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Individual, moody and seductive

Visual arts: Susan Norrie, Undertow, and A History of Happiness

Where: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 111 Sturt St, Southbank

When: until December 1

Reviewer: Robert Nelson

The two exhibitions at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art are a major element of the Melbourne Festival Visual Arts Program. They also mark the opening of the new ACCA, and the curator of the festival's visual arts program, Juliana Engberg, is also the new artistic director of ACCA. The building is an impressive piece of architecture that consolidates the art precinct from Federation Square, along St Kilda Road to this amazing rusty bunker on Sturt Street.

The inaugural exhibitions rise to both occasions. Like the architecture, the shows are severe and nostalgic. The building's distressed exterior and air of a fortress in Algiers is matched by forbidding historical echoes in Susan Norrie's videos.

From Orson Welles' adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial* to footage of a memorable dust storm that hit Melbourne in 1983, Norrie's work harks back to old and moody archetypes of an inhospitable or sinister kind. They recall Romantic painting; but even the cars and trucks all look old and roll at a funereal pace; and the primordial bubbling geology makes you forget modernity, evoking some dreadful return of life to the mineral element.

The main space at ACCA is enormous; and a wall is devoted to one black and white video. The camera follows a wave breaking as it approaches the shore yet seems to wash beneath us; this gives way to the primeval forest laid waste by fire; the dust storm follows, as the cloud encroaches upon the town; then we see Flinders Street Railway Station, with cars in slow motion; these give way to a telephoto view of a procession of trucks that turn gracefully on a bend in the free-



A still image from a video by Susan Norrie showing the dust storm that hit Melbourne in 1983.

way in the gloom. In none of the sequences is there room for a normal existence; the circumstances are all outlandish, horrendous and apocalyptic.

But it's also beautiful. The stately sequences are filmed in a painterly way but also with chastity, in deliberate but organic rhythms. You sense the elements rather than the moment being recorded; the world spreads out before you with uncontrollable mutations and you feel powerless, awe-struck and disconcerted.

In the rooms beside Norrie's videos, Engberg stages *A History of Happiness*. This is an imaginative anthology of works

speculating, often with irony, on the quest for happiness. It's a friendlier show than Norrie's, but patchier and harder to sum up in its various moods.

Nan Goldin's documentary photographs from her famous *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* from the early 1980s strike me as morose voyeurism of a homespun kind (unlike Mapplethorpe's curious photograph of an orgasmic Larry, which dramatically combines performance and pathology). Jenny Holtzer's signs from 1980-82 have a wry humour and vein of malice that are potentially poignant; some sentiments are satirical, some indulgent.

Peter Land's *Step Ladder Blues* is a macabre repetition of a man tumbling from a ladder. The wobbly actor stages his own downfall, perhaps the artist himself allegorically proposing that painting is altogether too precarious, or is now merely a game about hitting the ground least painfully.

Yoko Ono's *Box of Smile* from 1967 is a metal-lidded cube with the title inscribed on its mirror-finished metal. It's a shrine in melancholy celebration of narcissism, reminding you that no one looks at you so tenderly as you do yourself.

The greatest beauty arises in Robert Owen's *Trace of a Silent*

Bell from the late 1980s. It's a kind of deep white booth, with a low dome of glass crystals that glow over a light. The work has a marvellous serenity, as of Buddhist meditation. The title alludes to this tradition; but the settled character of the room conveys the feeling without further explanation.

Engberg has written evocative catalogue essays for both exhibitions. Although the two shows have a different curatorial rationale and spirit, they project a strong vision, which is individual, moody and seductive.

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