

The year that turned back the creative clock a century

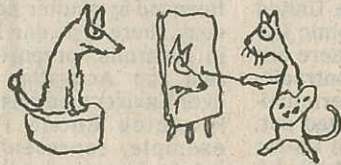
IF EVENTS over the past year have demonstrated anything, it must be that we are creatively much closer to the Victorians than to the Modernists.

The year 1992, or at least the art that was favored by our contemporary spaces during the year, had more in common with that of 1892 than anything that has occurred in the intervening century.

All the artistic values that disappeared with the Somme (such as didacticism, the Eurocentric "History" paradigm, the legitimization of cultural authority and the privilege of semantics over aesthetics) have returned with a vengeance. Even the hierarchy of genres has been reinstated, in an updated post-modern manner, of course.

Along the way, contemporary art has shed the last vestiges of its critical function and become part of the apparatus propping up the status quo. In this sense 1992 has been a year for conformism, conservatism and complacency; indeed, more than ever, the art scene has seemed to need — as Baudelaire once remarked — critical commentary that is "partial, passionate and political". However, the reviewer who attempts this, and refuses to genuflect to the established powers, is in an increasingly fragile position.

A year in the ARTS



ART 1992

CHRISTOPHER HEATHCOTE

The situation referred to by the British cultural theorist Raymond Williams in his final work, 'The Politics of Modernism' (1989), appears to have now evolved in Australia; all the noise about post-modern "pluralism" is probably a ruse devised to conceal the repressiveness of an emerging orthodoxy.

The days of the nonconformist and the stirrer are now numbered. Contrary to their rhetoric about supporting unconventional opinions, it seems to me that our arts institutions no longer tolerate the dissenting voice — and I say this from personal experience.

Looking back over 1992's exhibitions, Victoria was clearly blessed with seven exhibitors whose works met the highest artistic standards: Rick Amor,



Two of the year's best exhibitors: Helen Maudsley and John Brack.

John Brack, Lesley Duxbury, Douglas Green, Euan Heng, Helen Maudsley and Kevin Maritz.

In addition to this group, we have had many worthy shows by established artists and a high number of impressive efforts from less well-known figures. Of these, my list of the 10 most deserving, although under-rated, exhibitors for the year is: Stephen Bram (City Gallery), Sadie Chandler (Charles Nodrum), Juli Haas (Flinders



Lane), Ronnie Lawson (Lyttleton), John Miller (Girgis & Klym), Mervyn Moriarty (Sojourners), Catherine Temin (Sutton), Ben Ross (Judith Pugh), John Ryrie (Powell Street), Kim Westcott (Powell Street)

Beyond such issues, the gallery routine was more or less normal. Once again ultra-contemporary spaces promoted a small clique of cronies in a succession of group exhibitions that were hard to tell apart.

The annual Melbourne International Festival for the Arts distinguished itself for containing almost no visual art, just haute couture fashion and camp commercial graphics.

And, in addition to its umpteenth show of Turner-esque vistas, the National Gallery of Victoria's department of prints and drawings fawned over the works of ageing New Yorkers, while apparently ignoring a mounting wave of local talent.

We were also not short on exhibitions by figures who seemed to enjoy over-inflated reputations. I was puzzled by the attention given to exhibitions by Jon Campbell, Fred Cress, Juan Davila, Marilyn Fairskye, Deborah Halpern, Philip Hunter, Geoffrey Lowe, Mandy Martin, Stephen McCarthy and Rosslynd Piggott. But when it comes to awarding a wooden spoon Jon Cattapan's show was, in my opinion, the undisputed winner.

On a positive note, the catalogue essays were generally not as dismal, obscure and pretentious this year as last. ACCA, in particular, performed an unexpected about-face with Paul Carter's marvellous introduction for Ruark Lewis's drawing show — a piece to read over the summer, if you have not already seen it. I hope the days of art-speak are waning, and Carter will stimulate us with more of his thoughts on local contemporary art next year.