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ART

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There's hidden variety in 'scratchy' works

THE variety which is there in Allan Mitelman's work is unlikely to strike most viewers when they first cast a glance at the 46 works on paper which make up his show at 312 Lennox Street Richmond; ends 13 December.

Like that of a handful of other painters of his generation (Robert Hunter, Paul Partos and Julie Irving are the names which spring immediately to mind), Mitelman's art is notable for its quietness, its restraint, and its contemplative ease. His grey or off-white fields scattered with casual and scratchy marks would seem to have nothing to say about the world which lies beyond their four perimeters.

Mitelman's works fall neatly into two main groups. In some (and perhaps these form a majority here) Mitelman employs his scratchy and graffiti-like marks so that they make us more keenly aware of the worked and two-dimensional expanse of the surface. However faintly they may be inscribed, these marks all have the

character of a gouge or an incision and derive naturally from Mitelman's activity as a print-maker.

The second group of works is distinguished by the fact that in them the marks are allowed to float within a deep and seemingly limitless space. It is this which we find, for example, in 'Untitled 1976', in which Mitelman has superimposed a group of white and yellow notations on a darker ground. At no moment can the cursive pastel notations (some, one notices, are in fact words and numbers) and the water color ground be seen to form the same surface.

Rather like Klee, whose influence is apparent in the earliest work here, Mitelman likes to deal in fugitive hints and nuances. Take, for example, his mixed media works, many of which have their stone-grey fields bisected by a vertical line or group of lines.

When you happen to notice that the effect of this division is to as-

sociate the image with the pages of an open book, you naturally begin to wonder whether Mitelman's apparently meaningless marks are in fact signs. How intensely must we look in order to decode them?

The pencil drawings here raise similar questions about their meaning, for in them Mitelman often aligns his marks so that they fugitively define a hidden or unseen geometric figure. These apparently dispersed and wind-blown marks are in fact placed with subtlety and cunning.

Alan Sumner's 30 silkscreen prints at David Ellis (37 Bedford Street, Collingwood; ends 16 December) were all produced between 1944 and 1948 and form the first substantial body of work in this medium to be made by an Australian artist.

And so, too, does the deftness with which they have been composed, for these are works which gain their unity through Sumner's

extensive use of visual rhymes and half-rhymes.

Two other print exhibitions worthy of attention are 'Backstreet Visions' at the Gryphon (Melbourne College of Advanced Education; ends 12 December) and the stock show at 70 Arden Street (North Melbourne; ends 17 December). The former show, which surveys the work of Redletter Press, is likely to make its strongest appeal to those on the left, for its 103 items are overwhelmingly designed to advance a whole host of radical causes.

As I am on the subject of young artists I should also mention 'Young Contemporaries' at ACCA (Dallas Brookes Drive, South Yarra; ends 17 January) and 'Eighteen Artists' at the University of Melbourne Gallery. I find the first of these shows a dispiriting affair (not one of these "emerging" artists is making a genuine attempt to cultivate his mind), but would recommend the latter because of a lovely painting by Richard Ward titled 'A View of Catcliffe from Melbourne' and an equally impressive sculpture by Brigid Cole-Adams. These two works deserve to enter a public collection.