

An abstract shelter from the storm

A RESPITE from angst, from lashings of paint puffing up tormented visitors and from the meaningful irrational is at hand in Sydney.

Surprisingly, it comes in a varied array of abstract painting which, as you know, is always supposed to be at the end of its tether and, as you know, is so mutual and politically uncommitted that its austerities give rise, I am told, to the desperate declarations in the Sydney Biennale.

The epitome of the rational, the cool, the planned and the exhilaration of the deployment of oblongs of various sizes and hues is the work of veteran relational abstractionist, George Johnson, of Melbourne, ringing infinite changes on the skittish and the formidable at Rudy Komon's.

In *Structure Blue* an opaque



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blue is invaded by other vertical and horizontal oblongs which are teased like steel chaff to fall below; *World View Detail 1* indicates the geometrical and emotional diversifications of themes.

Here, strips and bands are folded with origami skill to enhance the notion of continuous starting and stopping. The forms are striving to make connections, but elsewhere they attract and repel one another as in the splendid *Construction 8* where oblongs have a cautious restlessness as though walking a tightrope.

In *World View* the small rec-

tangles are strutted above and below a wide band of black as though they were musical notes looking for compositional habitation. Most formidable is *Structure 1* which is as sculpturesque as Alexander Calder's tapestries and prints at the Wagner Gallery. The shapes seem to move about an unknown centre, striving for amalgamation.

All, by the way, is not flat patterned; in each work Johnson has small areas of stained canvas in freckled beiges and browns, little relaxations in this splendidly crisp show that rinses the eyes and sharpens the notion of significant, abstract form.

Like Calder, Graham Kuo at Rex Irwin, is an organic abstractionist whose forms (unconcerned with polite relations) swim, surge and relish, traversing luscious textures that would seem irrelevant to Johnson. Kuo's large works, in mainly lyrically gentle colors, are pasturals in the sense of Helen Frankenthaler's open, stained field and flowing curves, but Kuo has a heady impatience: shark-like fins cut the landscape, sudden lines whip across the placid pastures so that what may seem deceptively suave and vacuous, becomes perilous.

Kuo shares with Calder, with Ian Pearson at Robin Gibson's and with David McDiamond at Roslyn Oxley a dynamic, buoyant verve and freshness, so that one might imagine that solemn, remote and brave abstraction had been engulfed by the dark floods of some neo-expressionism.

Far from it, because Margery Edwards, once of Sydney and now of New York City, strikes the most funereal of notes amid the fairy-floss color at Oxley's. Her paintings, like varied slabs of opaque and satiny slate, and prints and collages of buff, browns, black and beiges, are not depressing but animatingly gloomy like the end of *Hamlet*.

In these delicate balances of various papers, strings and slight touches of paint, one sees the processes of timid pause turning to positive doubts for the works are vis-



George Johnson's *Structure One*.

ual oxymorons. Though they appear deliberated in their horizontal emphasis, materials (like string and plastic, an eyelet and so on) stray into these subdued monuments to contemplative moments. They demand, and deserve, scrutiny for their intimacies are restrained and their questions elusive.

There has never been anything restrained about Alexander Calder as those who

curves of the red and black entwined serpents in *Snakes* of 1975 and the eddying band that floats towards the red sun in *Zebra* of the same year.

These are celebratory works where the textures, in flat or raking light, add to the theme. The sumptuous and the use of poverty materials have rarely been so impressively combined.

Calder and Edwards arrestingly test the possibilities of humble material. However, Calder's woolen tapestry, *Les Vagues* of 1976, of two black-outlined horns (one blue and one red) on soft cream, creates an air of majestic luxuriance, the curves being emblems of organic grace.

Wagner's also has a collection of New York graphics from Motherwell and Zox to Al Capp. Once again the pure abstractions demand reassessment with Larry Zox's *Diamond Drill* and the powerful red, black and white of Pierre Clerck's demanding sign.

David McDiamond at Roslyn Oxley has buoyant signs and words aswarm on free

hanging cotton. All have messages of a kind but these matter little as he wants to present in weavings of words and letters, the edges of moods and feelings. Some are sad but generally he employs a rainbow-hued, mobile graffiti of such intricacy that once again scrutiny is demanded.

A brief look at abstract illusionism along with some clever artifices compels one to linger over Ian Pearson's fine painting-drawings on paper at Gibson.

Pearson paints veins in three dimensions, lets some marks and lines cast shadows, but restrains his virtuosity, for most of his criss-crossed oblong in niche-like shapes drawn with paint sticks are flat and resonant in themselves without having recourse to optical illusions.

All is lively, dashing and spontaneous. He shares with Calder and Kuo an organic crispness, but he is slightly satirical and even self-mocking, wiping out golden backgrounds and crossing out seductive oblongs.

All in all, an exhilarating week.

Undulating curves

pass his black scimitar in Australia Square know.

His paintings of moons, pyramids, snakes and crescents done in primary colors and emphatic blacks are demanding; no subtle nuances, no piddling attempts at surface seduction, no minor themes. With Calder you are in the bull ring with no easy escape.

The bull ring is less evident in his woman and hemp tapestries; there is room to relax and follow the undulating