

# Classical but current

## Art

Melbourne Galleries:  
Australian Centre for  
Contemporary Art:  
Self Memory And Desire — New  
Romanticism in Italian Painting

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**T**HE title of the song *Everything Old is New Again* is also a phrase which best describes the presence of the past in much "post-modernist" painting in the '80s. Come to think of it, even if I were to transpose a couple of words and say "everything new is old again", it would do just as well in summing up the current situation.

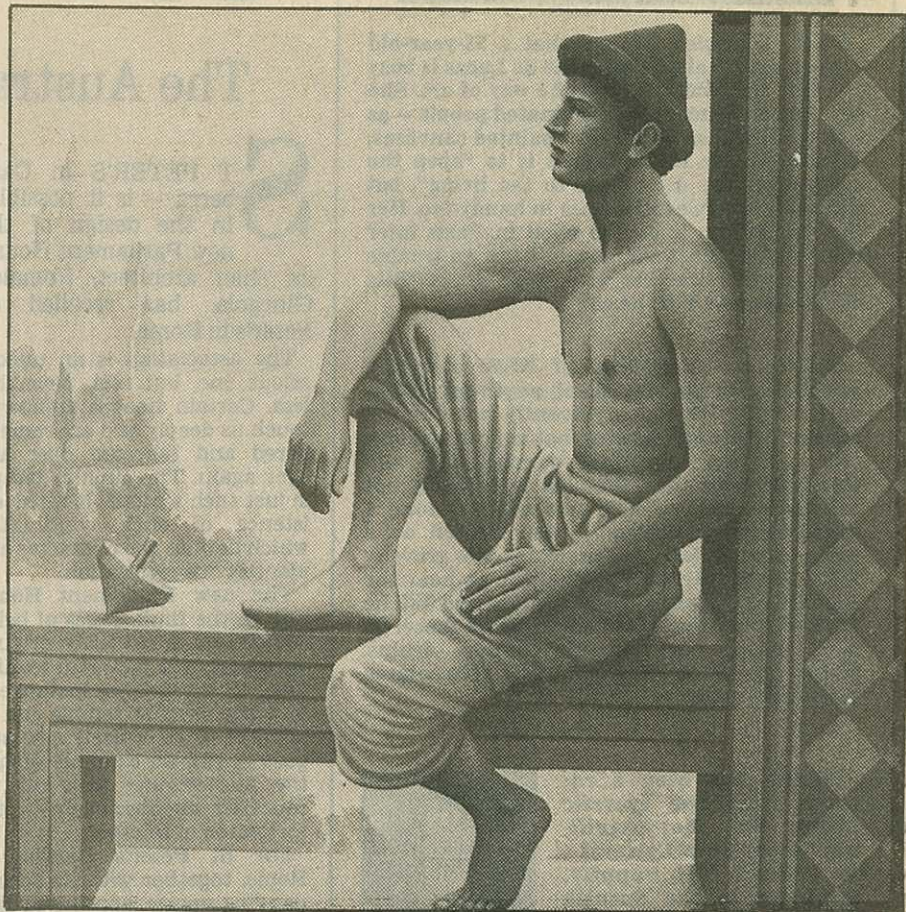
An important contribution to this widespread re-examination of the past, and earlier Italian traditions of classicism and romanticism in particular, is surveyed in *Self, Memory and Desire: New Romanticism in Italian Painting*, at The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. The exhibition concentrates on the works of 10 contemporary Italian artists who are sometimes grouped together under the banner of *pittura colta*, or "cultivated painting".

The deliberately archaic appearance of these paintings and drawings — their creators seem wilfully content to deny the existence of modernism's many stylistic innovations — must strike many viewers as being anachronistic. Indeed, to some Italian critics the artists are known as "anachronists". However, an examination of Italian attitudes to history and certain developments in Italian art in the aftermath of World War I, reveal not only the logic of the artists' attitudes to the past, but similarities between their works and those of the *novocento* group in the '20s.

"In Italy," Howard Fox observes, "history is read vertically: one thing 'upon' another 'upon' another . . . and every place and every event that exists in the present is physically 'and perceptually' situated in the setting of the past."

This attitude to history and its relation to the works on display is confirmed by Stefano di Stasio — the only artist to have previously exhibited in Australia whom Fox quotes as saying, "It is necessary to put oneself in a vertical position with respect to both the past and the future." The layering of history — which finds its way into the paintings of Di Stasio, Ubaldo Bartolini, Alberto Abate, Roberto Barni and others, through the adoption of discarded and devalued art styles is, of course, in direct opposition to the noisy proclamations of the Italian futurists early this century.

Such opposition is not without its ironies. As Fox, again useful, notes it is ironic that in Italy — where modern art, in the program of futurism, set out more deliberately than anywhere else to destroy the memory of the past — the past



Carlo Bertocci's *Il Magio*: a kind of artificiality

should have remained so alive, not just in contemporary art, but throughout modern Italian art, even in certain aspects of Italian futurism itself.

In 1984, the Venice Biennale Exhibition, *Art In The Mirror*, brought together a cross-section of artists — ranging from De Chirico and Picasso to Warhol and Mariani — whose works were said to present, "a panorama of the ways in which contemporary art has lived, and is living, its own relationship with the art of the remote or recent past, in the form of precise echoes and references."

The inclusion of paintings by Roberto Barni and Ubaldo Bartolini, who reappear in *Self, Memory and Desire* alongside those of earlier Italian moderns such as De Chirico and Carlo Carra, a reminder of certain correspondences between the younger Italians at the ACCA and the *novocento* group, who exhibited at the Venice Biennale 60 years earlier in 1924.

According to Claudia Ferrari, the *novocento* group — which briefly enjoyed the dubious patronage of Mussolini in the early '20s — "had no manifesto, no precise poetic line, and their works revealed no common denominator," that is, other than "emphasising the cultural and historical continuity of the great Italian tradition."

Of its more prominent members, Carra and Sironi had been futurists, but De Chirico, whose metaphysical trappings are crudely revived in Luigi Campanelli's

*La Modista* (1987), had long resisted futurists' dynamic pursuit of the new.

Although linked together as "new romanticists", the artists in *Self, Memory and Desire* approach the past in a variety of ways. Ubaldo Bartolini paints dark, stormy landscapes with solitary travellers and mountains that lick the clouds.

In Roberto Barni's *Dominio* (1984), a sky-bound cart drawn by two white horses spills its load of classical heads. Barni, a former pop artist, wants to "take the opportunity of making art which finally owes nothing to anyone".

Stefano di Stasio has stated that "it is necessary to choose a purpose, and my aim, my choice, my want, is to emulate the painting of the 16th century, because this was the highest point in painting".

Di Stasio's *Notte e Danzatori* (1987) is perhaps the most satisfying painting in the exhibition. This strangely theatrical work — which features naked dancing figures of different scale, model buildings and an operatic night-time townscape — achieves the desired timelessness without resorting to the dramatic pagan images of Alberto Abate, or Massimo Livadiotti's mixture of the antique and the exotic.

De Stasio's figures seem to exist somewhere between flesh and fantasy, but the seated man in Carlo Bertocci's *Il Magio* (1986) exhibits another kind of artificiality. It reminded me of a fleshed-out manikin contemplating the opening of Disneyland Italian-style.