

# The censors' sensibilities

**N**ORMAN LINDSAY'S free-moving voluptuous nudes caused him and society a great deal of trouble in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1957, a hurt, angry and pressured Cliff Pugh painted out a female nude in one of his works. In 1964, Martin Sharp was convicted of obscenity for what now seem mild satirical cartoons. In 1973, a poster of Michelangelo's 'David' was banned by the vice squad, and, a year later, models of the sculpture in David Jones stores were ordered to be covered up. And last year, for the first time, an artist went to jail because she failed to pay a fine imposed against her by a male magistrate who deemed her homo-erotic language installation (not suitable for printing in this newspaper) obscene.

These are a few of a long list of wowsery reactions to art in Australia that have resulted in the exhibition 'Moral Censorship and the Visual Arts in Australia', now at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

Art historian Alison Carroll has organised a survey of 50 original paintings, photographs of destroyed paintings and erotic photographs censored in Australia from the 1850s onwards.

"My view is that last century, and the early part of this century, in Australia, it was more the female nude that was censored, and that since World War II, when the male nude has been depicted in a realistic way, it is the male nude that has become shocking."

## Interview

ANNA MURDOCH

What is regarded as obscene has become more complex. Last century it was as simple as a nude woman in classic pose. Now, no particular rules apply, the police can barge in and magistrates make judgments.

"Everyone has a reaction and this exhibition is a way to look back at our history and see if we are doing the same thing now for the same reactionary reasons. It is only since the '60s and '70s that prosecutions have happened to artists, although film has been accommodated mainly because it's big business.

"At the moment it is still hurtful to artists, and it is imposing restrictions on creative endeavor because people don't know where the guidelines are. Obviously, things sexual and erotic are a very important part of our lives."

Also on show is a book of photographs by the late American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, a victim of AIDS. The book was shredded by the State Library of Queensland recently. "I think one of the points of the show is that while some of it is funny, some artists are still being very hurt by it still. Because censorship laws are very unclear, you are so dependent on what the magistrate thinks is obscene, and you self-censor."

'Chloe', the beauty who has stood incongruously at the bottom of the hotel staircase of Young and Jacksons in Swanston Street since 1909, once caused a lot of fuss. She could not, however, be included in the exhibition because it would have taken the removal of a wall to get her there.

"'Chloe's' problem was that she was known to be a real woman who posed, whereas if she was called Venus you would not have the same problem because she was a mythological subject and that made it a didactic picture teaching us something about the classics," Ms Carroll said.

Many of the impressive foreign works in the exhibition were brought to Australia for the big international exhibitions at the end of last century, and somehow stayed. "One of the first acts of censorship that I've found in Australia happened in Melbourne in the 1850s with a sculpture called 'The Greek Slave', which was displayed in Swanston Street in a shop window. The mayor asked for it to be taken away and the owner wrote a letter to the paper saying: 'Who is to determine how many garments are to be worn by the inhabitants of Victoria?'"

*'Moral Censorship and the Visual Arts in Australia'* is at the ACCA, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra, until 15 October. A forum of legal people and artists will discuss law reform in art censorship at the ACCA on 19 September, starting 8 pm.