

Censored, courtesy the vocal minority

A COUPLE of weeks ago, a suspicious-looking object arrived in the post. The large buff envelope and the type-written address label were normal enough, but it felt strange.

Is this, I wondered, another of those lettergrammed communications from the Sunshine State, like the one from Luke Roberts stating that "John Nixon is not a real saint"? No, it was the wrong shape. Also, the contents felt too hard to be another pair of underpants with "the critic sees" on the crotch, posted from a suburb adjoining Essendon.

What emerged as I shook the envelope was a paper plate with patches of colour on it. Turning it over, I discovered that it was from the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. "The Director Grazia Gunn, the Board of Management and the friends of ACCA Committee request the pleasure of your company, at a barbecue for artists..."

Of course, it didn't take much to realise that besides giving artists the opportunity to meet the new director and those faceless individuals who constitute the centre's boards and committees, this exercise in public relations might not be unrelated to the departure of former director Richard Perram.

Perram may have gone, but a project initiated by him, Moral Censorship and the Visual Arts in Australia, with Alison Carroll as curator, is being shown at the ACCA.

The history of the censorship of artworks in Australia, which dates from the rise of local art establishments (art societies and such) in the 1850s, needs to be written, and this exhibition should provide the background for a more extensive study of the subject.

Although Carroll's catalogue essay is meant as an introduction, it is nevertheless packed with a wealth of information regarding the many incidents — some of them absurd, others more sinister in their implications and outcome — that are highlighted in a display of works (and reproductions when the originals were destroyed or unavailable) and related documents.

What comes through after viewing the show and reading the essays (including those that relate to legal matters by Justice Michael Kirby and Art Law's Natasha Serventy) is the random nature of censorship.

It seems that most attempts to censor artworks are the result of solitary complaints by members of the public who contact the police. They in turn have to decide whether to take further action that could lead to prosecution, as happened to Mike Brown in the 1960s, and the destruction of the offending works — or reproductions, as in the recent

Art

Moral Censorship and the Visual Arts in Australia
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art
Melbourne

ROBERT ROONEY

case of the Queensland State Library shredding copies of books on the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

The role played by chance in such matters means that not all works with the potential to offend are noticed by these solitary protectors of public morality.

Take, for instance, the paintings of lovers in Laurence Hope's 1954 exhibition. Considering that five years earlier Rosaleen Norton's drawings were considered obscene and capable of depraving and corrupting the morals of all those who saw them, it is surprising that not one visitor to Mirka's Gallery thought Hope's naked couples reportable.

Blasphemous

Norton, who was already known for her interest in "black magic" was again in the headlines in 1952 when a book on her art was banned by the Post Office for transmission by mail because a number of diabolical paintings were said to be "too obscene or too blasphemous".

The earliest of Carroll's examples, as one might expect, focus on depictions of female nudity. Not even the choice

of classical subjects could protect Hiram Powers's statue *Greek Slave* (1855) or Bertram MacKenna's *Circe* (1893), which has been on display at the National Gallery of Victoria for many years, from charges of indecency.

As for Joseph Lefebvre's *Chloe* (1875), whose shapely figure is known to generations of Young and Jackson's patrons in Melbourne, it was once said that "no decent woman with her daughters could see the painting without feeling her cheeks tingling with shame".

In recent years, it would seem that the descendants of these Victorian mothers and daughters need to be protected against depictions of naked males.

One cannot imagine the farce over the presence of Michelangelo's *David* in department stores in the 1970s happening again, yet the sight of male genitalia was enough reason to have a photograph by Bernie O'Regan removed from display at the Blaxland Gallery in Myer's Melbourne store a few months ago. However, this incident is mild compared with the 1982 controversy surrounding Juan Davila's painting *Stupid as a Painter*, a work conspicuous by its absence from the exhibition.

In conclusion, it must be said that the artistic merits of the works are accepted without question by Carroll, when in fact a number of them are of little interest other than as evidence of the perversities of our censorship laws.



Rosaleen Norton's *The Witch's Sabbath*... 'black magic' had her banned