

ABOVE AND BEYOND

Austral/Asian Interactions. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne.

LAST Friday the call of duty found me viewing Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian Interactions at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, the latest in a decade of exhibitions promoting exchange between Australian artists and their counterparts in the Asia-Pacific region.

Death may well be warming up as a fashionable topic for consideration in the late 20th century, but the dialogue between East and West, as encouraged by such surveys, would seem to offer curators a greater range of possibilities, particularly if one considers that Australia already has a history of artists travelling to and being influenced by Asia, or that the cultures and artistic practices of Asian countries are no more the result of pure breeding than our own.

These factors are acknowledged by the show's curators, Clare Williamson and Michael Snelling, in a passing reference to Margaret Preston, Ian Fairweather and Donald Friend, and in the observation that "Thai art draws from Chinese, Indian and Khmer influences, Indonesian art reflects a synthesising of Hinduism and Islam with Javanese mysticism, while Japanese Yamato-e style was developed from Tang Dynasty painting from China".

Earlier exhibitions from Asia are given the brush-off for presenting "traditional and historical work in keeping with an Orientalist view of the region as an inscrutable other, as existing in another time as well as another space from our own". Ah, the inevitable wisdom of now.

However, it could also be said — Edward Said notwithstanding — that exposure to the traditional arts and crafts of Asia assists in our understanding of the works of contemporary artists from the same cultures, works that can contain vestiges of traditional images and techniques despite the ever-increasing influence of Western art styles, especially those located within modernism and post-modernism.

In Ah Xian's *The Disappearance of Mona Lisa*, one of three works in which images are transmitted by photocopying and fax machines, the process is not unlike that used by Ian Burn in his Xerox books (1969). Whereas in Burn's case a succession of next-generation copies of a blank sheet of paper resulted in masses of dots and other imperfections, Xian's sequence of 1000 black and white copies of the *Mona Lisa* chart its gradual disappearance, a situation reversed when selected copies are transmitted by fax.

According to Xian, however, these works are related in part to concepts in the Chinese philosophies of Yi Jing and Tai Chi.

Since Heirloom closed last June at the Monash University Gallery, there have been at least three other exhibitions dealing with aspects of cross-cultural exchange with Asia besides Above and Beyond.

Rapport, a joint venture of Monash University and the Singapore Art Museum, where it was shown, brought together Australian and Singaporean artists. There was also the display of works by Australians such as Tony Scott, Kim Westcott and Jayne Dyer, *Oblique Travellers* (which travels next month to Beijing), and Chinese Abstraction, which both showed at the Michael Wardell Gallery.

With the Wardell shows still fresh in one's mind, it is tempting to compare the works chosen for them with those in Above and Beyond. The immediate thought is that neither *Oblique Travellers* nor Chinese Abstraction is the kind of display one would expect to see at the ACCA, as the emphasis in each case is on conventional medium such as painting and print-making with a preference for calligraphic marks and grid patterns.

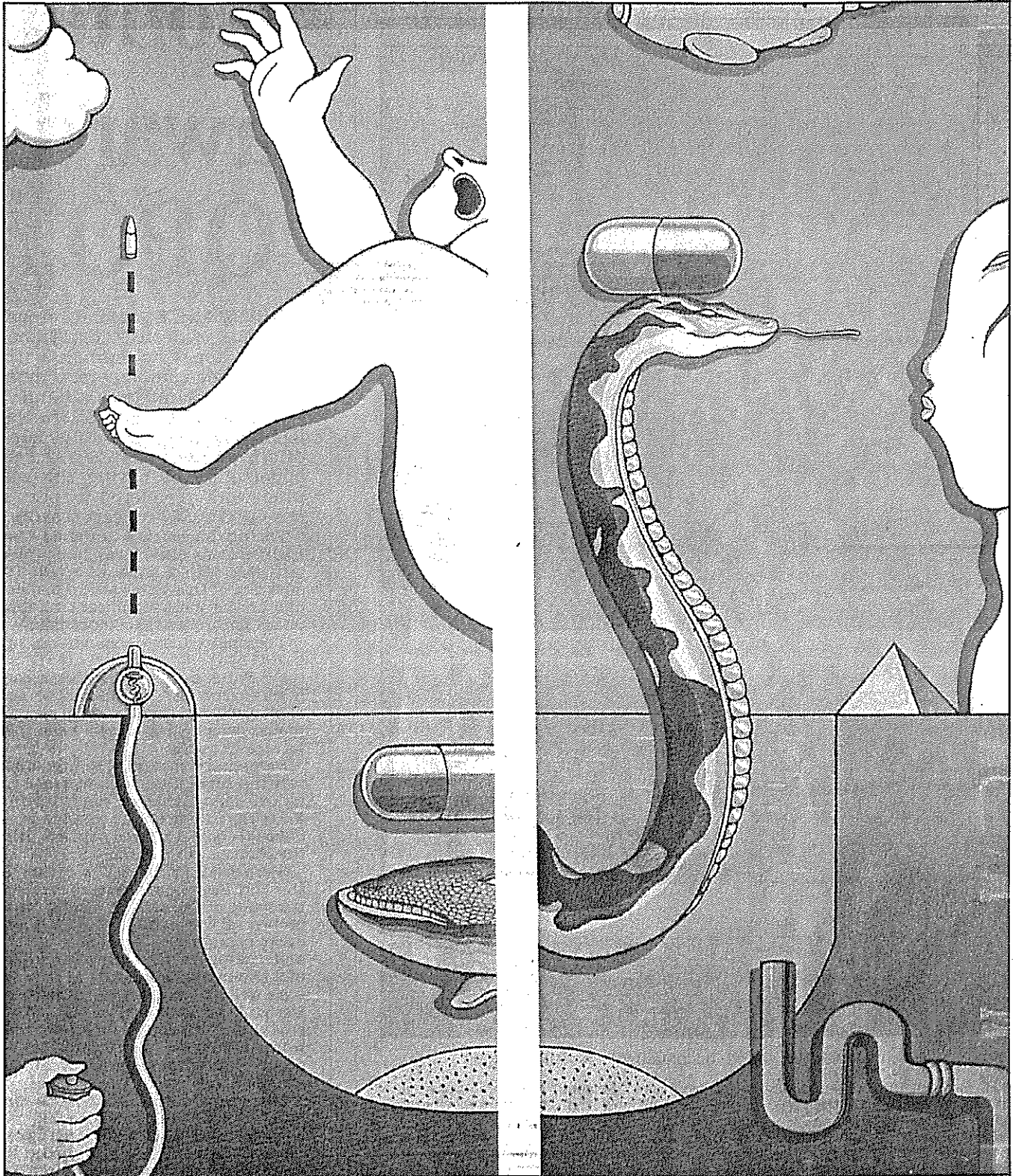
The typical ACCA survey will almost certainly give preference to installations and works utilising

ready-made objects — Xian's fax machines, Simryn Gill's suspended coconut bark suit, Kate Beynon's Chinese characters fashioned from chenille sticks, or the shelf displaying *Ten Hats for Ten Sons*, her meditative corrective to China's one child policy, and Pat HOFFIE's sanctioned use of a movie billboard from Manila which would have been better left as it was.

Not that painting or calligraphy are absent from Above and Beyond. Like Xian, Gwan Wei left China for Australia in the aftermath of the events in Tiananmen Square, having already absorbed Western influences. The paintings in Wei's *Treasure Hunt* series are precisely executed and Pop-ish, but instantly recognisable as his, a mixture of East and West in which snakes and naked figures with no sense of gravity exist in an imaginary world of earth, sea and sky, as flat as in a mid-period video game.

As this is an exhibition focusing on "the exchange between Asian and Australian cultures which has been taking place in Australia", it includes artists from various backgrounds whose works reflect contact with Asian art and artists through travel, and Australian artists of Asian descent, such as Lindy Lee and John Young (Young Ze Runge).

Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian Interactions is at the ACCA, Melbourne, to September 15. It is at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, from September 26 to November 2; 24HR ART, Darwin, April 1997; Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, June 1997; Canberra Contemporary Art Space, July and August 1997.



No sense of gravity: detail from Gwan Wei's precisely executed *Treasure Hunt*