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Inside the fantasy world of the young and the edgy

IT may have been said before, but there's a new spirit in art. At least in Melbourne. For the past two weeks Melbourne's arts spaces, streetscapes and bars have been hosting an army of young, fresh and edgy art, while the city's alleys have been flickering with 100 quirky light shows, all showcased through the annual Next Wave Festival.

If there was an aesthetic epicentre to this youthquake, it might well have been in the spooky, claustrophobic prison cells of the old City Watch House where the stunning exhibition New Ruins, curated by Tai Snaith and Amy Sales, was only open late at night and navigated by torchlight. A tangled briar hedge filled one cell to the ceiling, an entire TAB shop scarred by shotgun blasts occupied another. The mood of fantasy was as ominous as it was exhilarating.

Housed in the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's impressive vaults, New06 may appear more mainstream, but it's on the same wavelength and has a similar sharp edge. In-house curator Juliana Engberg has produced a beauti-

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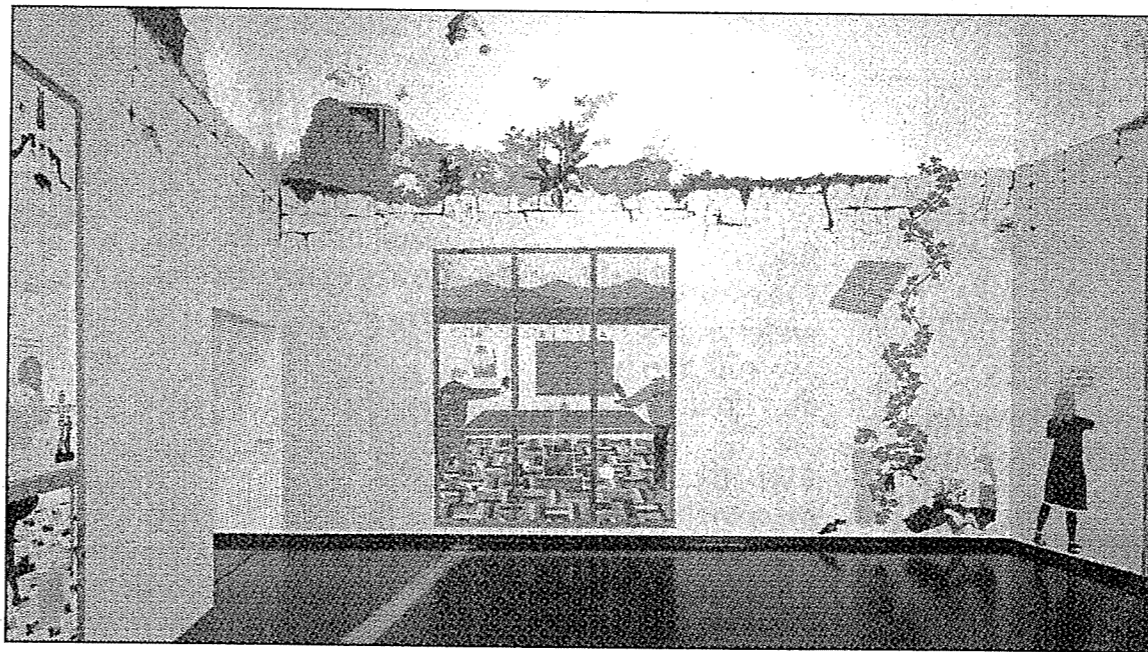
New06

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. March 14 to May 14.

ful and topical show using her seven artists, and her characteristic verve and finesse with exhibition design makes a persuasive argument about what this new move in art is doing.

For one thing, artists are creating playful fantasias on the stylistic idioms of modernist art. Laresa Kosloff's eccentric choreography of minimalist sculptures, bouncing and flexing on absurdly naked legs, turns the mechanistic gymnastics of Bauhaus ballet into an erotic comedy. Kosloff's geometric shapes may resemble corporate signage but they're also a clownish, overblown censorship blot concealing the sex between those dancing legs. In one performance, a black diamond spins on its pins like a little kid until it staggers dizzily and drunkenly in ecstatic slapstick.

Natasha Johns-Messenger turns the perceptual piety of minimalism into a



Delicate: Helen Johnson's installation depicts scenes of everyday life

game of mirrors, with room corners that seem to bewilderingly unfold, expand and realign like the interior of Dr Who's Tardis. Nearby, Giles Ryder recycles off-cuts of neon signage that join up into broad squiggles hovering above the

floor. While reminiscent of abstract gestures by Jackson Pollock or Wassily Kandinsky as well Dan Flavin's neon sculptures, they're also child-like graffiti marks with the techno ambience of bar decor.

But the strongest direction in the show is best indicated by the exquisitely confounding cardboard maze built by the Sydney collective Makeshift. Pokey corridors with gargantuan mouse holes chewed in the walls open suddenly into vaulted chambers with elaborately threatening but inexplicable wooden machines or nostalgically evocative miniature cardboard vignettes of a train speeding at night from a tunnel, or a woodland camping scene.

New06 is filled with these magically perplexing fantasy worlds, and whether abstract or figurative, bright or dark, they turn the studio or gallery into a sort of cubby-hole, a retreat fabricated from the objective spaces of childhood experience and imagination. It's a game, of course, played with a synthetic sort of romanticism to induce emotions and effects that in the past would have seemed too trivial or diverting for art. But it's compelling and appealing, and it's coming our way.

Edward Colless