

Rather gloomy picture of young artists

YES, it's that time of the year, or what's left of it, when the contents of stock-rooms are emptied on to the walls of Melbourne's galleries and art schools engage in competition with rival exhibitions of works by graduate and post-graduate students.

Many of the latter, as we have seen on a number of occasions in the past year, are already attached to, and therefore appear by courtesy of, certain commercial galleries with cradle snatching tendencies.

(But whether this exclusive representation is a matter of trust or actually involves signing a contract similar to the one offered to some young artists in the early '60s, I have yet to find out).

All these things considered, it is not surprising that the 1986 season should end with surveys devoted to the promotion of young artists. Young Contemporaries: Emerging Australian Artists at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, is the latest curatorial exercise by Sue Cramer. Only this time she is assisted by Peter Cripps, who is responsible for the selection of Brisbane artists.

Young Contemporaries exhibitions, as Cramer notes in her short introduction, were a regular, often annual event during the '60s.

The Museum of Modern Art and Design, at both of its Flinders Street locations, held exhibitions with such titles as New Generation,

Art

Young Contemporaries
Australian Centre for
Contemporary Art
Melbourne

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Young Minds and, of course, Young Contemporaries. The Argus Gallery held similar exhibitions, sometimes in conjunction with the Contemporary Art Society.

Before its demise, when it ceased to be a vital force and became a "sewing circle", the Melbourne branch of the CAS was one of the few exhibition outlets available to young artists. A glance at the catalogues for the above shows will reveal the names of artists, now with established reputations, who owe their early public exposure to the CAS.

The situation is quite different today, with more avenues being available and more chances to exhibit.

The main aim of Cramer's Young Contemporaries exhibition is much the same as that of its predecessors. It is "to bring to light new and challenging work by younger Australian artists (mostly in their mid-20s) whose work has not been seen in Melbourne before and to afford young artists some opportunity to see work currently being produced by others interstate".

Nice thoughts, especially the nationwide representation, but what really emerges

in this exhibition is an overall drabness.

This could be attributed to Cramer's (and Cripps') choice of artists, but is most probably a simple indication of the general direction of today's art.

To judge from the works on display, it would seem that in side-stepping modernism (in some cases to the extent of pretending it never existed) many young artists have found freedom to re-examine, or more accurately exploit, the art of the past.

However, a lot of this backward-looking art seems to be a contented revival in both its imagery and emphasis on conventional techniques of certain types of works (particularly painting) which emerged following the defeat of Germany in 1918, and flourished in the '20s and '30s. Michael Graf, for example, paints small Corot-like pictures of architectural details such as towers, domes, roof tops and grave stones, which are seen through circular openings or brick archways. They are reminiscent of Tony Clark's historical pastiches, only better painted.

Sterility

Historical towers, monuments, rotundas and fountains, perhaps signifying the intrusion of European culture into the natural landscape of New South Wales, are a similar feature of Narelle Jubelin's tiny "petite point" embroideries set in oval and diamond-shaped plywood

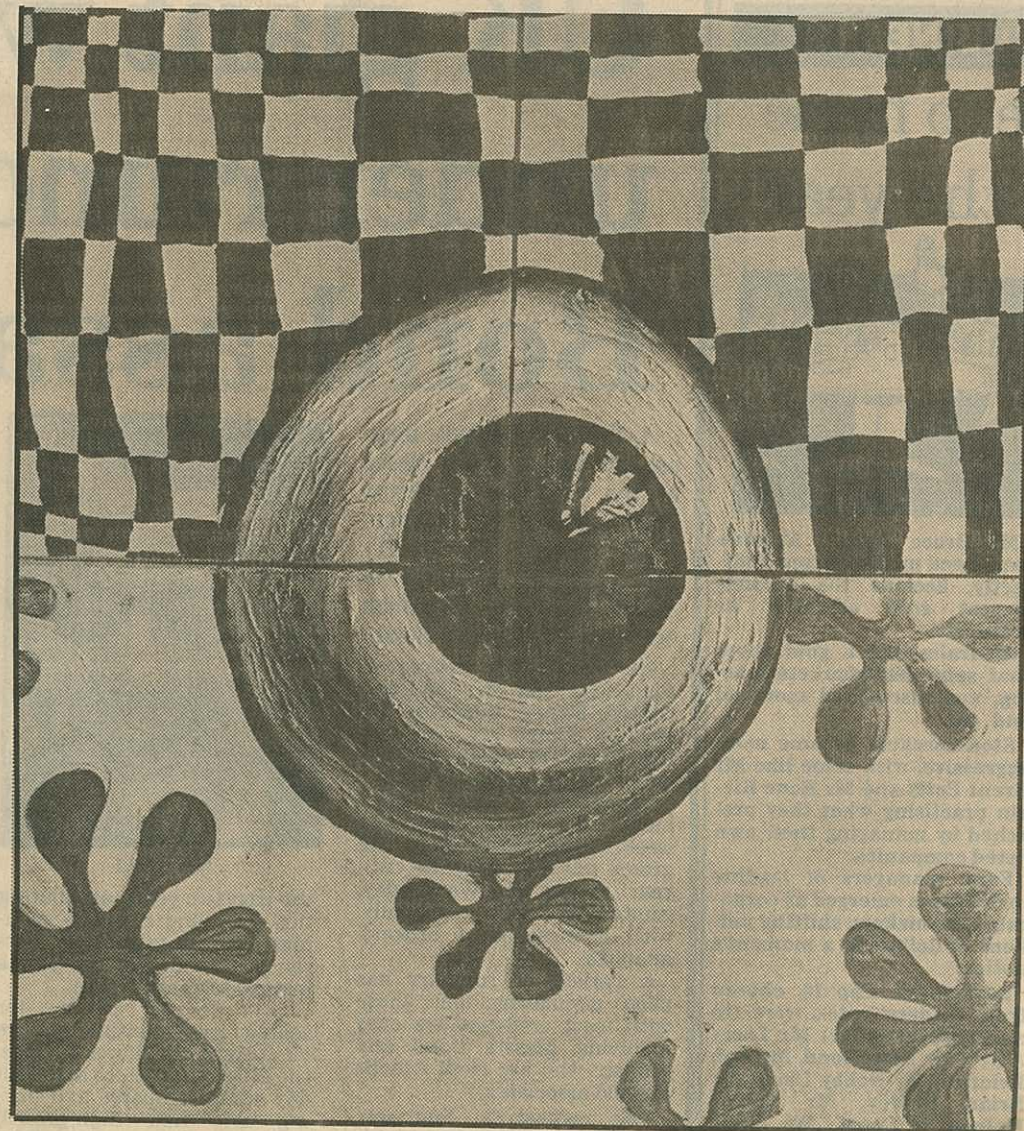
mounts, while Adrienne Gaha's charcoal close-ups of statues (always male), whose weathered surfaces are covered with cascades of pigeon droppings, seem to acknowledge the role of the classical revival in the aesthetics of power, and fascism in particular.

Darkness rather than light is also the dominating feature of other works such as Richard Thomas's paintings of superimposed images from Ryder and Malevich, or Mondrian's *Plus and Minus* on top of a nondescript romantic seascape.

Not everything in the survey looks as though it's been painted with black molasses or coated with thin layers of "brown sauce". Mark Webb's multi-unit *Untitled (Re-constructions)* - rows of wedge-shaped corrugated cardboard samples - have the sort of blank sterility that, to some, is a sign of intellectual activity.

They make similar exercises by fellow Brisbane artist Robert MacPherson seem like the products of a raving expressionist.

The only bright light in Young Contemporaries is Clinton Garofano, who with generous lashings of Day Glo and bright acrylic colour, paints gaudy "technopop" abstractions, in which a circular image (an eye, the globe and atomic symbols) is always placed at the centre of two-part fields of psychedelic and op-art patterns, woodgrain, velvet, quilting and other choice samples from the world of kitsch design.



The only bright light . . . one of Clinton Garofano's gaudy 'technopop' abstractions