— THE AUSTRALIAN Wednesday June 5 1985

Post-modern art carries echoes of fascist Rome

ROBERT ROONEY discovers a parallel between Mussolini's Rome and its "liberated" architecture and our own post-modern art

IN October 1934, 12 years after the fascists marched on Rome, Benito Mussolini raised his pick in a symbolic gesture to mark the inauguration of an ambitious project which, he told the crowd of workers and officials, would "liberate" the mausoleum of the Emperor Augustus from the "untidy accretion of centuries".

The project, he announced, had to be ready in time for the 1937 bimillennial of the emperor's birth. It did not matter that houses and

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streets in a vast area of 100,000 metres would be demolished.

Mussolini had previously stated, in a famous speech in 1925 on the physical future of the city, that the "millenial monuments of our history must loom gigantic in their necessary solitude". This is why the peripheral buildings of the proposed "Piazzale Augusto Imperatore" were placed at a respectful distance from the exposed ancient monument. The restoration of the mausoleum, like the Duce's trains, was on time, but the new buildings were not completed until 1940.

The whole project, as Spiro Kostof has observed, was one of Rome's largest "and least attractive". As a work of political propaganda, it was meant to illustrate the virtues of the fascist regime, and represent "a historical congruity as well, between Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire, and Benito Mussolini, who had brought it back to life". But time has proven it "a colossal mistake".

It was Mussolini's policy that important relics of "the grandeur that was Rome" should be preserved — relics, that is, from a period no later than the Christian renaissance — but "monuments, ruins, are one thing; the picturesque and so-called local colour, another. All the sordid picturesque is entrusted to His Majesty the pick". It must come down, he said, "in the name of decency, of health, and, if you wish, the beauty of the capital".

To the fascist planners and architects it was essential that the excavation and construction (and interpretation) of the remains of ancient Rome should go hand in hand with the development of the modern metropolis. In keeping with this principle, they were, according to Kostof, "often inclined to contrive physical connections between their work and neighbouring structures of older periods".

Perhaps I, too, am contriving connections when I say that much of all this sounds suspiciously like the position of post-modernism as "a movement towards regional and traditional sources: the desire to live across time in more than one dimension", to quote John Buckley's introduction to the survey exhibition of works by Tony Clark at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne. Buckley also quotes Charles Jencks's definition of post-modernism as a hybrid, doubly coded style, based on fundamental dualities. "Sometimes it stems from juxtaposition of new and old: sometimes it is based on the amusing inversion of the old." Here, of course, it differs from Italian fascist art and architecture, which is never intentionally humorous.

Actually, I am not alone in seeing similarities between the official art of fascist Italy and post-modernism. It was noted in an American review of the massive survey *Gli Anni trenta* (Italian art and culture in the '30s) held in Milan. And in an article on Del Debbio's herculean sculptures, Carlo Cresti points to the lesson for post-modernists in "Mussolini's forum" or "stadium of the statues".

However, to me, the most timely of the surviving relics of Mussolini's Rome is "the palace of Italian civilisation". Two views of this building are featured in Tony Clark's three-part work *Third Style, Third Rome* (1985). Rather than allow the palace to loom gigantic in its necessary solitude, Clark has cut across time and placed it in a miniature setting which imitates certain ready-made conventions of the Claudean landscape. He also makes the pristine geometry of its multi-arched facade decidedly wonky, almost as if it is about to collapse like an abandoned concertina.

Desire to cut across time

Behind Clark's plan of action over the past four or five years is the influence of Marcel Duchamp (hence "the need to operate from a theoretical framework"), Andy Warhol and particularly the example of De Chirico, who, with Carlo Carra and lesser known painters of the Novecento movement, was to abandon his earlier radical style in favour of a classically-inspired realism.

Why he should adopt a Cuchampian anti-art stance (and paint so many tiny pictures of classical temples and monuments in seemingly backward-looking old-masterish techniques) is best understood when we are reminded that Clark is the product of the '70s generation of artists who turned to painting after being nurtured by the example of their conceptually-minded elders, and who were to look also to their own backgrounds for inspiration. In Clark's case these were the years he spent visiting "ancient sites and ruins of classical antiquity" as a child in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. There is also, of course, his background in architecture.

Like his use of classical imagery, Clark's traditional painting techniques trigger a number of associations. They are not so much genuine old masters as the aspirations of amateur painters, academic "brown sauce", and the worn look of instantly aged fakes.

Clark likes to call his paintings "the St Kilda version of classicism — the imperfectly grasped form of high culture".