

Return to romanticism

By Judy Newman

THE ENTRANCE to the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in South Yarra was lined with Nimbin-like constructions of bamboo, hung with tinkling fragments of glass and shells and propped up in drifts of sand. Inside a washing machine sculpture was gurgling a watery tune.

It was all part of the Third Australian Sculpture Triennial but it might have been set up to illustrate a point which Judith Blackall, the curator of the other exhibition occupying the main galleries at ACCA, has been making in her lectures to students at Melbourne art schools.

The exhibition, titled 'Self, Memory and Desire — New Romanticism in Italian Painting', and the 10 artists included are part of an Italian art movement which is working today with a strong sense of the past in what has been identified as a conscious attempt to re-establish order and stability by returning to the traditional values of art.

What makes this type of art particularly hard to grasp today, Ms Blackall had been telling the students, is its quite sudden appearance after the Arte Povera of the '60s and '70s, when in the socio-political climate of the decade, art strove to destroy or bypass the art commodity system.

Artists used "poor" materials such as dirt, sand, twigs and broken glass which had no commercial value. So here were the two schools of art, "art povera" and the new romanticism, being exhibited side by side. Nothing could have illustrated more dramatically this change in artistic direction.

I asked Ms Blackall if this return to romanticism and to the use of classical references is likely to sweep the Australian art scene.

"I don't think so," she said. "I hope that this exhibition will not be seen as a pathfinder or something to influence young Australian artists. Stylistically it is not meant to be like that. It has to be deeply felt. Most of these artists come from Rome. I believe that this style of art couldn't have arisen in a modern city like Milan or Turin or in a modern nation like Australia or America.

"This movement is strongly Italian, strongly romantic. These artists draw firstly on the Italian Pittura Metafisica movement: de Chirico, Savinio, Carra and a little further back. The artists use symbols to evoke timeless themes of melancholy, of death, of searching. For example, Stefano Di Stasio invariably has a wayfarer lighting the way. There are roads, there are landscapes, there is distance and the figures are caught in a moment of truth.

"These artists are working today with a strong sense of the past. There are stylistic differences but the language they use is universally romantic."

In Italy, says Ms Blackall, many believe that historical memory is needed to recu-

perate a sense of value that art lost with the decline of the avant-garde in the early '70s. Political events are believed to have had an influence in its demise.

"It has been pointed out that the period of terrorism culminating in the assassination of Democratic Christian party leader Aldo Moro in 1977 shocked the culture of Italy into a re-evaluation. There was a swing back to a known order and this was reflected in the art."

But although this is a major art movement it is not something which is taking all of Italy by storm, said Ms Blackall.

"Obviously, this type of sensibility is not — well, not everyone likes it. It is mainly concentrated on Rome, where it has a big following."

Ms Blackall, who was born in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, has been running the Visual Arts Board artist in residence program at Arthur Boyd's Tuscan farmhouse, Paretalo, since 1982. Selected artists receive a grant of \$2000 and the use of a studio at Paretalo for about three months.

"Arthur Boyd invited me to go to the house in 1981 and I suggested that we turn it into a studio for Australian artists. He accepted on the condition that I am there to be responsible for the Boyds' interests as well as those of the artists. I teach English to supplement my income and I also go to Milan to work in a friend's gallery from Thursday to Saturday — this keeps me in touch with the artistic life of Italy. I make contacts between Australian artists and the Italian art world and organise exhibitions for Australian artists.

"I manage a trip back to Australia on average once every one-and-a-half years."

Ms Blackall says that, apart from Paretalo, there are a number of other studios run by the Visual Arts Board, which operate in a whole series of ways. Some are funded directly by the Australian Government, some are connected to schools, and others are available as a result of the generosity of owners of houses in Europe.

"There is one just about to commence operation in Tokyo, one in Paris and an important one in Berlin which is awarded for a year at a time."

Did she think the Australian artist needs contact with Europe to develop?

"The artists who come to Paretalo invariably return stimulated and the experience invariably changes their work in some way or another," she said. "But I feel that the need for the European experience is less the case with Australian artists now. In many ways Australia's isolation could be a new-found blessing. Perhaps an internal examination would not be a bad thing..."

She said that there is more factionalism between galleries, critics and artists in Italy than anywhere else, probably because of the inherent nature of the Italians, but that all sorts of exciting things were emerging.

More art is being brought in now from Britain and America so there is more diffusion. Art fairs provide a forum but they are usually commercial and difficult to gauge artistically.

"You are treated to a banquet of art at these fairs. You feast and you can't taste anything. I am mainly referring to the Milan Art Fair which is relatively new. The most famous is the Basle art show, but there is also one in Zurich, one in Spain. Art fairs are like an expo of art.

"The galleries are invited to take a stand in a huge hall and there they present what they feel represents their gallery.

"The organisers of the art fairs want to inject a philosophical line so they organise a series of conferences with the presences of younger critics, younger publishers and so on. More and more of these art fairs are springing up throughout Europe, also in America. They provide a forum where young artists can see the whole smorgasbord of the art world before them."



Picture: JOE SABLJAK

Judith Blackall: "This movement is strongly Italian, strongly romantic."