

Long and the short of a return to basics

FOR a person whose themes include astronomy, physics, design and physiology, Robert Owen's latest exhibition is unusually tight and simple. After all his dabbling in broad scientific pursuits, he has settled back into explorations with colour and returned to essentials.

George Alexander has described Owen as a "a rhapsodist of the senses at a time when we are in the business of divorcing the mind from the senses", an artist who is "deeply entangled with the pleasures of the materials: its colours, its textures, its light effects and so on".

In his latest exhibition Owen appears to be having a personal reconciliation within himself of both materials and pleasures. After a frustratingly brief episode trying to gain computer time at the Collaborative Information Technology Research Institute, Owen saw similarities with the computer screens' colour pixels and his earlier concerns in the exploration of geometrical shapes and pure colours.

These works originate in the '60s from Owen's interest in the grid and origami. Not an unusual interest for a

sculptor who would become professor at RMIT. Indeed the origami provides a primitive teaching exercise - fold a piece of paper into a 3D form and witness the sculptural form belying its original flatness.

Despite the slight blurring when the blocks of eight colours are butted up against one another (on a four by four grid) they don't play on any Op Art trickery or sleight of hand. Owen's slabs of colour aim for a new appreciation of colour. He repetitively uses colours in different combinations mimicking the pixel of the computer screen and creating interlocking rods.

These concerns govern the work in the main room with its six paintings in the Origami series but use the mural dividing the two rooms as a pivot or a transit - to use Alexander's terminology - for the shift between formal, non-representational and the representational works in the smaller room.

The huge mural titled *Sunrise* which fills the entire wall of City Gallery demonstrates the artist revelling in colour. In this work - an expanded or blown out version of the works appearing on the opposite wall

ART RAY EDGAR

ROBERT OWEN: City Gallery
(until April 2)

JON CATTAPAN: Australian
Centre for Contemporary Art
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- Owen blasts the eye with the recurring eight colours.

Using these colours on an architectural scale at once creates the feeling of an emerging sunrise and its intrinsic parts of colours by suggesting a spectrum.

Basking in the smaller room on the other side of the sunrise is a colour field of flowers. The Iris series uses fewer colours and instead of randomly shifting the blocks of colour, rotates three blocks at a time with one dominating two-by-two grid in the centre.

Apart from gathering a strength in simple but bold representation, the title can't help but conjure an even more expressionistic reference to Van

Gogh's blooms, bridging both formalism's cool colour field and representation's more expressionistic moments.

The irony for an artist who often loads his installations with complex mythic and scientific theorems is that he has found a simplicity that combines science but powerfully recognises the art as pre-eminent. For a Robert Owen show it is refreshing, for a current exhibition it is compelling.

JON Cattapan's journal entries at JACCA on the other hand are overloaded with emotion and imagery. Far from Owen's bold exercises in clean colour, Cattapan's surrealist diary entries are maps to the psyche. But Cattapan is no less a rhapsodist of the senses.

Using many of the surrealism's stock motifs - a Miro-like howling dog, sickle-like moons, overlapping and distorted bodies, tear drops, Dadaist X-ray imagery - Cattapan conjures with varying success the angst of loneliness either by tragedy or locale.

Occasionally Cattapan

incorporates humour as, in one instance, photographers, stooped and cloaked in camera equipment, attempt to capture a freakish object on film. To the observer it is an alien mirror image.

With their tighter construction and more graphic imagery of people clashing head-on, the Sister drawings are the strangest of the three series on display. The viewer in his Canberra and New York series is less dominant, more distanced.

If one is to use Surrealism's initial brief that the unconscious drawings would map the road to the psyche, perhaps one can read into these "diary" notes that Cattapan is not asserting himself in a career that peaked early while also being lost in New York and Canberra. With his confidence eroded he is the swirling confused figure seen in many of the works. Not that that is a bad thing.

The two exhibitions highlight the value of even the simplest stock-take. In Owen's case the value of simplicity is revealed; for Cattapan, the opportunity to capitalise on the strengths exhibited in the earlier works.