

ARTS

Abstraction can be anathema

THE show at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery briefly glimpses some effects of a mere 20 years of abstract activities in Australia and makes no claims to analyse or cover those aspects, and certainly does not pretend to be a historical survey.

How could it be otherwise in such a small gallery which had to be crammed to show 26 works and omitted Balson and Crowley from the past and Olsen, John Martin, Raft, Rapotec, Earle and a score of others from the present? It does indicate the necessity of a thorough historical survey if a really commodious space were available.

Of course, legions loathe abstract paintings and any extensive exhibition might not be a crowd-pleaser. State galleries would think twice about such a show, especially as unease has met the present revival of abstraction. It has not been revived but has simply emerged from an enforced hibernation because of the adulation given to an art of furiously expressed anxieties about society, the soul and destiny — art, in fact, which has a context.

For contextualists, abstraction is an anathema because it seeks release from political, artistic, and theoretical contexts.

A brief word on context. If every work of art is to be treated in terms of its context, then an infinite regress of explanations will occur: what of the context of the work's creation, and its reception? What of its context today and the years following its creation? What of the context of the galleries where it was shown, of the collectors who bought and pawned or auctioned it and of the critics of various opinions who assessed it? Such pursuits can come to only one sensible end — looking at the work of art itself. For abstraction that is mandatory, as it should be for all good art.

One exhibitor at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery claims lots of people feel threatened by abstraction but students of the City Art Institute which runs the gallery asked him, as a teacher there, to give a course on abstraction of which they admitted they knew nothing. To them it seemed a secret underground movement. If a purpose for the vigorous and captivating exhibition is needed, there is one.

Do some people feel threatened? Certainly abstraction is the least compromised of the visual arts. It becomes a host of things which are relished — nostalgia, propaganda, social comment, the traditions of portraiture, landscape and still life — and claims to enforce recognition of essential elements and, in so doing, implies art is often liked for anything but aesthetic reasons.

However, like all good art, abstraction is charged with meaning, and the relation of that meaning to form is as much a concern for Sydney

ART

Sydney Galleries:
Twenty Years of
Australian Abstraction
Ivan Dougherty Gallery
Karin Oom
Woolloomooloo Gallery
Polly MacCallum
Coventry Gallery

ELWYN LYNN

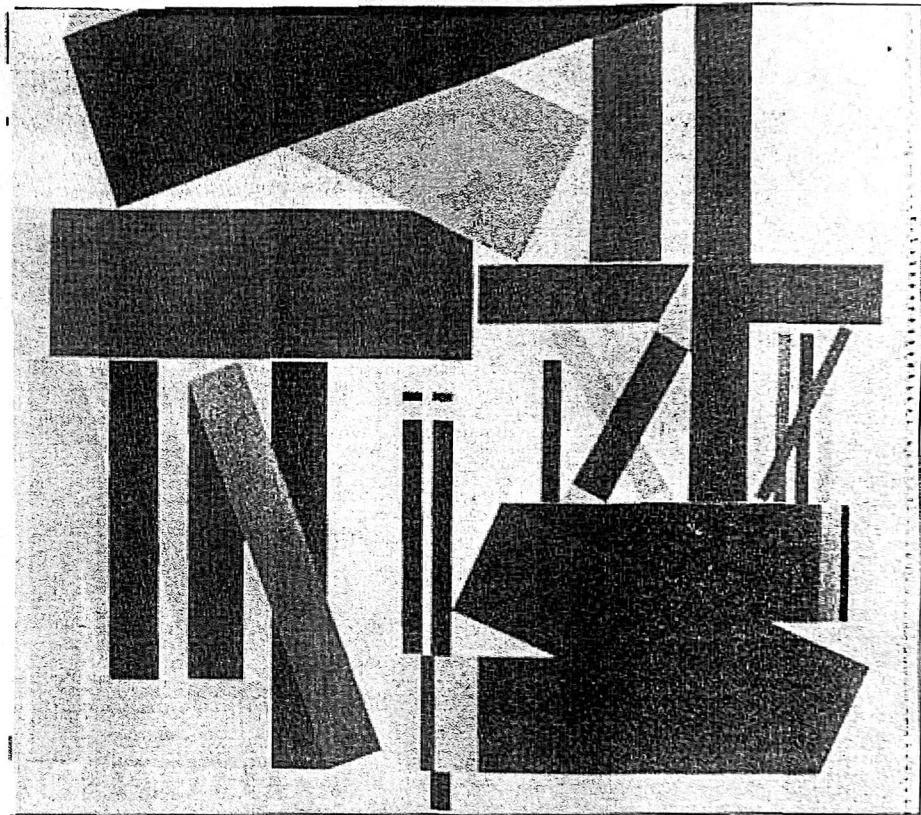
Ball's glowing *Tondo* as for a Fred McCubbin painting, crowded with chooks.

What can be gained from the Dougherty show apart from sheer delight in individual work of quiet, subdued and camouflaged shapes in John Peart's chameleon-like apparition or Roger Kemp's sustained scatter of black marks across an equally fractured ground? As elsewhere, there are two main tendencies in local abstraction: clear cut, sharply defined shapes, reducing form to its simplest elements and organic, unified growth, revealing processes rather than firm conclusions.

As these modes often affect one another it would be too simplistic to see the difference as that between the diagram and the blot. For example Alun Leach-Jones' *Romance Of Death* is alive with curves and zigzags which take up the issues of geometric abstraction but it is also about the origins of forms and their attempts at fulfilment. In the same way Col Jordan, who has hitherto pursued a modular simplicity, here in *Pandora's Box* involves elements like parallel bands from previous work with new dispersals of crisp black and yellow squares and diamonds as if tracing the genesis of form.

Its restlessness is quite unlike the concentrated clarity of an undeviating, structural, abstractionist like George Johnson who balances, folds, pivots and hinges variously coloured and shaped oblongs which thrust inexorably, or gently touch. Only Ball's 1968 *Tondo* has the same unmitigated clarity, but if Ball is beneficent, Johnson puts us through exacting exercises.

The other geometrically inclined abstractionists complicate simplicity. Michael Johnson's *Gupta, 1984-85*, could have been painted for this occasion. The thoroughly symmetrical format of a central rectangular, surrounded by crimson and palest blue bands and supported by bands of crimson and green, has a rosy radiance cut by a diagonal cross of orange red. The paint is succulent and pulsates variously in the differ-



World View by George Johnson: a concentrated clarity.

ent areas. It predicts his recent organic work and in conceding the values of painterliness challenges the tyranny of equilibrium.

Similarly, Jennifer Marshall's interlocking, fluid geometrical planes are liberated with rapid notations. Frank Hinder's 1968 work of overlapping transparencies is modified by mottled touches. Robert Jack's interpenetrating confrontation of triangles in varied greys allows under-painting to suggest concealed forces, and Alan Mitelman's large grey work of tossed thin lines strives to endow geometrical shapes with the vague atmosphere of his smaller works. Like Jan Riske whose hundreds of thin throbbing lines seem caught between becoming and disintegration he resists classification.

At the moment the truest heir of constructivism on show locally, apart from George Johnson, is Polly MacCallum at the Coventry Gallery where

her fine, firm but subtle wall reliefs and sculptures, all in praise of translucency, transparency and clean clarity, seem likely to define the essentials of art without adornment or subterfuge.

Back however to the Dougherty Gallery organicists who either swarm with overall patterns like Peart, Mitelman, Kemp, Gunter Christman, Marlon Borgelt and Helen Haggath or are concerned with the emergence of individual forms as in Kate Briscoe's tough, crusty jagged shapes, Fairweather's displaced, lonely figures, Michael Taylor's beribboned disillusion of nature and Henry Salakauskas' black triangular sky descending gently on soft sepia and grey clouds.

The patterns can be so closely knit that forms seems held in suspended animation in Borgelt's writhing, endless fronds and in Christman's 1971 *Smoke Belly*, a beautiful grey pulsa-

tion of tiny cells. In Haggath's lush calligraphic *Soweto* and Paul Higgs' equally rich *Easter Island* forms seek to become articulate through primitive signs. There are other works which are full of rewarding, theoretical and aesthetic stimuli not the least being Tony Tuckson's grey sweep cut by long, vertically crossing thin lines. Its simplicity goes beyond the origin of signs — like the first creative cry in the clearing mists. Flat, plain and unadorned, it is organicism at its purest.

Plenty of crusty, impastoed touches adorn the surfaces of Karin Oom's work at the Woolloomooloo Gallery. Her pure abstracts can renege in the gloom in *City Lament* or flicker and radiate with golds and blue in *Festival* where the straggling contours are arrested by some brisk constructivist lines. That remark drags in historical context but hers, and all the works mentioned above, can be enjoyed for their own sakes.