

Space, size and surface



Visual art
Pamela Gaunt; Nicola Loder; Ewa Narkiewicz

IN THESE visually sophisticated times dominated by the digital moving image, the visual arts is highly conscious of its viewing space. For many artists, "the hang" is now more correctly conceived as "the installation", and how pictures function in the gallery space or in relation to a viewer is a major part of the creative process.

This preoccupation with visual placement is clearly apparent in Nicola Loder's current exhibition of gargantuan digital prints at Gallery 101.

Continuing the style of her recent large-scale photographic work, Loder presents three suites of elongated images, designed with a monumental presence akin to giant billboard advertising. However, these stretched scenes of horizons, street vistas and human faces strike quite a different chord from the chic world of product pushing.

Although definitely intended as museum works (their enormous scale of up to 12 metres in height pretty much precludes private ownership), they emanate a surprisingly soft, even poetic, presence.

This is especially the case in the

Portraits suite, where Loder captures an expressive gamut of ages and races, from a tiny white baby to a crinkled Mediterranean woman.

These surprisingly gentle and warm visages seem directly at odds with the vast scale on which they are portrayed.

The power of Loder's work has much to do with an ambiguity fostered by this discrepancy between subject and object. As in the other two suites — *People in Urban Landscapes* and *Skyscapes* — the stretched format of each image creates an impression that the picture is actually a scroll, physically rolled out into our space and rendered rigid by its aluminium backing. Up close we see only minute colored dots. Stepping back we are confronted with a bewitching contrast between each image's narrative and Loder's obvious talent for catching dynamic abstract shapes and textures.

Ewa Narkiewicz's liquid light photographs at Dianne Tanzer Gallery share Loder's soft surface textures yet occupy a far more humble space.

Developed on to grids of small plates in brass, copper and aluminium, their subtle permutations of shade and color give them a playful third dimension. Formally, the near transparent monotone of the liquid light effect resembles faded sepia photographs of objects collected

and exchanged incidentally through a life — shells, roses, silver trinkets.

There is something analytical about Narkiewicz's eye, revealed through her effort to present these simple things with the preciousness of museum pieces.

Narkiewicz's ability to render the ordinary above the normal lies in her alchemical technique and use of close pictorial space. Her skill is that of a collagist, arranging the colored grids of each image to create pockets of visual focus.

The pink of copper, silver-grey of aluminium and golden-olive of brass play against each other, creating ripples of difference. She enhances the surface energy of her work by hand-coloring sections of some pictures — a rose petal here, a tulip stem there.

This, together with the geometric shaping of several works, gives us an impression of being in the presence of sculptures rather than flat portraits.

Pamela Gaunt's *Nothing to Wear* series, on show as part of the Melbourne Fashion Festival, offers a witty spoof on the clothing culture.

Crazy sewn assemblages of haberdashery items and fabric snippets carry titles such as *Glam, Total Look* and *Super-Bod*, poking fun by juxtaposing famous international labels with the mundane washing instruction tag.

Gaunt's intention seems to be both homage and homily. She sets out with her formidable crafting talents to create entertaining statements about the seduction and manipulation wrought on us by fashion's insidious presence.

Beneath each lattice and web of crazed patching and ant-like sewing are clear outlines of pattern drafting paper marked with familiar tuck and cut lines, suggesting the practical formula underlying the embellished veneer of a finished garment or image.

Despite their incredible patience and detail, Gaunt's work seems to view better close up, where we can fathom the time and invention of its creation. From a distance the substance of her collages is lost and the shapes alone don't seem to create a dynamic statement.

This may have something to do with the conventional installation. Longevity too seems to be an issue, albeit a debatable one in the current art scene and certainly a totally redundant one in the fashion market!

● Nicola Loder, at Gallery 101, 101 Collins St, until 7 March; Ewa Narkiewicz, at Dianne Tanzer Gallery, 108 Gertrude St, Fitzroy, until 5 March; Pamela Gaunt, at Distelfink Gallery, 1005 High St, Armadale, until Sunday

Reviews by Anna Claburn



Look up: Nicola Loder's imposing, elongated images