

## ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Short of mark as art or philosophy

Picture: PHILIP CASTLE

### ART

Robert MacPherson and Janet Burchill, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (until 17 February); **Monotypes**, Powell Street Gallery (until 21 February).

CHRISTOPHER HEATHCOTE

ROBERT MacPHERSON and Janet Burchill, who are currently exhibiting at ACCA, are artists who endeavor to come to grips with the latest ideas. Both are drawn to post-structuralist theory, having adopted the view that a work of art has no inner content, no underlying essence or meaning. Instead paintings and sculptures are to be regarded as just empty signs on to which each viewer projects an (arbitrary) interpretation.

In MacPherson's case this is not a decision which has been hastily reached as he has been producing conceptually oriented art for nearly 30 years. To my mind his most significant works date from 1975 when he began to systematically examine the possibilities of art. At that time MacPherson probed the materials from which works of art are formed (brush, ground, texture, tone) in his very reductive serial works; and the implications of the exhibition space (frame, wall, height, lighting) via his gallery installations. Over the past five years he has tended to assemble ready-mades, preferring to exhibit shoes, oars and campstretchers over which he positions decals spelling out the scientific names of hibernating and burrowing frogs.

Burchill is a more recent arrival to theoretical artistry, having developed her distinctive "deconstructive" paintings in the mid-1980s. What she did in these was paint on to a number of small colored panels a single word, usually "Aporia" or similar terms referring to an absence of meaning, which were borrowed from the writings of the French thinker Jacques Derrida.

These works immediately brought the artist to national attention; but despite this acclaim Burchill's works may represent a very deceptive form of painting-by-numbers. Surely there is more to intellectual activity than stooping to the parrot-like repetition of conceptually fashionable phrases?

The Neo-Platonic and Cartesian artists of former centuries, like Poussin and Velazquez, were certainly able to use art as a vehicle for theoretical inquiry without resorting to dabbling "Eidos" or "Cogito" on their canvases. Indeed, Derrida himself has already criticised



'Room Full of Paper Boats', by Robert MacPherson at the ACCA Gallery.

this approach overseas, saying that it lowers philosophy to a mindless recitation of buzz-words.

For this latest effort MacPherson has covered the floor of one room in ACCA with paper boats, the wall of a second with budgerigar nesting boxes, and also exhibited a typed list of the Latin names of 300 species of tree-frog.

Meanwhile Burchill exhibits two bland sculptural objects of wood, wire and rubber (which very obliquely refer to Rodin's 'Burghers of Calais' and 'Three Shades'), and an installation piece fabricated from screen-printed camouflage patterns wrapped over geometric forms.

According to the exhibition notes these unlikely units are intended to explore the implications of signification, the nature of the work of art, and the underlying "essence of the thing". That this claim contradicts the very basis for post-structuralist ideas (which, as mentioned, refute all theories of essences) does not occur to the artists or organisers. As a consequence this is not only bad art, but it is poor philosophy too! The MacPherson and Burchill show, like so many of ACCA's past displays, is more about trying to give an impression of being philosophical, rather than being philosophical in any rigorous sense.

POWELL Street Gallery starts off the year with a laid-back exhibition of monotypes. A difficult medium to handle, the monotype is an original unrepeatable print with the same status as a painting or drawing. The reason for this is that the artist paints a one-off design in colored inks upon a polished metal plate which is then printed on paper. Once this process has been carried through the printer's plate is quite blank and awaits another idea.

Of the gallery artists included, John Pearl keeps up to his usual poetic standard with his screen-like abstraction 'Four Figures' while 'Hudson Industrial' finds an enthusiastic Jan Senbergs aban-

doning brushes and opting for the unbridled fluidity of scrapers and fingerpainting. However, the real surprises are delivered by the Walker boys, Murray and John.

If some works lapse into his familiar childish clichés, Murray Walker's whimsical mauve images of masks and spirits are arguably the best works he has produced. Likewise, John Walker, whom I had considered one of the more overrated daubers of the 1980s, manages to deliver the goods in several pieces. Indeed, the shimmering oriental golds evoked in 'Number 14' testify to a concealed sensitivity in this otherwise excessively coarse painter.