

Ian Milliss

As an artist who rejected an invitation to show in the inaugural exhibition organised for the new Contemporary Art Society Gallery by Terry Smith and Tony McGillick, I must comment on Terry Smith's review of that exhibition.

Having recovered from his incredible presumptuousness in billing it as "his coming exhibition", one finds what Terry Smith has written on this occasion, as on every other, to be a classical example of the provincialism that has always been evident in Australian Art which he mentions in one of his points. The total lack of originality and uncompromising mediocrity displayed by 95% of Australian artists as they blunder along the unoriginal paths they have chosen to copy has here found its critical equal!

The basis of my criticism is that no exhibition of work by Australians could possibly tell you about the important issues in serious art at the present time, quite simply because practically no Australian artists really understand what they are. Same for critics. What passes for art in Australia is nothing but a series of non-art formulisations of stylistic mannerisms lifted from the work of various overseas artists. (An example is the work illustrated in the column, which unlike, unlike Clive Murray-White's interesting early work, is nothing more than a copy of a steam work by Robert Morris.) Australian art criticism is generally even worse. Terry Smith, aided and abetted by Tony McGillick, has misunderstood overseas art, misunderstood the criticisms of that art, and then applied his newly adopted mistaken critical notions to the equally mistaken cover versions of that art turned out by Australian artists at a safe distance of some several years later.

Two very obvious and related examples of his inability to handle the facts before him are (a) his contention that 'abstraction is basic' to recent art. It isn't. Abstraction and the whole tradition of 'modernism', were made redundant by the art which, no matter what exact form it took, investigated the problems of physicality raised by the work of Jackson Pollock; it is very concrete art and on the whole a very literal one, far from abstract. (B) his presentation of the show in terms of an object v non-object dichotomy. This has never been more than a trivial, incidental issue in serious art, and is definitely an issue no longer.

Overall, one senses, in this first exhibition by the CAS a vague ghost of the old Central Street Gallery. The same fallacies about art and the relationship between Australian and overseas art that Terry Smith presents as the rationale and conclusions to be drawn from this exhibition were also spread by the artists who directed Central Street Gallery. The general inadequacy of their art, however, meant that their ideas were mainly embodied in somewhat desperate art world political activities. Could it be that their actions in turning over the gallery, which had been closed for a year, to the CAS, is a means of getting it reopened with them still, through the CAS, of which they are committee members, and Terry Smith retaining a fair amount of backroom control.

Finally it should be obvious that if and when truly important overseas art comes to be done in Australia, the issues of overseas art will be totally irrelevant to the understanding of it. Only the terms which it itself imposes will be relevant for

although it will have grown out of a concern with the present issues in foreign art it will be radically to it. Terry Smith, in his mad scramble to present himself as Australia's greatest art critic, will doubtless miss the point ... once again.

Source: CAS Broadsheet, Aug/Sept 1971, p7