

No simple way to find the Australia in Australian art

WHAT is Australian about Australian art? How might it be "international"? These questions can no longer be asked in the old way: as if a list of qualities, on either side of the ledger, could count as a sufficient answer. The situation is simply too diverse, too dispersed, for such simplicity.

Here and There, at Monash University Art Gallery until December 12, goes straight to the point. Elaine Merkus assembles work by 17 artists recently returned from studying abroad, usually at one of the network of studios established by the Visual Arts Board. Some have also benefited from the Power Studio at the Cité International des Arts, others from the Murdoch and the NSW Travelling Scholarships.

Opening the exhibition, the new Visual Arts/Crafts Board (VAB) chairwoman, Majorie Johnson, reaffirmed a commitment to the program. It remains to be seen what the result will be for the abruptly amalgamated and suddenly inflated constituency of artists



ART
TERRY
SMITH

and craftspeople.

Since the Settlement most artists have been incessant travellers, particularly so they could learn. Before each of the colonies developed its own regional culture, art was part of the pattern of ad hoc cultural exchange with different places and classes in Britain. A sense of the monolithic weight of British culture grew in tandem with the desire for a coherent Australian art.

For most of this century, however, a more complex set of connections has inescapably bound our artists. Insistence on the absolutely local has alternated - sometimes in the same work of art - with dreams of invisible absorption into cauldrons of metropolitan creativity. The carrot of an

utterly relaxed practice, neither "here" nor "there", has dangled before us, mirage-like. The reality has been more regularly shot through with tensions, equivocations, overlaps and contradictions, all marked by the scars of the fundamental inequality of our cultural dependency.

From its founding in 1972, and despite a still-diminishing budget, the VAB has been a major force in institutionalising our art practice. It has pump-primed an entire generation of artists at a time when the market could not and would not support them, when many traditional modes of art-making went into catatonic collapse, when the international art system was mainly preoccupied elsewhere. How has the overseas studio program fared in this environment?

Here and There does not concentrate on the first group of artists who worked abroad in the 1970s. The exception is Virginia Cuppaidge, who oversees the Greene St studio in New York's SoHo and is represented by paintings which show only gradual

change within an already tentative, decoratively abstract framework.

Most exhibitors have been abroad in the past few years, their work grouped quite directly as "before", "during" and "after". In some cases, such as that of Peter Atkins, there is a move from competence within a local tendency, itself a pale condensation of a previously imported style, to an updating of dependency in line with present fashion. Citing a batch of recent international art stars, Rodney Pople's *Painting with diligence* sends up this process.

For others, such as Stephen Turple, the local traditions were more sustaining of subtle work than the enforced fitting-in. Some simply recast their abiding interests: Annette Bezor changed the backgrounds of her over-the-top displays of female ecstasy from Ayers Rock through the Eiffel Tower to a full-bore, classicised mythological space. Others changed hardly at all: thus Kate Farrell's images of women's powerlessness remained as spare, drained and passive as before.

Still more perspectives emerge. Anna

Zahalka's photo-essays, evoking fragments of a Kafka story, or posing friends in postures of famous European paintings, underline how many lines of other cultures ebb and flow here, especially in the experience of recent emigrants. Sue Rankine is one of the few to overtly tackle the distortions of displacement on one's sense of personal identity. In *Emigré 1985* a map-figure is stretched across a rack of disintegrating land-forms. After a visit to New York her work is less focused on this issue, and less impressive.

Finally, some show the ambivalences of trying to see through the eyes of alien cultures. Marilyn Fairskye rather heavily overlays postcard views of the Seine with imagery from advertisements for S&M equipment and military hardware. More subtly, Peter Burgess deploys an understated conceptual-minimal manner to counterpose icons from the cultural history of Ireland, England and Australia, as well as another set elegantly derived from Russian, Chinese and American postage stamps.

The overall sense is that experience abroad for this, as for the previous, generation of artists was not immediately profitable for the work made at the time and shortly thereafter. A broader perspective, however, would show that a trial by fire elsewhere is as essential to the maturity of Australian artists as are the tests already provided here.

The differing demands of the local and the international also inform *William Delafield Cook, selected work 1958-1987* (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, until December 6). From modest abstraction, Cook moved in the 1970s into a refined Neo-Realism, always closely tied to art about art.

The most compelling room recreates aspects of a 1978 exhibition at the Redfern Gallery, London, where the artist showed minutely detailed views of the cliffs at L'Etaple and of rows of poplars, favourite subjects of Monet, along with the antiquities section of the British Museum and the Ingres wall at the Louvre.

Fine charcoal drawings set their

skilled technique against a poverty of subject that approaches interior design of an obvious kind. Similarly, his Australian landscapes at first surprise by their exact quotation of *National Geographic* colour photography, but eventually, and recently, subside into unironical direct rendering.

Here and There is also epitomised by Dutch-born US artist Willem de Kooning's massive bronze sculpture *Standing Figure*, a National Bank Bicentennial gift to the nation which is outside the Victorian Arts Centre.

It is a gargantuan blow-up of one of the painter's small clay pieces, which were conjured by his manipulating the material in the palm of his hand, in a free play with the malleable stuff. In this he followed Matisse. Something of the initial spontaneity remains in its globular flows and abrupt shifts of emphasis. The ponderous grandeur of Henry Moore and Norma Redpath is also evident, but the shifting masses remain both more primitively unformed and more bizzarely off-scale than anything by either of these two more conventional sculptors.