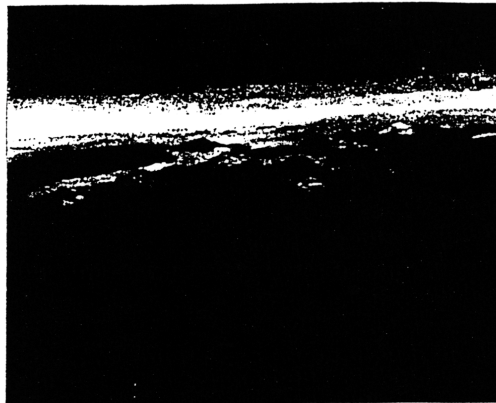


ART
.....

Nice to look at but wearing pretty thin



Philip Wolfhagen's *Imaginary Light 41x South x147x East*

After 10 years, the annual Moët & Chandon Touring Exhibition has lost the keen sense of competition that made Susan Norrie's "fete" such a notable winner in 1987, but it now delivers, with the inclusion of a broad range of media, one of the best overviews of contemporary art in Australia.

Helga Grove won the 1997 Fellowship with her work *The Perfume River*, which was completed after she undertook an Asialink Residency in Vietnam. The announcement of her success was made at the Queensland Art Gallery earlier this year and the exhibition is now at the National Gallery of Victoria until May 12 before moving to Perth, Sydney and Adelaide. As the winning work, it has an interesting energy and translucence - it is beautiful to look at - but its success is not surprising. After examining the winners of the Fellowship over the past decade, beauty seems to be an underlying text in a large number of them, and this - in the eyes of some - will be one of its failings, although the 10 winning works have their merits and, presented together, represent a solid body of work.

There are some interesting works this year. Carolyn Eskdale's *Reconstructed daughter's bed* installation contains the decaying remnants of life in the form of discarded furniture, veiled and contained in a translucent fabric box. It works so well as to involve viewers in a slightly uneasy experience as they try to decipher its story. Her work has a timeless quality that is poetic in its attempts to package the past and modern

attempts to redefine and explain memory. Philip Wolfhagen's *Imaginary Light 41° South x 147° East* shows a wonderfully luscious use of paint and a strong grasp on romantic landscape traditions as he continues to examine his native Tasmania. Nicola Loder's *Landscape 1-4* is a departure from the portrait work she is known for, but she continues to push the image base of photography and merge it with stylistic signatures borrowed from painting and installation. The assimilation of these formal elements works well as she creates an interesting connection with the landscape. Her work is breathtaking in its quality, dimension and scope.

Robert Bridge-water is an artist whose small wooden piece *Palpitate* balances between issues of environment and human intervention, and although it seems a homage to nature it comes across as a cherished item lovingly made but carrying the weight of human experience.

Overall, however, the association of idea, content, form and visual impact that some of the artists play with is too simple and several tread well-worn paths. These works are entertaining enough, but where is the art that invades your thoughts, sticks in your throat and challenges the spirit? There can be too much reliance on "tricks" in contemporary art practice and, while an artist is to be admired for real efforts, those that play with technology instead of content, borrow from others rather than imagine and skirt too close to decoration will soon be forgotten.

■ COLIN SIMPSON