

Will Melbourne
balk at an exhibition
on obscenity?

RAY EDGAR reports

ONE thing is certain about sex in art — there is always an audience and everyone is a critic.

If the vice-squad file in behind the voyeurs at the opening of the "Moral Censorship in Visual Art" exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art next Saturday, they may see a small sign on the entrance wall.

The simple warning to ward off wimps and wowsers reads: "Children should be accompanied by an adult."

While the show's curator, Alison Carroll, concedes the vice squad may pay the show a visit (they have been told about the exhibition), she is sceptical that they will take any action — despite Australia's gruesome history of heavy-handed censorship.

A warning to under-18s has not yet been considered — an R-rating for an art gallery? — despite the inclusion of some considerably raunchy art. The exhibition includes explicit collages from pornographic magazines in the works of artists such as Mike Brown. A Sydney magistrate in 1963 described Brown's work as "an orgy of obscenity".

Justice Michael Kirby, president of the NSW Court of Appeal and a former chairman of the Law Reform Commission, agrees with Carroll that in the future, our present censorship rules may be out-



Melbourne's best-known nude, *Chloe*.

Seeking a moral victory



Michaelangelo's *David*.

moded. He says in the exhibition catalogue, to which he was asked to contribute: "Perhaps in a future time those rules too will be regarded as ridiculous or hopelessly old-fashioned."

Apart from the notoriety it confers, censorship has more severe implications for artists who take the plunge into an explicit depiction of sexuality.

The idea of spending two nights in jail because someone thinks your work is obscene is "unethical", according to artist Katharine Phillips. Phillips served a jail sentence after refusing to pay fines imposed for the alleged obscenity of her sculpture show in Mildura last April.

Her jail sentence was the first of its kind in Australia but inspired remarkably little publicity.

Alison Carroll says that, had the work been shown in Melbourne, it may never have reached the point of the artist being jailed.

Artists, of course, have never dealt too favorably with the issue of censorship. Earlier this century controversial Melbourne artist Norman

Lindsay stated in his autobiography that he felt he had to learn how to write to defend the first attacks on his works.

Lindsay's debauched scenes of sexuality shocked his society. Even today, his copulating nymphs and satyrs can raise a conservative eyebrow.

One of the most famous subjects of censorship in Melbourne is *Chloe*, now hanging in Young and Jackson's pub. Donated to the National Gallery of Victoria for its first major public screening in 1883, the painting caused so much fuss the owner had to request its return. Sadly, only a sketch of *Chloe* will be in the show.

As with many other cases of censorship, the ACCA show has its share of mirth. In its 400-year-history, the image that is Michaelangelo's *David* has no doubt endured many ignominies — but perhaps its most ludicrous was in Melbourne.

In 1973 vice-squad detectives were called in to a small Melbourne bookshop to confiscate a poster representation of *David*.

WHILE no one would compare Australian artist Juan Davila with Michaelangelo, his images have received similar treatment from the authorities. The works by Chilean-born Davila include graphic representations of sadomasochistic and homosexual acts. Complaints from the Festival of Light director, Fred Nile, led to the banning of Davila's painting *Stupid as a Painter* in 1982.

This in turn led the then NSW Premier, Neville Wran, to declare: "Art has nothing to do with the vice squad."

Alison Carroll says the aim of contemporary galleries, particularly government-sponsored ones, is to be "issue based".

Surprisingly, Carroll does not believe in any unilateral freedom of speech code but thinks there should be some review board made up of "citizens from galleries and state libraries who know what art is about. Most people would think censorship was a necessary reality, especially where children were concerned."

Carroll is hoping to include vice-squad members in a forum on law reform in the area of moral censorship and the visual arts to be held at ACCA on September 19. The seminar is part of the exhibition.

■ "Moral Censorship and Visual Arts In Australia" will be exhibited at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art from Saturday, September 2, to October 15. Inquiries: 654-6422.