

# One too many rivals on this patch

Bruce James

Sadie Chandler has a fight on her hands. Call it an exhibition bout. The venue is the Opera House Studio foyer. Eight rainbow-hued canvases from Chandler's gender-bending *She/Male Bodyworks* series, each one packing a Pop Art punch, square up against the vocal muscle of the cabaret diva, Paul Capsis.

Who will win? The Queen of Grrrrrrl Power Painting or the Dark Prince of Decibels?

Can flat images ever compete with three-dimensional spectacle, especially the all-singing, all-gyrating variety performed by La Capsis? Do theatre patrons really want to look at art when they've come to be entertained?

And does Chandler's sudden switch to the subject of male transvestism put her far too close for comfort to the Capsis camp?

Finally, who wrote the genial wall text which gives the paintings a run for their money when it comes to complex ideas expressed with a common touch?

If Capsis weren't competition enough, outside on the Western Boardwalk the whitegoods manufacturer Fisher & Paykel is sponsoring a rather cheesy photographic exposition seemingly on the theme of "the milk of human kindness".

At least, it's called *M.I.L.K.* Maybe it's about spik milk, because there's a lot of emotion going on in the pictures. A lot of noses being screwed up and heart-strings tugged, too.

They call it photojournalism. The passing crowds love it. When you remind people that ordinariness is special, and make it winsomely photogenic to boot, of course they love it. Throw in a few baby shots, a gap-toothed grandma or 20 and a killer television campaign and naturally you have a blockbuster exhibition with a deep-going purchase on the truly important

things in life - like, well, large fridges. This is a Benetton advertisement, minus the sermon and blood flow.

With sentiment of the kind that underscores *M.I.L.K.* as the arbiter, Chandler's works wouldn't last five minutes. They're pop-cultural in origin, sure, but that's not the same as saying they're popular in appeal.

Like it or not, her works are pitched at a specialist audience - not necessarily an educated one, because Chandler enlists with most contemporary artists in craving to communicate her thoughts without intrusive degrees of difficulty, but certainly an audience that is attuned to

## WHERE, WHEN

Sadie Chandler: *She/Male Bodyworks*

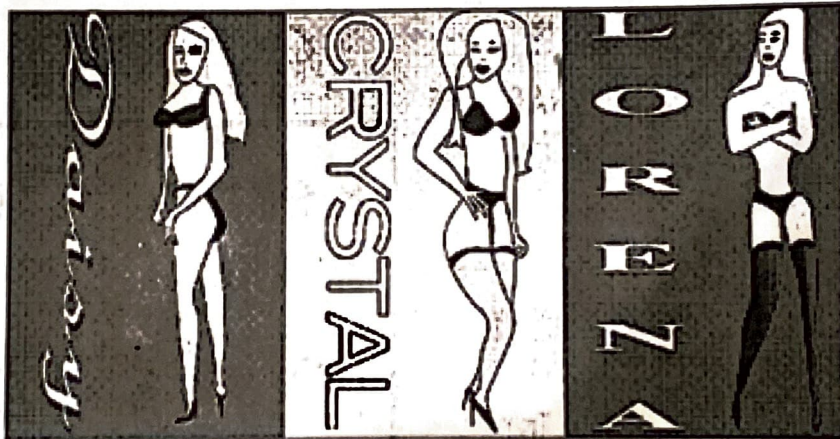
Opera House Studio foyer, until March 9. Accessible at theatre and box office times.

but it may be wondered if the casual observer can do the same. Only by reading the aforementioned wall text will some be able to spot the gender ruse in play, and even then the cartoon-style execution makes it hard to accept that the lovely Crystal is anything but a crisply drawn blonde bombshell straight from the heterosexual imagination.

with the transvestites, this is not simply acceptable, but vital. For the artist, it's an error of judgement. Imagine if Goya had cast his vote for some of the weirder participants in the *Caprichios*, rather than stepping back objectively from their antics.

Where Chandler truly hits her mark is the technical side. Her *She/Male Bodyworks* are hard to fault when it comes to basic properties such as chromatic range, compositional devices, paint application and that general orderliness of elements we all enjoy in art.

Lettering, a growing passion with this painter, features in most of the exhibits, sometimes



Mixed gender lost among the mixed genres... Sadie Chandler's *Daisy, Crystal, Lorena*.

concepts such as citation, parody and wit.

Lorena, Daisy, Kitty, Crystal, Ingrid and friends are not suburban gals with a retro-seventies evening ahead, big hair and all. They're inner-city boys frocked up, and in some cases nipped and tucked, all in readiness for paying clients. Their cross-dressed come-on is all about getting cash in the clutch purse, not achieving social betterment for themselves or peace for the world. Trannie hookers with hearts of gold they are not.

Chandler sees through them,

Yes, it's part of Chandler's aim to make precisely this point about the indeterminacy of human desire, to show us that it can't be signed, sealed and delivered in a perfect, unmistakable, unchangeable package.

But to be indeterminate while making a point about indeterminacy is not a helpful way to go.

In a sense, Chandler does fall into the trap set by the slinky she-men who populate her pictures. She believes them. Takes them at face value. Trusts them. For the men who pay to sleep

distractingly. She's on record as admiring the handiwork of the Mexican sign-painters of Los Angeles, although it's unlikely those artisans are able to resort to the computer software programs at the Australian's command. An artisanal quality nonetheless raises the impact of the final product a notch or two.

This is a likeable show, but it falls short of revealing the artist at her acerbic best.

Outmatched by Capsis and the whitegoods people, Chandler fails to strike a body blow, either for painting or transvestism.