.

One further difference is of importance. Unlike the early works, which are generally painted with a rapidly moving and heavily-charged brush, the more recent ones have their sploidy marks submerged beneath puddles of varnish.

These splodges first entered Clark's work in 1983, when he began to base some works on the floor plans of classical buildings.

I think that the element of irony in these works can be exaggerated. While a certain degree is no doubt present in the deliquescent and icing-like images of the early paintings (Clark would know that Claude began his working life as a pastrycook), the later ones seem to endorse that nostalgia which the use of classically inspired images has often served.

To my eye the crucial works are three or four oval compositions done last year. Such formats were often favored by rococo artists, who often veiled their classical themes and allusions by clothing their figures in contemporary dress. In their works a nostalgia for the past is so pervasive it colors the air the figures breathe. Though Clark's relevant paintings contain no discernible figures, they accentuate the nostalgia by shrinking the sizes of the oval until they approach those of a cameo or a vi-

nette. These paintings are souvenirs of nostalgia.

Clark understands that the only tours we can now undertake are those conducted in time. Now that all parts of the world are mapped and explored and, moreover, are simultaneously available, our journeys must be directed at some point in the past. Far from being an occasional emotion, nostalgia now governs our consciousness.