

Taking space for a walk

Visual arts

Neil Taylor, Niagara Galleries, 245 Punt Rd, Richmond, until April 29, and Heide Museum of Modern Art, 7 Templestowe Rd, Bulleen; **Painted spaces**, ACCA, Dallas Brooks Dve, South Yarra, until April 23; **Rita Lazauskas**, **Subject, Witness, Participant**, Albury Regional Gallery, 546 Dean St, Albury, until April 30; **Caroline Williams**, **Viva Australia: Out of My Mind**, Robert Lindsay Gallery, 45 Flinders Lane, until May 6

Review Robert Nelson

THERE was once a time when an artwork was thought of as an object surrounded by space. And so it is, technically. But contemporary art puts a spin on this that emphasises the opposite: the work surrounds you. You're placed inside the spatial machinations of the artist.

Neil Taylor provides an example. His sculptures at Niagara are constructions in the burly vernacular of wire mesh. They vary in scale from a whole room (in which you're surrounded by spring mattresses) to tabletop sculptures. But even the smallest is an environment unto itself: you find yourself imagining what it would be like to be inside the layered grilles.

The sculptures have little mass and seem jokesy, as if the sculptor has enjoyed himself rolling around in cyclone wire or mesh. The air permeates the sculptures; in spite of their gridded symmetries, they're all internal spaces. But once your imagination is enticed into the system-

atic passages within, you enter a gridlocked network where you're no longer in control. You feel caught in a Cartesian cage of claustrophobic coordinates.

Taylor's work can be seen full-scale in the gardens at the Heide Museum of Modern Art and at Coliban Farm, just beyond Woodend. Directions are available from both galleries.

You might think that sculpture — with its walk-through potential — would be the prime medium for surrounding the spectator. Meanwhile, you think of painting as a precious object sequestered within a frame. Not necessarily.

Painting naturally occupies the periphery of a room and surrounds you. The whole tradition of fresco painting was established to engulf you as much as the architecture. Painting isn't intrinsically a solitary autonomous object on the wall.

A bracing show at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art shows how painting can envelop the spectator, just like sculpture. *Painted spaces: a collaborative wall project* makes the cavernous Loti Smorgon Gallery bristle with painted designs, floor to ceiling and cheek-by-jowl, without a patch of original wall showing. The contributions by individual artists from

Melbourne and abroad don't function pictorially, but rhythmically. Instead of presenting an illusion, the giant motifs take over the walls, mostly with abstractions of a resonant kind. Wilma Tabacco's mesh motif in four colors stands out. The procession of feet by Chris Heaphy is ingenious.

The most pictorial artist is, ironically, the curator, David Thomas, whose evocation of another interior beyond the gallery wall harmonises well with its abstract neighbors and proves that the illusionistic tradition can survive in any circumstance.

Artists who make pictures that respect illusionistic conventions have often used their power to suggest a world beyond the frame.

In *Subject, Witness, Participant*, at the Albury Regional Gallery, Rita Lazauskas represents sacred happenings from old masters, insinuating her self-portrait within their often gory, melancholy or aristocratic narratives.

The paintings aren't set up to transcend the spatial frame of the image but the time-frame of the image. With their bizarre dislocations and anachronisms, the pictures suggest that ancient rituals are still unconsciously being carried out by the contemporary artist.

THE stretching of time and place can also be seen in *Viva Australia*, by Caroline Williams at Robert Lindsay. The paintings derived from archival photographs show how much we unfortunately relive our past.

The oldest photographic source is from the 19th century, showing Aboriginal warriors in ceremonial dress. An air of imminent extinction hangs over the

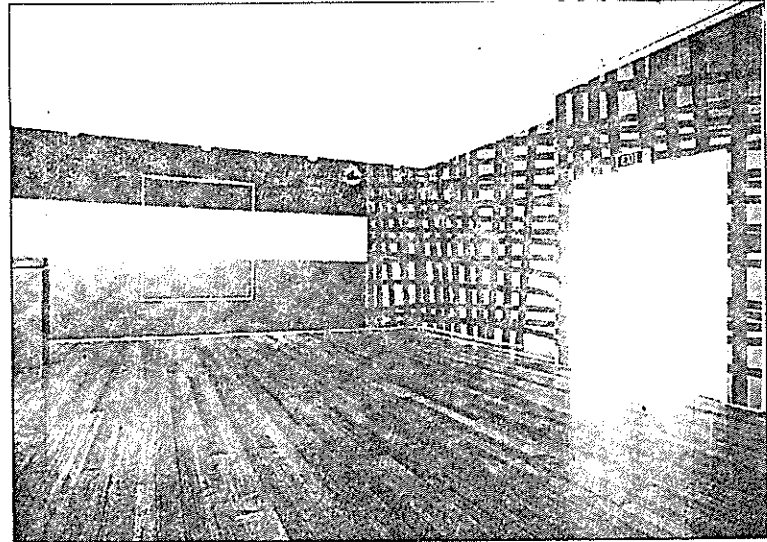
patchy figures. Most images are from the postwar period, dwelling on regressive moments of our political history and ending with the paranoid chin-shot of *Our Prime Minister*. Amid these horrors, Williams introduces the history of her family.

The exhibition is subtitled "out of my mind". A fine double meaning: it could suggest that the works are hatched or invented by the artist's mind alone or it could mean that the theme drives the artist to distraction. Convention demands that you remain within your mind. To be out of your mind means you're mad. But what about when political circumstances are insane? If you stay within your mind, you end up accepting a reactionary language and may never transcend the ambient folly.

Williams is all paradox. Just as she forces little photos into a monumental scale, which they sustain with reluctance, so she throws private intimacy together with public squalor. It's an allegory of political consciousness.

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Painted spaces at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.