

REVIEW

Heide gets formula right for artists in a group exhibition

THE group exhibition has played an important historical role on the Australian art scene. From the Heidelberg School's '9 by 5' show onward, the major artistic innovations have more often than not made their public appearance in such displays. Until the late-1960s, these events were wholly initiated and organised by the exhibitors themselves, usually without the benefit of commercial or institutional backing. The last two decades, however, have seen this pattern substantially change. Group exhibitions have been absorbed into our public galleries, so much so that today's contemporary spaces build their annual programs around topical group shows.

This shift has relieved artists of many burdens. But it has also entailed certain compromises, and sometimes clear risks, because control over the group exercise has passed from the participating artists to an exhibition curator. Taking a crucial position between the creator and the viewing public, this individual not only makes the decisions as to whom and what will be included, but invariably acts as an interpreter for the exhibits (usually via a catalogue essay).

Many curators organise such projects in a responsible manner, but every so often one has the impression that artists are manipulated. Indeed, several years ago I saw a curator assembling a selection of otherwise quite unrelated works of art in order to suit his personal whims. To make matters worse, he threatened to exclude from his Government-funded travelling show those artists who voiced their unease with his ideas.

'Room for Abstraction', Heide's current group project, demonstrates just what can be achieved when gallery staff relinquish some of these powers. James Harley, the exhibition's coordinator, has limited his involvement mainly to selecting the participating artists. The success or failure of the display therefore resides solely with the artists, who each hangs a section of the gallery with works in whatever way he or she desires.

'Room for Abstraction' is not a survey of present non-figurative tendencies.

ART

Room for Abstraction (Heide Park and Gallery, until 20 October); **Aleks Danko: What are you doing boy?** (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, until 22 September).

CHRISTOPHER HEATHCOTE

While the rationale behind Harley's choices is not mentioned, most of the participants were associated with 200 Gertrude Street Gallery — where he worked as an assistant — during the late 1980s. Together the group delivers a non-figurative show that is stylistically and philosophically broader than any I have seen at Gertrude Street for some years.

Four of the artists prefer a conservative approach. James Clayden and



КЛЕНТ (14).

A detail from Aleks Danko's 'What are you doing boy'.

Brent Harris isolate a few austere works in the center of the wall, while Neil Emmerson has lined his room with instant turf, in the middle of which he has placed an illuminated photograph of grass clippings. Diane Kilderry hangs about her space an array of dark gestural drawings that seem interesting, although they are unfortunately framed

and positioned in such a way that the viewers can clearly see only their reflections.

Kim Donaldson and Angela Brennan steal the show. If I worry about the aesthetic merit of Donaldson's seemingly trendy abstracts, she is not short of ideas when it comes to display. Her small reductive panels mounted on a blank grey field are imaginatively situated in difficult-to-hang spots, running around air vents, atmospheric monitors, railings and even through the gallery windows. Individually, Brennan's lolly-pop colored works are uneven, but together her densely clustered walls are as festive and visually entertaining as a Darryl Lea window display.

WHEN it comes to creativeness in artistic installation, 'What are you doing boy?', Aleks Danko's latest project, probably beats every other exhibition in town. Taking his childhood experiences as his subject matter, Danko explores the difficulties of growing up in Adelaide during the 1950s and 1960s, having to choose between the worlds of his Aussie schoolfriends and parents who wanted to impress upon him their own Ukrainian heritage. Danko is the kind of artist who gives a capital 'I' to the term Installation Art. Each room at ACCA has been transformed into a disorienting environment by the careful manipulation of light, color and human scale.

The main space refers to enforced after-hours Russian classes, containing an oversize schoolchair and simulated blackboard, the entire room being lined with giant (Glen Baxterish) illustrations and Cyrillic texts from old spelling books. A second sentimental enclosure represents his parents' twilight world of remembered European autumns spent in a cosy, and rather dreamlike, domesticity. The third — ironically entitled 'Eden' — alludes to the hard, saturated excess of ocker Australia, with stubbies mounted on galvanised steel obelisks (a witty reference to St Anzac's day?), sunlight that hurts the eyes, and an expanse of broken glass that crunches underfoot. 'What are you doing boy?' is without doubt installation art at its best!