

THE



AGE

6 TheCulture Review

MIXED MEDIA MEGAN BACKHOUSE



Now showing at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, *A History of Happiness* features artists such as Yoko Ono and Nan Goldin, whose *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* is pictured above.

Visual arts getting the numbers

The visual arts program may not be the biggest component of the Melbourne Festival, but the festival's four exhibitions are nonetheless drawing sizeable crowds.

Almost 5000 people have attended Southbank's new Australian Centre for Contemporary Art to see the group show, *A History of Happiness*, and Susan Norrie's *Undertow*, since the two exhibitions (and the space itself) were launched a week ago. More than 1200 people have, meanwhile, visited the RMIT Gallery to see *The Heimlich unHeimlich* group show

since it opened last Tuesday and about 870 people have wandered through the lanes and passageways behind RMIT's Storey Hall to see *The Unused*.

Organisers are extremely happy with the attendance figures, with Juliana Engberg, the curator of the festival's visual arts program, saying she is "absolutely thrilled" with the public's response to "the new ACCA experience".

"The building and the exhibitions have received very enthusiastic, at times even ecstatic, comment from visitors," she says.

THE AGE • WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2002
theage.com.au

US critic finds a lot to enthuse about

He's visited train stations, the lanes of Chinatown and galleries from Caulfield to Collingwood. Over the five weeks that David Pagel, a visual arts critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, curator and teacher, has spent in Melbourne, he has seen a lot of art.

Pagel is the Macgeorge Fellow, a program set up to encourage cultural activity, offered to people from Australia and overseas who are involved in the arts.

Speaking from the Ivanhoe house that was bequeathed to the University of Melbourne in 1970 by Norman and May Macgeorge, Pagel sounds upbeat about the visual arts in Melbourne.

"What I am most impressed about is the multi-layered activity, from high-end commercial galleries to large, state-supported institutions to small artist-run initiatives to galleries getting by on a shoestring," he says.

Pagel, who leaves town this Saturday, says he has particularly enjoyed visits to the studios at Gertrude contemporary art spaces ("a concentrated focus of energy, it's pretty exciting"), Uplands Gallery ("one foot in the artist-run initiative world and one foot in the burgeoning commercial world") and the work of Dale Hickey, Robert Rooney, Ian Burn and Rose Nolan.

"What I am most impressed with from those four is how they shift from style to style — writing criticism and theory, making art, documenting things. It seems to me much more fluid here than in the States."

He also speaks highly of Callum Morton's model of the old Gas and Fuel buildings at Anna Schwartz Gallery, despite never having seen the real thing, as well as Stephen

Haley's show at Nellie Castan Gallery.

The survey of Elizabeth Gower's work that opened last week at Glen Eira City Council Gallery and an exhibition, which Pagel opened, of sculpture by graduating students at the Victorian College of the Arts, at Conical, also get the thumbs-up.

Pagel says he was "blown away" by the recent paintings from Balgo Hills at Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi. "That was really fun for me because it struck a chord with a California sensibility that I am really fond of."

He is less enamoured with the Melbourne Festival's group shows, however. He found *A History of Happiness* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art "thin and underdeveloped" (though he found the new ACCA building "fabulous") and says that, while *The Heimlich unHeimlich* at RMIT contains some interesting individual works, "the whole isn't greater than the sum of its parts".

"I was surprised by the absolute absence of painting," he says.

Susan Norrie's *Undertow*, however, he said was "solid, interesting work".

Art fairs in general depress him, and Melbourne's was no different.

"People think art fairs are barometers of too many issues when they really are not. It really is about selling stuff... I don't put a whole lot of stock in fairs."

Pagel will deliver the Margaret Manion Lecture 2002 today at 6.30pm at the Elisabeth Murdoch Lecture Theatre (behind the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne). The lecture is titled *Wrong: Contemporary Art in Los Angeles*, and is free with no booking required.