Romantic revival resurrects old themes

TIMES ON SUNDAY 27.9.87

ART
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ROMANTICISM is one of those art concepts that works like a toy train ride at a fun fair. We all pile in, excited at leaving for a moment the familiar for the strange, entranced by the prospect of adventure in fantastic places, knowing all the while that our journey is a passage through simulations. Unique thrills; it seems an escape into the extraordinary. But we do it in herds, stay on level ground most of the time, and usually return to where we started.

It was not ever thus. Around 1800, artists such as Goya, Gericault, Blake, Friedrich and Delacroix were impelled by a tearing anger at established society. Bitterly alienated from cultural orthodoxy, they were driven to immerse their imaginations deeply in nature's mysteries or to a desperate wandering through distant parts of the world and their psyches.

Romanticism has since been diluted into a rather reactionary, conventional comforter. It is trotted out defensively whenever there appears to be a threat to the idea that individual genius is the essential fount of creativity, or whenever the unique value of works of art as saleable commodities is seriously questioned.

The New Romantics (Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, until October 3) is presented as a survey of "what is emerging as a strong and significant new direction in contemporary Australian art". It is curated by Graeme Sturgeon, director of Artbank, the successful, Government-funded art rental service. He begins his catalogue essay by denying any connection with market demand. Why not, then, test out his idea within the nominally disinterested spaces of a public gallery?

Few of the 24 artists in the show are part of the Macquarie stable. The spin-off is less direct: it is to seek a local accent for the latest phase in the return by artists to painting as a medium and subjectivity as an outlook. Both these seemed dead only a decade ago.

Sturgeon admits that the word "romanticism" can mean almost anything. He defines its new, local meaning as asserting the "primacy of individual response" to both the natural world and interior states of mind. Yet these ideas have been universal in Western art for almost two centuries.

Around 1800, Romanticism defined itself against the various classical tendencies then current. Who is the enemy now? A footnote hints that it is the post-modern proclivity towards appropriating imagery from other art and from popular culture. Certainly there is a stultifying conventionality in the art of quotation-only. But is not the declaration of a New Romanticism the announcement of another academy?

Self, Memory and Desire: New Romanticism in Italian Painting (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, to November 1) shows that certain Italian artists have been responding a little more subtly. Their romanticism is a nostalgic classicism. How far they move past equivocal evocation of the past is, however, questionable.

The Australian "romantics" differ markedly in another, utterly predictable way: most are landscapists. As, of course, were many of the originators of the tendency. But while the present-day Italian artists begin from an ironic reversal of the Romantic-Classical equation, Sturgeon (despite disclaimers) presents the "new romantics" as basically replaying the themes of their predecessors.

The art in the exhibition shows this to be inadequate. Many artists do quote earlier art: Kerin Murray's *The Death of Nastasya Filippovna* is Manet's famous Olympia restated without the bodies, through the arrangement of clothes. Such sources blur still more the concept of Romanticism revived. Manet was no Romantic. The curator has collected art inspired by all the myriad tendencies in French and German art of the 19th century.

The stronger work sets up implied subversions of its own overt Romanticism. Mandy Martin's *Folly* isolates a coastal, rocky outcrop in picturesque fashion but paints it in the brutally direct, loaded palette-knife manner of the great Realist Gustav Courbet. Glittering gold wash is opposed by heavy impasto, ethereal nuances collide with chunky actualities. A ghostly sand-mine glows in the distance. A mirage, perhaps, but also a machine bent on consuming this beauty.

Anne MacDonald's *The First Wound: Anima and Animus, from the Grail Myth*, places ancient symbols (a bound fish) against some from popular culture (a chocolate box heart), exposing the constructed character of "romantic" love. John R. Neeson grossly exaggerates the conventions of Romantic painting: sunlight bursts through dark clouds, nature becomes a theatrical trick.

Such indirection is foreign to the older exhibitors. Lloyd Rees paints the sublime as dazzling, blinding; a gentle, visitor's version of the late works of Turner. *Sky Garden* is one of James Gleeson's most powerful psychic interiors — a landscape of the body, seen from the inside out. An apotheosis of anal penetration is achieved. In the upper section, crustaceous body-parts combine into a homoerotic ascension. A joyous angel's chorus contrasts subtly, but emphatically, with the negativity of the Grim Reaper.

In another footnote, Sturgeon lists a further 13 artists, from Arthur Boyd to Jenny Watson, whose work falls within his Romantic replay. At this point the concept becomes just too general. But it is also narrow.

Could we not see, for example, John Nixon's years of celebration/interrogation of the idea of the artist as primogenitor at work on the mythology of Romanticism? His installation *Self-Portrait, the Music Room* (Oxley Gallery, Sydney, to October 10) consists of a violin mounted on hessian outside, while inside there is an empty case in the centre and four black panels, one on each wall, reflective of the viewer, their surfaces also scattered with tiny fragments of white paint skin. This has as much impact as anything in *The New Romantics*, as well as an internal, critical distancing rare in the Macquarie show.

At the heart of the Third Australian Sculpture Triennial in Melbourne is the retrospective of sculptures and works on paper by Robert Klippel (Heide Park and Art Gallery until October 25). The Picassoid drawings of sculptural ideas, done in concert with James Gleeson as they shared a love of Surrealism, are still full of suggestion — especially for mixed media artists just starting.

While the machine-part collages and painterly blottings of the 1950s now look impressive, Klippel did not follow up their promise, falling instead under the influence of the major United States sculptor in steel, David Smith, and of the simplified modernism of formalist art critical theory.

Throughout his art KLippel seems torn in different directions. A master of minor transmutations, he seems to have been seduced by the desire to make a grand statement.

The diverse dichotomies of his way of working — between wood and metal, natural and machine forms, created and found objects — make interesting anything he touches. But there is also always the enervating tension of a constant battle between the rich internal explorations and the frequent failure to find a holding shape, a coherent overall configuration.

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