



Pseudo-narrative: Bush's *This Big in the Afterlife*

## Touch of Hollywood in realism's theatre

### GALLERIES

**MELBOURNE:** Claiming: An Installation of paintings by Stephen Bush, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

By **ROBERT ROONEY**

**L**IKE the character in the old radio comedy series *Mrs Obbs* often used to say: "There's so much to do, and so little time to do it in" —

work is also indicative of his preference for rendering objects in a photo-like grey or sepia monochrome — perhaps arising from the diminishing importance of colour in an earlier series of bleak rooftop views — that succeeds in intensifying the impact of those pictures where full colour is restored.

This effect, which I have previously described as a kind of heightened technical-colour realism, is not unlike that experienced in certain Hollywood movies (*The Secret Garden*, for one) when black and white images suddenly explode into colour.

An amusing aspect of James Mollison's five-year plan for reviving the National Gallery of Victoria is the announcement that Susan Norrie is among the artists to

which, if applied to my own situation, usually means: so many shows to see and so little time before they pass into history or oblivion (mostly the latter, I'm afraid).

In recent weeks the choice has been exceptionally varied. For example, aside from the normal run of solo exhibitions (which in themselves range from displays of pseudo-romantic landscapes to computer-generated prints and drawings) Melbourne's commercial galleries have also treated viewers to a theme show, *Something to do with the Sea*, and a mini mid-career survey of the Sydney artist Peter Powditch (at Powell St and Niagara Galleries respectively).

By the time you read this, they, too, will have gone. Among the remaining exhibitions, however, I recommend you catch *Claiming: An Installation of Paintings by Stephen Bush* — at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art — before it travels to Adelaide. (Later this year, a related exhibition of the artist's work will be presented at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Connecticut.)

When I first encountered Bush's work, in a 1981 group exhibition of former Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology students, he was painting suburban milk bars and service stations. In subject matter, at least, they displayed some affinity with the paintings Christopher van der Craats exhibited around the same time. But rather than embrace "bad paintings" as van der Craats had most certainly done, Bush chose to render his Hopperesque scenes with a greater technical proficiency.

Both artists were included in *Fears and Scruples*, the first of two very successful theme shows curated by Naomi Cass during the 1980s. By then, Bush had turned from the urban environment and was concerning himself almost exclusively with depictions of rural mythology.

Unlike van der Craats, who was to embark on a series of picture postcard images of tourist monuments in simple outlines, Bush has remained a confirmed realist.

*Field Day* (1985), which was selected for *Scruples* and depicts a man on a tractor demonstrating a plough to a group of farmers, is, of course, an extension of Bush's early interest in regionalist painting. The

oe given a mid-career retrospective. Although Willem de Kooning was 64 when he had his mid-career survey at New York's Museum of Modern Art, in Australia the term is usually applied to artists in their mid-40s or 50s. One must logically conclude that if Norrie is already at the mid-point of her career, it is destined to be a short one.

While Bush has been around almost as long as Norrie (a decade at the most), curator Naomi Cass has deliberately resisted turning *Claiming* into a premature mid-career survey of "the artist's journey from art school to the present". What I have outlined of Bush's past has no place in an installation whose selective focus is on the years 1986 to 1990, and those paintings in which the artist himself appears in various guises.

Reflecting Bush's 19th-century interests, each of the two large pseudo-narratives, *This Big in the Afterlife* and *Plains of Promise* (both 1990), are isolated in a separate room with roughly painted coloured walls (violet in one, deep red in the other), much as Frederick Church and other Americans displayed their vast landscape panoramas for the public.

In the main gallery the rest of the paintings are hung at irregular intervals between images of dovecotes (many resembling familiar architectural monuments) which are painted directly on to the walls — a sly reference to Robert MacPherson's installation of budgie boxes seen recently at the ACCA.

As there is little, if anything, in these pictures that isn't fake, it matters not whether Bush, in exhibiting his multiple selves, mocks the heroic attitudes of history painting made dumb through repetition, or resorts to the kind of self-absorbed gestures that have long failed to differentiate between heroes, explorers and madmen.

Bush's subject is the West of the Imagination; the land of manifest destiny gone sour, it is a place where false founding fathers in hired costumes point to classical ruins, where Albert Namatjira's head is carved, sphinx-like, from a huge rock, where an artist is both the myth-maker Buffalo Bill Cody and the real life possessor of 14 western boots, 27 western shirts and 4 western belts.