

Questions of Faith

FAITH IS one of those over-used and under scrutinised words which, like the word *art*, runs a risk in the contemporary world of becoming conceptual diarrhoea. As terms today, both *faith* and *art* are stretched over such a huge and diverse range of ideas and practices that they are nearing transparency and in danger of being replaced altogether by the more tangible and specialised reality of words such as "environment", "economic", "ethnic". One wonders if there is any space left for spiritual convictions in a context as woven into the swinging tail of contemporary political and sociological theory- as- art.

Two artists are exploring these questions in two utterly different exhibitions. The one thing that Irene Barberis's show at Luba Bilu Gallery and John Nixon's at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art have in common is a preoccupation with the current manifestations of faith; the possibility of an innate truth, beauty, purity or otherwise, an all-encompassing natural authority in the realm of art.

While their notions of art are almost incompatible, both artists are presenting private manifestoes (or scriptures) on what constitutes their particular belief system in the form of somewhat epic surveys of large chunks of their past work. Barberis's show is the culmination of a two-year Masters degree but covers territory she has traversed during the past 14 years during private research and more recent studies in Medieval illuminated manuscripts.

Nixon's represents a 25-year pilgrimage to the heart of Modernism and is promoted as a homage to his two most consistent efforts to transcend traditional narrative and subjective notions of art making: the "monochrome" (essentially black paintings of various sizes) and the "ready-made" (a direct reference to Marcel Duchamp's first challenges to art's orthodoxy in the early 20th century).

While the two exhibitions share the visual vocabulary of abstraction and chose to convey their thoughts via the contemporary theatrics of installation, their messages are distinct and literally worlds apart. Barberis names her collection of wall pieces, free standing objects and delicately crafted books of images "The Spiritual and the Mundane".

ANNA CLABBURN sees two exhibitions with very different views about faith in the modern world.

Her art is a vehicle for a creative outpouring of personal faith as well as a sign of her belief in the communicative qualities of art. She obviously expends enormous quantities of energy creating work of astounding volume and intricacy. Words of scripture are embroidered on layers of veil-thin paper while vast and intensely coloured panels cover the majority of walls in Luba Bilu's space. It is an astounding effort of craft as well as a profound exposition of the artist's faith and is worth visiting for either aesthetic or intellectual purposes.

Down on The Domain at ACCA, Nixon calls his show "Thesis". This can be read as a sly ode to his love of the minimal statement, and blatantly states the intellectual premise of his work. Nixon is no Romantic and, unlike Barberis, establishes his faith in art as a process of enquiry into past notions of what constitutes great or 'pure' Art. There is no figuration to be seen besides the various familiar objects he uses to construct his "ready-mades": a magazine, a thesaurus, a piano. Each room is a sparse statement of his faith in art's perennial ability to find value within its own trope; outside of and beyond the confines of contemporary visual reality.

Seen in the light of a detailed and informative catalogue with interviews and recent essays, Nixon's work is both interesting and significant in its critique of the meaning of art in the context of art's history. However, his visual and literary references to ideas of historical practitioners — the Russian Constructivists, Joseph Beuys, Duchamp and other intellectual hard-edgers — is unashamedly derivative. This is not a problem, he appears to say in the catalogue interview, as originality is as anachronistic as subject matter: "The function of the artist is to act as a laboratory of ideas of the experiment of art...Here there is a belief in a non-objective art, a non-narrative art, one which does not tell stories but deals with the fundamental principles of Art".

It is unfortunate for Nixon that the ambience exuded by his labours is of a rather depressing cynicism rather than

of enlightened liberation from the referential world. Throughout these rooms of hard objects punctuated by poignant empty gallery wall there is a dawning sense that the idea has won out over the object.

Maybe the problem with Nixon's work, in today's context and in comparison with Barberis' unquestioning celebration of faith, is that it is ungenerous. An art which requires documentation to describe its purpose is becoming a problem in a society that is accustomed to having most of its visual reality explained as candidly as a television commercial or news broadcast. This is not suggesting that art needs to become obvious in its meaning or that Nixon is not a very significant Australian artist. Rather, the moral of this fable is that undisguised faith in visual creative expression is more infectious and conducive to the longevity of art than intellectual excavations which solely reassess art's past.

*Irene Barberis continues at Luba Bilu Gallery until 12 March, tel: 529 2433.
John Nixon continues at ACCA until 20 March, tel: 654 6422*