

A nation's dearth in Venice

THAT Australia's exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale had less of an impact than it ought has nothing to do with the quality of the art and everything to do with the concept for the exhibition and, particularly, the woeful inadequacy of the Australian pavilion.

The three curators, Hetti Perkins, Brenda Croft and Victoria Lynn, had made the best of the pavilion's awkwardly divisive upper and lower levels by choosing to make Emily Kngwarreye's striped body paintings the focal point for the exhibition entrance.

Judy Watson's unstretched canvases were given the entire lower level — their subtlety well brought out by the blocking out of natural light and spotlighting them in a darkened room.

Linking the two representations of Aboriginal art — that of the old painter who had rarely left her desert home and the younger Aboriginal artist whose art reflects her journey of discovery back to her land — were two rather token, albeit beautifully crafted, woven fitting baskets by Yvonne Koolmatrie suspended in space.

The most obvious drawback in the selection — which the curators could not have foreseen — was the death last August of Kngwarreye. Had she lived to create work especially for the Biennale, a different dynamic may have been in play. As it was, the choice of work was limited to those existing, with the curators plumping for what I think are her least interesting paintings (although many hail them as strong examples of painterly abstraction).

But the problem of Australia's participation in this Biennale goes far beyond these works. First is the statement made by their selection. Aboriginal art is at a pivotal point in its development, which Australia ought to take the opportunity to promote in an international context.

Having already announced to the world through the Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls 1990 exhibit that we have both urban and land-based artists, this was the perfect time to show, as is so frequently done in Australia, that Aboriginal art is no longer regarded as a separate, marginalised form but as part of the contemporary Australian art as a whole.

Putting one leading Aboriginal artist with a non-Aboriginal artist would have made this statement — and also solved the problem of the display space.



SATURDAY VIEW

Susan McCulloch

In the longer term, Australia desperately needs to overhaul its Biennale presence. Prime in this is addressing the problem of the pavilion.

Two long narrow spaces rigidly divided, each too small to show major sculptural or three-dimensional pieces, are the main drawback. This building would offer little chance to create a display such as this year's Greek exhibition, which created a room underneath the floor into which the visitor looked from above.

One brave proposal the Australia Council initially was enthused about but later backed away from may have offered a solution. This was for a group of nine Aboriginal women to paint the walls of the pavilion during the Biennale. The walls would then have been dismantled and sold in Australia.

Not only would this have provided funding for a new pavilion but created a vibrant art event and attracted huge international media attention. As it is, we seem stuck with this pavilion in perpetuity.

Organisation and cost issues also need addressing. Trips to Venice are very nice and, obviously, putting on the Biennale requires someone to take on this arduous task. But do we need three top-level curators to put together an uncomplicated show that any one of them, one would hope, could do in a week or two? Let alone sending three, four or more other administrators from Australia for various periods?

Also, while many of the other pavilions' top staff can speak at least Italian and often English as well as their own language, Australia's lack of local knowledge and language restriction were painfully obvious.

If all we can produce for the Biennale is a polite little show that would hardly raise an eyebrow in Australia, is there any justification for a \$650,000 to \$700,000 budget?