

Breathing life into space

VISUAL ART REVIEW NEW06

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,
111 Sturt Street, Southbank, until
May 14
Robert Nelson Reviewer

YOU can get lost in art at ACCA: the exhibition *New06* contains four installations in which your faculties of orientation and optical logic are stretched; and sometimes you wonder how you'll get out.

But the best pieces reflect on the labyrinthine character of art history and make the tortuous journey rewarding.

Like an engineer, Natasha Johns-Messenger sets up mirrors in optically diverting passages. She also cuts through the gallery wall to reveal a kind of painting in the arrangement of metal studs behind or board. She has only to glaze it with lights and behold, a formalesque "composition".

Her mirrored constructions relate to the picture-space of Western tradition, a rectangle of peculiar curiosity because reflecting on an illusionary world beyond our own. In her maze of mirrors, you experience picture-spaces of an imponderable nature, unfathomable and eerie.

In one, the simple device of seeing your own back accompany you around the glassy ambulatory seems to allegorise your appreciation of art in a gallery: no matter how fresh the art, you're always

accompanied by your own background.

The huge labyrinth created by the group called Makeshift is an ambitious piece of architecture wrought in cardboard upon a wooden frame.

You pass down a narrow corridor into a small court with three doorways. It's as if you've entered into a children's story that you're going to have to write yourself. You try one way and encounter further cross-roads, make a decision and explore the consequences. Either you go on further detours or you end in a niche, a dead-end or a room with a naive installation in it.

The roof is low, the materials ticky-tacky and the passages are narrow; so the air of a child's space — with its assumed immunity to claustrophobia — encourages a kind of innocence. This is clinched by installations such as the model railway and a fairytale garden of spruce, which lets you out of the maze. But all the while, there are resonances of a medieval cloister, a tall ship, a tunnel beneath a fort or an impenetrable library, the kind of spooky atmospheric

place that Umberto Eco evokes in his historical novels.

Art history is also given a leg up by Laresa Kosloff. The artist dresses up in the abstract language of modernism, donning a cardboard rhomboid that completely covers her upper body, the legs protruding. It's not simply a case of putting a screen in front of her: she's actually got inside the box. Her thighs pass through two symmetrical holes on the edge towards the bottom.

In two videos, the artist does her best to stagger around with some grace in this outlandish costume that so suppresses the necessary human attributes of head, torso and arms. The engineering would not allow the knees to be brought close, so the postures usually assume a somewhat squat disposition, a bit like a baby with an oversized nappy.

In these burlesque works, Kosloff is walking the talk of early modernism. The fundamental shapes that supplanted the human figure during Suprematism were considered to approach a new aesthetic absolute: abstraction.

This discourse is drawn into a cumbersome ballet, where the human figure extrudes itself

embarrassingly from the rigorous geometry: behold the naked flesh with its wobble and tremor and chaotic pulses.

The choreographed geometry is also humorously fetishistic, as the vulgar male eye looks to the shapely thighs in search of the "box". At this point, however, the cardboard delivers its hardest angle, with the wedge-like assertiveness that occurs in some of Picasso's primitivist proto-Cubist paintings from 1907-08.

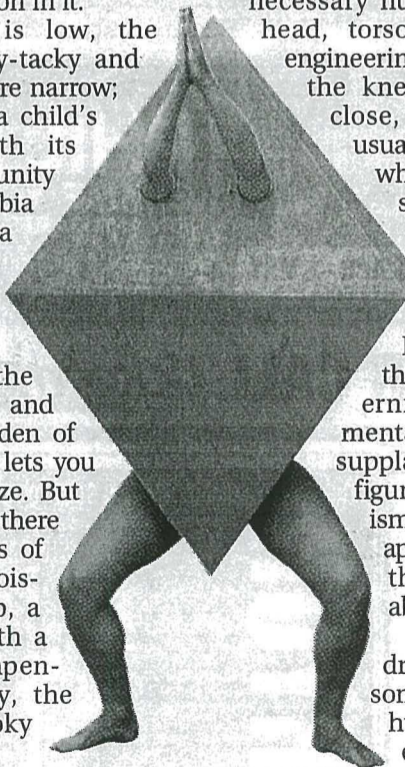
Paradoxically the carnal presence of the artist is heightened by the abstract mantle, as you contemplate her concealed upper body with head hard up against the smelly cardboard, breathing deeply with the strenuous gym-work. The rhomboid is an abstract ideal from the outside; but within, it would collect the moist panting with insufferable closeness. The enclosure is an abstract prison, hot and steamy and bothersome.

The paradoxes of feminist beliefs are explored in a curious suite of murals by Helen Johnson called *The Centre for the Study of Adhocracy*, in which incompatible slogans, life styles, environmental feeling and damage coexist as a string of paradoxes.

At the end of the exhibition — which contains work by Giles Ryder and Darren Sylvester — you can crawl into a little cubby house by Shaun Wilson, where a film of early days offers fuzzy consolation and comfort.

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Giles Ryder's
*Fluorochrome/
mirrorchrome
[transparent
radiation]*
M.I.R.H.
06Portrait
(detail above)
and Laresa
Kosloff's *Spirit
and Muscle* video
work (detail
below) are part
of *NEW06*.



The Age
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