

**J**ON CATTAPAN'S latest show, his best for some time, raises some important questions about our expectations of artists approaching the mid-career' classification. Like a number of young practitioners who suddenly made it big in the 1980s, he seemed to start exhibiting at a cracking pace. A signature style quickly developed, an enthusiastic following built up, and predictions were made for a long and distinguished future.

Ten years down the cultural track, and the artist's works have been beginning to look tired and repetitive. Cattapan is not an isolated instance here, for this apparent slump in performance afflicts many of his peers (Philip Hunter, Jan Murray and Guiseppe Romeo immediately spring to mind).

Rather than suggesting that the artist has run out of creative energy, I suspect that in Cattapan's case his main handicap may be the contemporary art system as such, particularly a widespread assumption that painting is the ultimate measure of ability. The fact of the matter is that to be taken seriously today an artist has to produce a certain proportion of big pictures. Anything else and you're just not felt to be in the race (even younger photographers are now making works which imitate heroic paintings).

# Jon Cattapan at his best

## ART REVIEW

**Jon Cattapan** (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, until 4 April). **Tibor Wiener, 1907-69** (Charles Nodrum Gallery, until 20 March). **Heather Ellyard** (Luba Bilu Gallery, until 27 March).

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However, the works in his current show suggest Cattapan excels not in painting, but in the graphic arts. To compare the selection of feeble semi-watercolors and smeary pastels — the apparent record of an unsuccessful struggle to control the color, density and plasticity of his media — with his more concise, unfussed black and white drawings, should be ample proof of this: the artist is at his most inventive when articulating his thoughts with line.

This is especially so with the 'Sister' series. Developed presumably with much use of free-association, and a

pronounced touch of Dubuffet and Picasso, they have an unaffected freshness. Most represent two abstracted figures, apparently male and female, who are seen with pets, furniture, cars and various domestic props. They are unmistakable symbols for emotional experiences, the two figures being alternately thrust together and pulled apart by social events taking place around them. The entire series seems to form a meandering narrative, leading the viewer through meetings, conversations and moments of intimacy.

Yet as one traces the changes in their relations the finished pieces manage, in some inexplicable manner, to evoke feelings of pent-up sorrow and loss. Cattapan's blunt lines tap an expressionist nerve; and it is little surprise to discover that these lonely images form a response to the death of his sister.

Make no mistake, there were to my mind deficiencies with his previous exhibition of paintings, problems echoed in several of the 'Red Figure' and 'Under New York' pieces seen here. However, the 'Sister' images are the best

compositions Cattapan has exhibited, and must be counted among the most moving drawings to yet be produced by an artist of his generation.

**TIBOR WIENER** (1907-69), a visionary painter who fled to Australia from Central Europe during 1939 and thereafter spent much of his creative life in relative isolation, is the subject of a fascinating survey at Nodrum gallery. There is an effervescent joy about his later works, which tend to paraphrase Chagall and other painters from the School of Paris.

But Wiener's best pictures have the wintery seriousness of a Russian tale: they are heavy, dark, brooding. For example, 'Number 11', represents a cohort of plump, fleshy trees which seem, upon first glance, like people reaching out and trying to embrace each other; and on second, like tentacles ready to seize the unwary traveller. While they are less suggestive of the occult, there are similarly unsettling undertones to the peasant cottages, bowl of quinces and bleak harlequins in 'Number 7',

'Number 14' and 'Number 21'. There is little prettiness about such paintings; for the artist was more concerned with getting down to the gritty truth.

This temperament is as much suggested by Wiener's method of execution as his subject matter. The three unflattering self-portraits, for instance, dispense with naturalistic color and are orchestrated around jarring crimson and viridians. More striking still is his grasp of tone and tactility: there is much subtlety in the near blacks, and the paintwork often has the texture of a very thick, very dry scab.

**DESCRIBED** by the artist as 'a self-portrait in pieces', Heather Ellyard's exhibition consists of an intricate system of paintings, drawings, charts, diagrams and geometric compositions. They outline an alphabet of visual motifs: Neolithic images of women, bulls on heat, central core imagery, a Bataille-like eye, schematic sketches of the female nude, containers, isometric projections, and parts of the painter's face. Each has been precisely executed on a small square panel, individual works then being assembled into large gridded configurations. Overall, the show seems rather programmatic, and more concerned with presenting an idea than making a work of art. But it is carried off with style.