



Robert's Gligorov's film *Bobe's Legend*, above, was shown at ACMI. The eerie and morbid work of Edvard Munch, below, is still showing at NGV International.

International flavour

Some of the most interesting art this year came from overseas, writes visual art critic **Robert Nelson**.

WHEN NGV Australia at Federation Square staged its exhibition *Living Together Is Easy*, the most interesting installations were by artists from outside Australia.

It's not that local production is dodgy or insipid beside the material from overseas, and certainly, in this year of energetic examination of overseas art, the local scene has not declined or suffered more neglect than usual.

This year, however, many galleries beyond NGV International have shown international material. Much of it is well-chosen and good; and even when it doesn't strike a sympathetic note, you have a satisfying feeling that at least your awareness is growing and you can place your dislikes in a larger frame of reference.



Man Ray's *Kiki and African Mask* was in the NGVI show.

[C08 NAA 29dec04]

It would have been hard to find much to dislike in *The Impressionists: Masterpieces from the Musee d'Orsay* at NGV International. This was one of four major exhibitions of historical material at this flagship venue, setting an extraordinary benchmark. This radiant collection was anticipated chronologically by *Darkness & Light: Caravaggio and His World*, an eclectic exhibition of old masters, and chased by the eerie and morbid *Edvard Munch: The Frieze of Life*, which is still at NGV International.

The fourth was the large survey of the surrealist photographer Man Ray, making an impressive tally; and you can add to this the somewhat less coherent miscellany *World Rush — 4 Artists*.

International shows are extremely expensive to arrange, insure and freight. You can expect that the factor of price will skew the representation in favour of easily transportable or reproducible genres, such as DVD or photography. But international material comes slightly more affordably to some galleries than others. For example, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image has consistently shown international material, as in its striking *Transfigure*.

But works like Robert Gligorov's film *Bobe's Legend* are nevertheless easier to post than a suite of large paintings.

It is also notable that new media tend to be somewhat more mobile internationally, as with the Australian artist Stelarc who featured in the same exhibition, but who regularly operates overseas.

The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art staged a

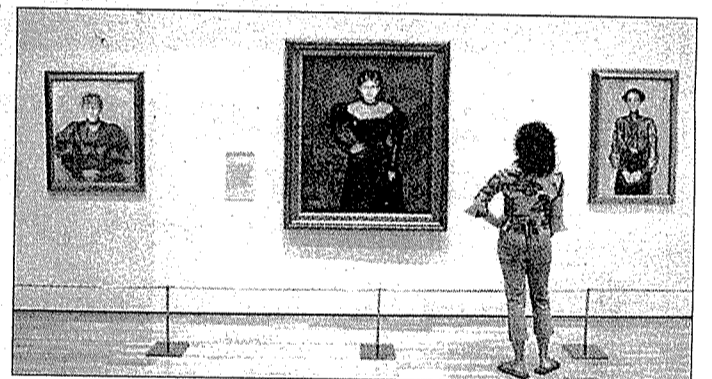
succession of exhibitions either with exclusively international content — such as Janet Cardiff's *Forty Part Motet* and Ugo Rondinone's *Clockwork for Oracle* — or a mixture of local and international, such as *New 04* or *Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia*.

The development of a whole new art-space at the Meat Market in North Melbourne through a private source in the Kaldor Art Projects is also very heartening. The complicated installation of the American graffiti-sque artist Barry McGee was stimulating and clearly took a great deal of effort.

The university galleries associated with art academies have been active in bringing international material to the community, such as the RMIT Gallery showing the Munich Goldsmith Gerd Rothmann and contemporary lacquer art from Taiwan. The Faculty Gallery of Monash University, Caulfield campus, showed some excellent international material, such as the photography of the Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom, with the globalisation discourses so relevant to our part of the world.

GERTRUDE Contemporary Art Spaces showed striking structures with drinking straws by Koji Ryui and architecture in cardboard by Horst Kiechle in its *Octopus 5*; and the fascinating Ti Parks exhibition was more international than not. We're grateful, however, that all such galleries continue to show good local material, such as Ben Morieson's *Burnout*.

Some international artists are closer to us than others; and the New Zealand scene was represented well by Peter



Robinson at Heide Museum of Modern art. The exhibition *Three Colours* paired Robinson with Gordon Bennett, making for some rich parallels in postcolonial discourse but also in the psychology of the two different artistic personalities.

Indigenous art was paradoxically revealed to be international from early days in the small but moving *Etched on Bark 1854: Kulin Barks From Northern Victoria* at the Melbourne Museum. Some of the precious works had to be shipped from England. This exhibition was a sobering precursor to the formidable but sometimes disturbing *John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque* at NGV Australia.

Speculations on Australian culture struck me as problematic in Aleks Danko's *Songs of Australia* but especially in *2004: Australian culture now*, both at NGV Australia. Danko argued against national clichés and sentimentality, a good intention but with superior overtones. Meanwhile, the large survey *2004* presented our visual culture as dangerously compliant with commercial lifestyle values.

This was resisted in shows too numerous to mention, such as those by Nusra Latif Qureshi and Naeem Rana at the Counihan Gallery in Brunswick. This work seemed to me to have more psychological insight, as well as social pungency, than the strong showing of the surrealist legacy. You could

include in that the retrospective of Peter Booth at NGV Australia, but, in all events, the Agapitos collection at Heide and James Gleeson at NGV.

Regional galleries continued to invest in projects of artistic and cultural significance, especially on the historical side. The example of the night-forgotten Elizabeth Parsons, *More Than a Memory*, at the Geelong Art Gallery, and Alexander Colquhoun at the Castlemaine Art Gallery brought forth excellent works of scholarship which assist us in revising the scheme of reputations past.

The commercial galleries deserve special recognition for their great contribution to the visual arts, supporting again and again certain artists who sell only modestly — if at all — because they believe in the artists' work.

The Melbourne International Art Fair showcased their efforts well against some healthy competition from overseas, especially from Asia and Europe.

Alas, the year has ended on a sad note with the untimely death of Gabrielle Pizzi, whose leadership in the commercial Aboriginal art scene was exemplary. It now seems provident in a melancholy way that a part of her work could be honoured in her lifetime through the exhibition of her wonderful collection at Heide.

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