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# Time is ripe for gallery reforms

Art

Jan Nelson. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, South Yarra, until 10 July. Chris Booth. Meridian Gallery, Fitzroy, until 8 July.

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THE MELBOURNE art scene is optimistic about the prospect of a Museum of Contemporary Art opening soon. Even those who do not trust officialdom believe that another art space should inject some life into the gallery circuit. Surprisingly, most are supporting it in the hope that it will offer an alternative approach to the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, which is increasingly described by many leading artists and dealers as a moribund venue. Indeed, even unestablished artists have been speaking out against ACCA (mainly on 3RRR FM's art show).

Whether we get the MCA or not, the time does seem ripe for reform at ACCA. The centre's essential problem involves a lack of artistic diversity, for it tends to interpret the term contemporary in a very narrow sense. One suspects that the tail has been trying to wag the dog, for ACCA has seemingly tried to direct the course of art by favoring works that meet a constrictive ideological agenda.

Thus, instead of endeavoring to aid all that is most fresh and imaginative in a pluralist manner, the centre's exhibition program seems to me to be based on certain convictions about which idioms ought to prevail.

The outcome has been a sequence of shows that all but a few viewers find monotonous and boring, as the gallery's attendance figures demonstrate. ACCA's dwindling supporters respond to criticism mainly by blaming all on the centre's location, size and fittings (although it possesses superior facilities to nearly every commercial gallery in town). It is said that things will be set right if ACCA gets a bigger, lavishly equipped building. But it seems to me that little will change: artists will be confronted with the same shortcomings on a larger scale.

ACCA's current show of installations by Jan Nelson seems fairly indicative of the present artistic condition. I am always reminded of the Woody Allen film 'Zelig' whenever I come across Nelson's works. The central character in 'Zelig' was a pure cipher, a man without a definite identity who altered physically and psychologically to mirror those around him.

Likewise, in only a decade, Nelson has managed to be a gutsy quasi-German expressionist painter, then a code-scrambling disciple of David Salle, and even an ironic deconstructor of the landscape tradition. Make no mistake, this accomplished artist's pictures have always been devised and executed in a stylish and proficient manner, but one worries that nothing individual has been articulated behind the visual polish. Nelson's output appears to blend seamlessly into whatever curatorial fad is going.

The latest show sees Nelson make a timely switch from painting to installation art. She has arranged a sequence of innocuous plaster ornaments (which are presumably influenced by the New York artist Jeff Koons) around ACCA's main space. The apparent purpose is to draw our attention to how the internal environment found within a modern gallery can impinge on the exhibits to modify and distort their meaning. Present a piece one way and it conveys certain significances; alter the presentation and all is reconfigured.

This has been accomplished by subdividing the large room into an olive-green museum space and a clinical Modernist 'white cube'. Within these two environments, Nelson displays not works of high art, but her plaster casts of everyday items (buckets, rocks, branches) and kitsch statuettes (a milkmaid, a barrel, a modified jasperware vase). They have been positioned atop a bizarre array of pedestals, including plain white pedestals, varnished timber pedestals, untreated plywood pedestals, felt pedestals, a wickerwork pedestal, and even a jokey pedestal made of stacked colored cushions. Point taken.

CHRIS BOOTH has assembled some mighty sculptures out of boulders gathered and quarried from Castlemaine and Gariwerd. He lashes together oddly shaped lumps of sandstone and slate in a series of neolithic-like pylons that tilt and lean dangerously about Meridian Gallery.

One has some reservations about the final



Jan Nelson's 'Homage to Milkmaid': a timely switch from painting to installation art.

effect in 'Numbers 2, 3 & 4'. Booth has probably placed theatrical ahead of plastic concerns by using the gallery space to create a dramatic effect, rather than treating each piece as a self-sufficient object.

But there is an astonishing and quite moving simplicity to 'Celebration of Stone' in the gallery's foyer, which distinctly recalls primitive ritual sites. It consists of four waist-high granite boulders, each weathered and flecked with lichen, which unevenly surround a towering menhir-like sandstone column. The latter is veined with flaky red sediments and supports another solid granite lump as it rises several metres over the viewer's head — a highly emotive work that must be experienced to be truly understood and appreciated.