

Games of selective vision

VISUAL ART
Strangely Familiar

By PETER TIMMS

Strangely Familiar is predicated on the idea that "the more visually based our society becomes, the less we often actually see". It's a nice little conceit to think that artists should draw our attention to things we are otherwise too distracted to notice, but should they and, if they do, what would be the point?

Is our society in fact becoming more "visually based"? Some might argue the contrary, that it's language that now dominates our lives. This exhibition's wordy catalogue is itself a demonstration of that. But even if we are numbed by visual overload, that's surely not because we've forgotten how to see, but rather because the images that life confronts us with are mostly bland and meaningless.

We've sensibly become very selective about what we pay attention to. People living in tribal or peasant societies, hunting or working the land, take in visual information every waking moment of their lives, just as we do. The difference is that this information is important to them and they know what to do with it, whereas a lot of what we see is of no real interest to us at all.

It's a problem that haunts the first part of *Strangely Familiar*: seven very large photographs by Scottish duo Mat-

thew Dalziel and Louise Scullion, in which, through the wonders of modern photography, mocked-up structures are superimposed on to real landscapes. There's a group of futuristic hothouses in the desert, a strange bunker-like structure on a snow-covered mountain-top and a rickety shed on stilts by the seashore. "These man-made objects," the artists tell us, "become the signifier of where (sic) nature and culture intersect. The different objects hint at the

diverse ways we utilise the environment, they reflect the meanings and codes through which we transform nature."

Unfortunately, they do no such thing. These photographs tell us no more about the intersection of nature and culture or about the way we utilise the environment than any building in any landscape, or any tree on a street corner. The artists present us with banal images in order to convince us to pay more attention to the banal. There's not a lot of thinking going on here.

The two other installations in *Strangely Familiar* work beautifully because they are more allusive, playful and participatory, and because both, in their

own way, create a strong sense of narrative. Leslie Eastman, Andy Thomson and Daniel von Sturmer have constructed a large cube of translucent white gauze, which sits on the floor at one end of a darkened room, becoming a 3D screen for moving images of city parks and buildings.

Treetops, fences and grassy fields, quite unremarkable in themselves, flash past and collide in a riotously energetic ballet. At the back of the cube, upside-down images of the park outside the gallery are formed by lenses inserted directly into the walls: Plato's cave for the '90s.

All kinds of clever little games are being played out here. Perhaps the white cube indicates the idea of the art gallery, the video images racing back and forth across its surface referring to the real world outside its privileged spaces.

The lenses in the wall superimpose pictures of this particular gallery at this moment in time and, upside-down, the view we would have had through the windows, had they not been boarded over. Present and past, inside and outside, movement and stillness, nature and culture, reality and artifice: so many

oppositions are juggled, so many possible interpretations raised and all with such deftness and lightness of touch.

Nicola Loder also uses video projection on translucent screens: this time a forest of them, set at odd angles, that we are encouraged to walk amongst.

The images spill from one screen on to the next and we constantly find ourselves in the way. There's a woman on a balcony turning slowly to look at us; a tennis match, seen from a dizzying height; a city plaza, with people milling about; traffic inching along a freeway. And, every so often, in the midst of this concatenation of ordinariness, a man in a suit and tie falling in slow motion through the air. A suicide, probably.

It's like walking right into an early German expressionist movie, except that it's all brightly lit, emotionally disengaged and anonymous: Dr Caligari comes to suburbia. We've somehow got ourselves all mixed up in odd, unrelated fragments of other people's lives, which we're seeing from many different perspectives at once.

There's a fragile, ambivalent poetry to Loder's broken narratives, a sense of beauty rung out of alienation. And, when you emerge into the real world, you really do find it quite strange.

● *Strangely Familiar*, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra, until 4 October.

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