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Gay art comes out of its bondage

■ Does Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras run the risk of ghettoising its artists, or does it celebrate a uniquely homosexual sensibility? **Joanna Mendelssohn** investigates

THE late Pierre Molinier's photographs confront with their high camp S & M fetish images at Sydney's Martin Browne Gallery, while at Roslyn Oxley9 a show called Queerography celebrates both the sexual identity and varieties of sexuality of younger gay and lesbian artists.

Molinier, an acclaimed and controversial French surrealist, began taking photographs of himself as the "divine hermaphrodite" in 1965. He was then in his 60s and a collection of his photographs (he pictured himself in bondage drag) has been brought to Sydney by the Australian Centre for Photography for this year's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

The Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has expanded from its origins as a fringe event and with performance, film and art exhibitions is now very much part of the mainstream. The 1994 festival, which opened yesterday and runs until March 5, offers one of the most comprehensive showcases of lesbian and gay art yet assembled in this country. Even the staid Blaxland Gallery in Grace Bros Sydney department store has joined in with Remain in Light, an exhibition of 20 gay and lesbian photographers, including Luke Roberts, William Yang, Scott Redford, Seymour Hardy, Vivienne Binns and Anita Modok.

The question which arises from this visual celebration of gay and lesbian art is the same that has been debated for some years in both literature and the performing arts. Is there really a separate homosexual sensibility in art, or has the separate culture of sexual preference merely appropriated elements from other mainstream cultures?

"There's no one specific gay sensibility," says Professor Liz Ashburn, who this year will be teaching a new course in lesbian and gay art at the College of Fine Arts, University of NSW. "What we have is a variety of cultures, related in different ways. Within the gay and lesbian communities there is a need to have a culture other than mainstream for particular diverse groups. Because of the diversity, which includes race and class as well as gender, there are huge divisions.

"But all these tensions are what makes the Mardi Gras viable and exciting. There is the conflict of feminist sensibility, S & M and exhibitionism. We do have a history of being oppressed. We've been carted off to concentration camps, psychiatric hospitals and been publicly disgraced. So now we look away from the oppressive labelling to provide a label that is positive."

If in the past artists were under social (and legal) pressures to suppress evidence of their sexuality, in these politically correct times the pressure can be the other way. Which leads to another problem. If Patrick White were known primarily as a gay writer, rather than a writer speaking to all readers, surely it would diminish rather than enhance his reputation. Acknowledging sexuality or sexual identity is one issue, placing creative workers into ghetto-like boxes is another.

"If you can have women's art and Aboriginal art then you can and should have gay art," says Paul Foss, editor of the leading art journal Art and Text. There is some gay art for reasons of political correctness; the kind of work carried out by ACT-UP. But another far more interesting sort of gay art is that which attempts to investigate at a more formal level how gender, identity and sexuality are constructed historically and aesthetically.

"I think this most recent type of practice will remain with us for some time to come," says Foss.

In terms of content of the offerings at this year's Mardi Gras, the parallels are not with the classical ideals of Greece or the Renaissance, which inspired homosexual artists in the past, but rather with the kind of sexually provocative teasing that has always been very much a part of any kind of sexual confrontation.

The "shocking" art of Norman Lindsay in the first half of this century was a necessary prelude to the liberal attitudes of recent years. Lindsay used ridicule and contempt as reasonable visual and literary images to preach the kind of sexual liberation that reached its climax in Playboy in the 1960s. When Lindsay started to paint pubic hair on his nudes it was a deliberate act of sexual provocation, just as the plots of his novels where the parson's daughter and the Sunday school member became pregnant were a great joke on the forces of moral rectitude.

"Teasing the censors and sexual parody are very potent weapons for change," says Sheona White, who also lectures at the College of Fine Arts. "Think of Mae West in the 30s, and how she continued to challenge the restrictions that were placed around her."

HALF the fun would go out of the annual Mardi Gras Parade if the fundamentalists were not standing there in outraged disapproval. But for some in the gay and lesbian community even the family groups who watch the spectacle of the parade for its excitement and panache are suspect.

"You almost feel put in a position where you have to confront them," says Michelle Barker, who is both co-curator (with Andy Davey) and exhibitor in Queerography. "People come and watch, but it's still a spectator sport. It's still us and them."

She adds: "They still go out and bash people."

If the shock value were removed from Molinier's photographs, along with the chains, bare bums and suspender belts, there would be little interest. And for those people who are not actually turned on by Andy Davey's detailed images of erect or fuzzy penises, or C. Moore Hardy's lesbian fetishism, there is some old-fashioned libertarian comfort in the notion that once these images stop being thought offensive they may simply be seen for what many of them are: boring.

But not all sexually confronting and politically motivated art is mediocre. In the late 60s Vivienne Binns terrified art critics with her Vag Dens, paintings which fitted no category known to man. They were tough and jagged exquisite confrontations over the very nature of painting and sexual identity.

But if some of the work of younger gay and lesbian artists in this year's Mardi Gras seems banal, and the explicit sexuality both boring and distasteful, then it is better than the alternative. Even an elementary knowledge of our local art history leads to the sad life of Elioth Gruner. He is remembered by art lovers for his muted green landscapes and beach scenes. But letters of his friends of the 20s and 30s show a man who dared not reveal his sexual inclinations, and whose attempts to conform to the straitjacket of middle-class society led to alcoholism and depression.

The confrontations of the sexual teasers and the militant gay and lesbian artists have freed this generation from the pain.