# Multi-hued seduction

## ART

Melbourne galleries:
**Mysterious Coincidences**
**New British Colour Photography**
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

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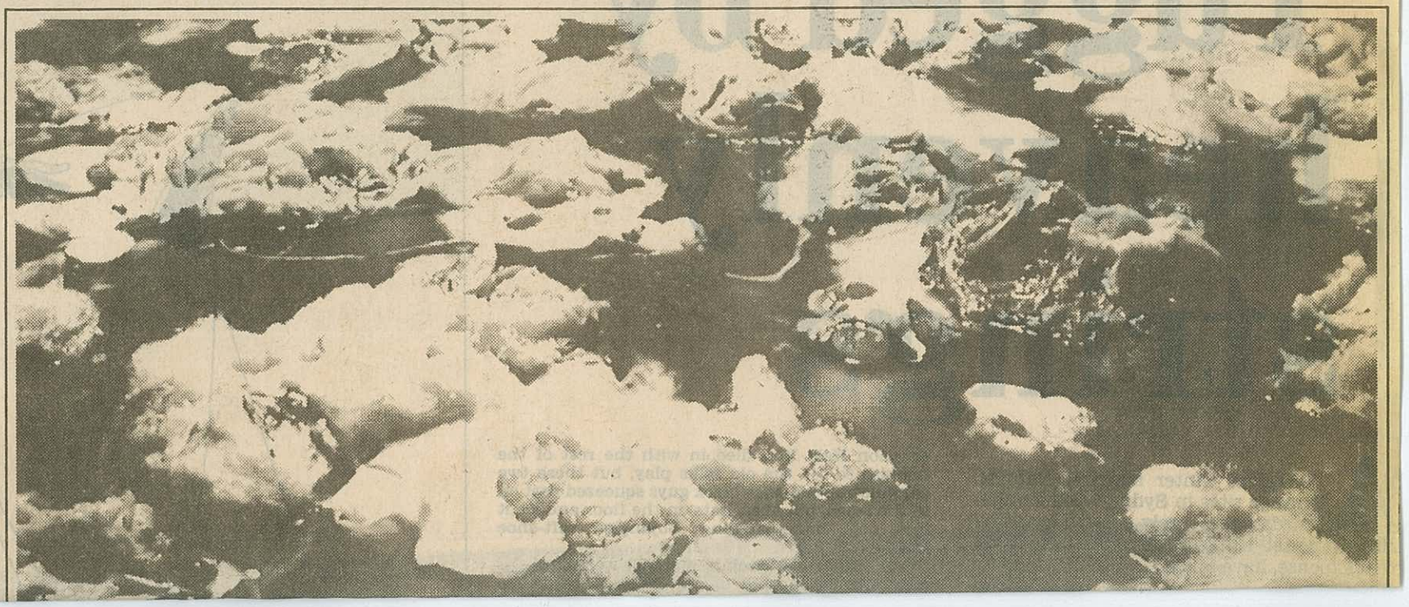
LAST month, the ultimate disaster happened – my video recorder broke down. While it was away being repaired, I suffered withdrawal symptoms of the kind Marshall McLuhan once described when a television addict is denied the medium's daily massage.

Only for me, as a VCR owner, it was more to do with not being able to control when I could view things. While looking for the cause of the dreaded malfunction, the repairman remarked on the television set's vivid colour. I said that's the way I liked it, and told him of my observation that artists tend to tune in the colour according to the type of paintings they did.

For instance, a painter who uses lots of tints



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For instance, a painter who uses lots of tints and monochromes is likely to favour a tinted black and white image while another whose work is bold and colourful sees nothing wrong with bright orange faces and acrylic-looking greens. As for me, I like reds to be vivid and colours to resemble those in glossy magazine photographs.

What amazes me is that people (not only artists) will accept bright colours in magazines but prefer images on the television screen to look like drab wartime National Geographics. Perhaps I shouldn't be so amazed at the lack of consensus about what constitutes natural colour, as our perception of colour, natural or otherwise, seems largely a matter of taste and conditioning.

The notion of natural colour is, of course, as much open to question as our habit of accepting documentary photographs as representations of reality and truth.

Although the exhibition Mysterious Coincidences is subtitled New British Colour Photography, colour itself is not the central issue in the works on display at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. At least, not in the same way it was in the United States with the photographs of William Eggleston and Joel Meyerwitz (both seminal influences) and others in the early 1970s, or the conceptually oriented works of artists such as John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman.

Tim Head's *Toxic Lagoon*: colour evidence of pollution imparts beauty even to poisonous matter

Recent colour photography — and here the British are no exception — also owes a great deal to the influence of two groups long associated with the use of colour film.

First there is — particularly from the '40s onwards — that multitude of snap-happy amateurs for whom Kodachrome and Kodacolour, with their bias towards reds, are tailor-made.

Then, in the '50s, commercial photographers using colour came to the fore, professionals working in the areas of advertising, fashion and magazine photography. Once at opposite ends of the spectrum, so to speak, the different attitudes of amateurs and professionals to subject-matter and technique have been absorbed into photographic practice (not to mention the influence of film and colour television).

At the moment, it would seem that most artist-photographers prefer their work to have the slick perfection of commercial photography, rather than the amateur's indifference to technique that suited the concerns of '60s conceptualists.

This is probably because, as Susan Beardmore observes in the catalogue, "the psychological power of colour is well established in the commercial sector. Precision of control is lucidly presented in most advertisements, whether described in the still photograph (a fiction of a concrete kind), or the seductive, equally persuasive, moving image."

Artists concerned with presenting ideas seem particularly attracted to commercial photography's powers of seduction. The photographs in Olivier Richon's *Iconologia* series look like those advertisements featuring expensive consumer goods displayed against rippling plush velvet or reflected in ornately framed mirrors. The odd pairing of distinctly antique images seems to offer the viewer a luxury of meanings while remaining elegant and elusive.

Of the other artists who stage images, Boyd Webb makes surreal assemblages resembling cratered lunar landscapes for the sole purpose of photographing them. The odd thing is that although Webb makes no secret of their artificiality, they still look real.

Ron O'Donnell's photograph of a room-sized construction, *The Great Divide*, turns a simulated suburban interior into an extravaganza of creeping consumer obsolescence and decay, while in *The Blues* triptych, Mitra Tabrizian and Andy Golding use the cinematic conventions of Hollywood film noir and texts appropriated from the British Film Institute's poster collection to make statements about racial encounters in a world where black can also mean coloured.

The problem with using colour photographs as visual evidence of pollution and environmental decay is that they are apt to make even the most toxic substances seem beautiful. This, I guess, is why Tim Head and Keith Arnatt approach environmental issues with a touch of irony.

Tim Head's stunning photographs are morbidly fascinating studio-staged representations of ecological disaster areas. They are alien landscapes in which soggy tissues float like islands in a Blue Loo lagoon, where barbiturates threaten to germinate in detergent deserts and monster munchies lie stranded on cellophane terrain.

In his *Polythene Palmers*, Keith Arnatt records with documentary faithfulness and precision the intrusion of consumer culture into the Arcadian landscape of Samuel Palmer. You will find none of the documentary photographer's stereotyped images of Northern Ireland in Paul Graham's pictures of Belfast, Strabane and Tyrone. The political situation in Ireland is implied through distance and absence rather than through direct confrontation.

When people do appear, as in *Republican Parade in Strabane*, their activities seem incidental to the scheme of things, just as the fall of Icarus is in Breughel's famous painting.