

Focus on Asian relations

TO judge from the recent pronouncements of certain economy-conscious but apparently culturally ignorant politicians, they would have us believe that an awareness of Asia and the need to forge links with our Asian neighbours are notions they alone have invented.

Long before 1990, when Asialink was set up "to foster and encourage a more Asia-aware and Asia-literate Australia", it seemed that there was hardly an Australian composer who wasn't acknowledging the influence of South-East Asian or Japanese music on his or her compositions, and no doubt one could chart a similar awareness of Asian culture among several generations of visual artists.

It may have been less organised and institution-
alised than now, but it was there nevertheless.

With regard to official exhibitions, at least two come quickly to mind. One was the Australia Council survey Daniel Thomas selected, *The Australian Landscape 1802-1975*, which was seen in Beijing and Nanjing; the other was Permand-anagan Alaam Khayal: *Landscape and Image: A Selection of Australian Art of the 70s*, curated by Bernice Murphy, which travelled to Indonesia in 1981.

During the 80s, when Japan was a prime target, most travelling surveys of contemporary Australian art were not so biased towards the landscape. This is the position adopted by the organisers of *Location*, an exhibition of photo-based work by Australian artists, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, which counts Asialink among its supporters and is destined to travel to Jakarta, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Singapore and Japan. Its purpose, we are told, is "to further the exchange of art, artists and ideas between Australia and Asia".

The photograph's status as an object is the chief concern of John Dunkley-Smith, Kevin Todd, Anne Zahalka and others whose works can take many forms, including books, light-boxes and unframed prints. And while the show's curator, Juliana Engberg, observes that "*Location* may be a misleading title to those looking for clues of the Australian identity and true-to-life renditions of touristic or scenic points of interest", such elements are often present, albeit in a staged, constructed or editorialised form, either as structures upon which new works are built or in order to subvert photographic conventions.

What the busloads of snap-happy Asian tourists who invade the streets and sites of our major cities would make of these works if they saw them in Jakarta, Japan and other home territories, one can only guess. Those in the best position to know will be the artists and officials one assumes will accompany the show to its Asian venues.

PERHAPS they would find something numbingly familiar in the endlessly merging banalities of Dunkley-Smith's *Exterior with Palms*, an installation consisting of 324 colour slides of seaside suburbia which are projected in pairs in the corner of a darkened room. Something akin to crowded photo albums and carousels, and other souvenirs of their own arbitrarily structured travels.

In her essay, Helen Ennis talks of "photography as we know it (standing) tremulously on the brink of its own dissolution". Meanwhile, Dunkley-Smith's quartet of loaded carousels go on clunking and clattering as they dispense their seemingly random seaside views.

After *Exterior with Palms* I had difficulty adjusting to the stillness of Ian North's *Home and Away*—I could have sworn that the island on the left of the second diptych was slowly merging with a shadowy form. The island is in fact an iceberg from one of Frank Hurley's classic photographs of Antarctica, which North has paired with J. Dixon Scott's pictures of the English countryside. To these black-and-white images North has added gestural touches of yellow and magenta paint.

Engberg writes that "the colonial fusion of the 'motherland' of England is made unpalatable by means of North's satirical use of the unlikely matched images". Coming to the catalogue after the show, and being somewhat indifferent to much of its analytical contents, I saw neither ugliness nor satire nor suggestions of the

GALLERIES

MELBOURNE: Location/Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

By Robert Rooney

exploitative aspects of colonialisation", but Romanticism revisited. On the wall nearby, David Stephenson makes use—in his panoramic *Lorne, Square Zawn*—of one of 19th-century German Romanticism's most serviceable icons, that of a solitary, silhouetted figure facing a vast, mountainous landscape in Caspar David Friedrich's *Traveller Looking over the Sea of Fog*.

"There are eight million stories in the naked city; this has been one of them." So ended each episode of *Naked City*. First a film, then a television series, it was named after a collection of photographs by Arthur H. Fellig, a press photographer known professionally as Weegee.

In Robyn Stacey's Cibachrome slices of life, *All the Sounds of Fear*, the stark reality of Weegee's on-the-spot crime images has given way to photo-computer fabrications in garish colour which are authentic insofar as they capture the essence of the Big Cities we know best from filmic narrative of crime and violence.

By comparison, Rozalind Drummond's shifty-eyed black and white photographs of subway terminals with banks of video screens and 'copter-view views of city streets and buildings from the *Shadow Zone* series seem detached and spookily claustrophobic, while the white-suited male commuter on a freeway facing the Sydney skyline in Zahalka's *Traveller* is as formally posed as a model in a Norito Yoshimura spread in Japan's *Mr High Fashion*.

There are 13 artists in *Location*; these are some of them.