

YEAR IN REVIEW

The city is 2003's biggest

There were no blockbuster exhibitions but plenty of action in the visual arts this year, writes **Robert Nelson**.

This year has ended with a very festive bang: the reopening of the National Gallery of Victoria on St Kilda Road has brought euphoria to the public and serious inspiration to artists and students. It isn't just a case of having the old masters back on the wall, but a reinforced outlook for the town as a confident art centre, able to invest in the visual arts with a world-class facility and curatorial vision to match.

The collection of the NGV International has inestimable benefits for artists. It provides extensive first-hand contact with the great traditions of Europe and Asia. Artists in Melbourne can once again enjoy a breathtaking proximity to the several epochs and geographies that make up their view of art. Affinities, antipathies and reactions can be freely debated and worked out in the studio. Once again, Melbourne feels like a town with deep rapports with the great diversity of its cultural origins.

The significance of the NGV International has inadvertently focused our attention on private benefaction, as the permanent collection was so extensively afforded through the visionary largess of Alfred Felton. We haven't had such a benefactor since 1904, when Felton died. However, there is still some significant philanthropic activity, as witnessed by the recent opening of the beautiful TarraWarra Museum of Art just outside Healesville.

Put this together with the rich prizes in the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award at Werribee Park, the McClelland Survey and Award at the McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park and, last but not least, the Clemenger Contemporary Art Award at the NGV Australia, and you can see private support for the visual arts is impressive. And so is the art that it encourages.

Encourages, but doesn't necessarily pay for the spectacle, except by providing unlikely hope for the bulk of artists. The big prizes are generous for the winners. For the other artists, alas, the privilege of being in a rich award can cost them a livelihood when a large sculptural work (such as may stand a chance of winning) has to be manufactured for the occasion. They do it through pious mixtures of temptation and belief.

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As the NGV on St Kilda Road has been "in restauro" for most of the year, there have been no blockbuster exhibitions, with the modest exception of the Conder exhibition at the NGV Australia at Federation Square.

Still, nothing to compare with *Pierre Bonnard Observing Nature* at the National Gallery of Australia in



Canberra, the like of which we look forwards to next year with the advent of *Caravaggio and His World*, now in Sydney.

Contemporary international art is jealously watched and analysed by artists. Unlike music and film, the visual arts are not easily transportable. Still, as I know from the graduate studio program at Monash University, many artists make the pilgrimage to the Venice Biennale or the Kassel Documenta. Review articles in journals such as *Art Monthly* are read with keen critical interest.

International art also has a strong presence through the Melbourne Festival and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. *The Labyrinthine*

Effect, at ACCA, skilfully folded local artists into the international scene, as did the bracing exhibition *Orifice*, part of the Melbourne Festival.

Aboriginal art was well represented in numerous strong solo exhibitions at Gabrielle Pizzi, Alcaston Gallery and Flinders Lane Gallery. But there were also three historical exhibitions of note which seemed sobering and quietly formidable. The first was the gentle but rather harrowing *Blood on the Spinifex* at the Ian Potter Museum at the University of Melbourne, which revealed the tragic content of Aboriginal oral history, which has not until recently been recognised in European Australia.

The second was the warm but also melancholy *Remembering Barak* at the

NGV Australia, which showed the works of the Koori leader — dignified representations of the sophisticated ceremonies, dances and clothing of the Victorian Aborigines.

New View: Indigenous Photographic Perspectives at the Monash Gallery of Art in Wheeler's Hill gave a good idea of the technical, psychological and satirical resources of contemporary Aboriginal photography. This was answered by a remarkable survey of the 19th-century photographer J. W. Lindt at the National Trust. Without wanting to be ironic, Lindt hauntingly captured the precarious European sympathy for the Aboriginal catastrophe.

The rightful place of traditional media in the contemporary scene was

beneficiary

Powerful statements, traditional skills



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Charles Conder exhibition at the NGV Australia was the "blockbuster" of the year; *Remembering Barak* at the NGV Australia included William Barak's *Ceremony with Rainbow Serpent*; Sigalit Landau's video loop, *Barbed Hula*, was a talking point of the confronting *Orifice* exhibition, part of the Melbourne Festival; *The Labyrinthine Effect* showcased the work of international artists, including Canadian Rodney Graham's *How I Became a Rambler's Man*.

the subject of at least three curated exhibitions. The first was *Depth of Field* at Shepparton Art Gallery and Monash University Museum of Art, exploring the relationship between painting and photography. Second, *500 Fridays: Ten Years of Contemporary Plein Air Painting* at the Geelong Art Gallery and touring advanced the persistent relevance of outdoor painting. And *Art + Film* at the Centre for Contemporary Photography explored sculpture, painting, photography and video in the grip of cinematic narrative.

I greatly enjoyed the survey of sculpture that Heide Museum of Modern Art amusingly titled *This Was the Future*. It enabled you to recognise the work that still speaks to the contemporary scene

and which has receded to the status of historical document.

Exhibitions in Melbourne are so numerous most do not get reviewed. I always have regrets. One show that comes to mind was Nicola Loder's *Wild Thing* at the Centre for Contemporary Photography. Its strange projection of the individual in an urban setting, replicated in patchwork cells, arrayed in field-like conformations, made me think of many metaphors in which the social and the psychological overlap, where the individual is subsumed by authority and becomes part of a larger machine. Poetic work which definitely deserves attention.

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Myer Report funding is in the bag, but the craft sector also deserves other congratulations for 2003, writes Penny Webb.

What a high note on which to end the craft year: in London, on December 7, the Turner Prize (worth \$47,000) was awarded to Grayson Perry "for his use of the traditions of ceramics and drawing in his uncompromising engagement with personal and social concerns". And what a relief for me: in reviewing a show of Stephen Benwell's decorated pots at the end of last year, I had rather mean-spiritedly wanted them to have more of the power of Perry's "exhilarating, sometimes disturbing" ceramics — not fair, I know, but at least I was on to a winner!

At \$30,000 triennially, the Cicely and Colin Rigg Contemporary Design Award is not in the same league, but it specifically recognises commitment to craft traditions only belatedly lauded by the Turner. In 2003, and with textiles as the nominated area of expertise, winner Louise Weaver's crocheted installation was poignant and thought-provoking. There were other opportunities during the year to see impressive work by two other Rigg contenders, weavers Sara Lindsay and Kate Derum, but unfortunately I failed to see any more of Patrick Snelling's superb printed fabrics on exhibition.

The two skills areas, ceramics and drawing, mentioned by the Turner judges were in evidence in Melbourne this year. Ceramics by Benwell, Jane Sawyer, Bronwen Garner, Susie McMeekin and Prue Venables were reviewed; as were drawings by Lindsay, Ruark Lewis and Petra Nevistic. (A lively celebration of Monash University's art and design faculty drawings was curated by Ken Smith and Kit Wise.)

Textiles were not only the focus of the Rigg award: in shows all year it was obvious just how pervasive fibre of all sorts is in workshops and studios. Melbourne weavers have access to the work of Latvian immigrant, Anna Apinis, (on permanent display in the Immigration Museum), the patterns of which were compared in a review with Tiwi painter Therese Ann Munkara at Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi. And a touring show curated by Norma Respicio of the Philippines (at the Gold Treasure Museum) was a great overview and an opportunity to compare the regional differences in that country.

Highly symbolic needlework objects by Rosemary O'Rourke, draped garments designed by Lorinda Grant for

hand knitters and lace from the collection of the Embroiderers Guild of Victoria were all heroically feminine. (Did I mention that Perry also embroiders?) And who could forget the woven pandanus, spirit figures, fish traps and animal forms from the women of Maningrida in Arnhem Land?

This year, exemplary works by Polixeni Papapetrou, Jeff Carter and Joachim Froese (the last shown by the hard-working Stephen McLaughlan) showed that traditional photography, both colour and black-and-white, has lost none of its relevance after a decade-and-half of the ubiquitous Photoshop.

Powerful statements in glass by Stephen Skillitzi and Julio Santos (at Kirra) and linocuts by John Ryrie (Chrysalis) showed mid-career practitioners doing work that sustains a lifetime's involvement. Apart from perhaps revealing the human need to make images, the carved emu eggs at the Koorie Heritage Trust's terrific new home on King Street and street stencils have at least one thing in common — both were reviewed in early October.

Although not normally considered a craft skill, installation is obviously an important element in the realisation of many practitioners' vision. While I was particularly struck by the delightful video installation, *Fiesta della Sedia*, by Cindy-Lee Davies and Justin Caleo, at Melbourne Museum, other confident installationists were Sally Smart ("fly-by-night" show for dealer-without-gallery Kalli Rolfe), Louise-Ann Zahra, O'Rourke and Pip Stokes (all at Craft Victoria); Rainer Linz and Lewis (RMIT Project Space); and Kate Daw's words in a darkened room at William Mora. A touring retrospective of the work of Melbourne designer Susan Cohn was supplemented by a powerful display of recent works, conceived to enable the designer to explore a theme, curated by the Ian Potter Centre: NGVA.

Gallery owner Mari Funaki is congratulated for consistently staging shows of the highest calibre, especially by gold and silversmiths Otto Kunzli, Marian Hosking and Julie Blyfield, in the simplest space in town.

Finally, one of the main causes for celebration this year was the reopening of the NGV on St Kilda Road. Have you seen Bertil Vallien's 1965 earthenware jar (in Gallery 27, Level 3)?

Tomorrow: Helen Thomson and Jim Murphy review the year in theatre.



RIGHT: *Narcissus* by John Ryrie, at Chrysalis Publishing. **FAR RIGHT:** *Owl I* by Stephen Killitzi and Julio Santos, at Kirra.



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