

Art and the art of raising children

Reconciling creativity with parental nurturing can be a tricky business. JANE FREEMAN reports

THE artist splashing paint about in a frenzy of creativity. The parent yawning through nappy changes and young mum coffee mornings.

These two images may be difficult to synthesise, but many artists in the '90s are attempting that integration, according to Elizabeth Gertsakis, curator of a new exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

The exhibition, 'Inherited Absolute — Artists with Children', explores the unexpected reverberations of parenthood for post-modernist artists.

Gertsakis claims that some young artists in their 30s and 40s find themselves tired and bored with exhibitions and sales, dogged by a feeling that the art world has failed them. They look elsewhere and find the answer in chatty guides to successful breast feeding. The problem remains how to mix the individual's creative drive with the dependent neediness of children.

The title of the show comes from the combination of the inheritance of a contemporary artist — the modernist tradition — and the absolutes that having children dictate.

"These artists have all been influenced by the late 19th-Century idea of the artist as a special kind of person, separate from everyone else around him or her, including family and other people," Gertsakis explains.

"They have come out of art school with a certain idea of how an artist should live, what they should look like. Now they are forming partnerships, having children — how do they lead normal lives and still continue to be artists?"

Gertsakis's exhibition was controversial from its genesis. Every level of the "art hierarchy" was sceptical about its importance, but she believes that child-rearing makes a fundamental difference to an artist's sensibilities.



Picture: CATHRYN TREMAIN

Curator Elizabeth Gertsakis with two works by Siobhan Ryan, 'Hunter' and 'Boudoir' (1991).

This is not a show about Vegemite-wholesome family values. The walls are hung with vivid, challenging, even disturbing canvasses, including a painting by Stephen Cox about the moors child murders in England and Warren Breninger's photographic images, 'The Sick Child'.

Gertsakis points out that there is more social consciousness in these works than you might expect to find; she attributes it to the physical link between a parent and the future. The works also exude a greater optimism and hope, a shift away from trendy apocalyptic nihilism.

Gertsakis sorts the works into seven themes — gender and sexuality, still life/interiors, pattern and symbol, fragmentation and serialisation, theories of order and chaos, epic narrative, the family narrative.

Artist Philip Faulks, 33, has two

sons, Hart, 4, and Paris, eight months. He was a reluctant 28-year-old father who was told briskly by his own mother to cheer up because his son might be the one to save the world.

Now he says his two sons have triggered new themes in his work; most strongly, a re-evaluation of his own relationship with his family.

However, the financial drain of two children has also altered his work patterns. He now has a day job and paints mainly at night, or one day of the week when the children are both at creche.

Siobhan Ryan, 32, admits that if she had to make a decision, she would probably never have felt she had enough time to have a child. When she found she was pregnant, one week after her father's death, it felt like a natural cycle of regeneration. She now has a two-year-old son, Hunter.

She was not prepared for the alienation she felt as one of the few people in her peer group to become pregnant. She says many of her contemporaries are too scared of losing their "place in the art race" to have a child. Women artists have always had a rough time, she believes, and women artists with children are relegated to a lesser category.

She remembers visiting a Sydney dealer when she was pregnant, who told her she should come back to him once she had the baby and had decided she still wanted to be a painter.

"Even now, I get people who are surprised that I am painting."

► 'Inherited Absolute — Artists with Children' runs until 23 August at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Arts, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra. Phone 654 6422.

FISHING

GEOFF WILSON

FOLLOWING good reports from Rocklands Dam in western Victoria, Gary Beardon of Belmont made the journey but found the fishing had somewhat slowed.

Nevertheless, he managed to catch four rainbow trout to 1.1 kilograms, all taken on mud-eye fished under a float near the main wall. Local anglers revealed that most recent action had come from the Glendinning Arm and near Pendyke Creek. Advice from that area is to wait for the heavy rains when the fish will be at the edge of the lake feeding as the water covers new ground.

BARRY and Margaret Carter of Hollands Landing on the Gippsland Lakes report good catches of bream continue to be taken from McLennan Strait. Ken Dawson of Drwinn Point took 15 fish to 800 grams, Don Hanson of Sale took another three, Laurie McMillan of Maffra took one of almost a kilogram and Brian Dymond took 12 bream and 29 mullet.

BIG flathead become rather scarce around the shallow sand flats at this time of year, but this doesn't stop Freddy Bayes, the doyen of flathead fishing from seeking them out. A recent trip to Mallacoota saw Fred in action on the big frogs once more, but even he admits they took a bit of finding. In fact, it took two days of prospecting until he found a patch of good fish. In calm conditions, he took eight magnificent flathead to 4.32 kilograms casting a "frog spoon" while wading the flats in the bottom lake. When the wind blew up in the afternoon, he took another two on live mullett.

► I thank everybody who wrote to me and will reply to all mail accompanied with a stamped, addressed envelope. Write to Geoff Wilson, P.O. Box 384, ...