

A work of art or just an object?

A FEW YEARS ago I was present at a lively exchange between an economist and a writer, over the value of art. The economist took the strictly utilitarian approach that value should be gauged according to function and usefulness. A car is useful, therefore it has a certain value; a toothbrush is useful, so it has another value; and so on. Thus, he concluded, we delude ourselves in attaching any merit to paintings, sculptures, music and poems, because they are basically useless things which "don't do anything worthwhile".

The writer countered that works of art do have a function, although it cannot be measured in such crude material terms. Painting, poetry and music offer a psychological transport; they alter the way we think, feel and imagine. Sometimes the experience of the work of art will considerably intensify and reconfigure our perceptions of the world, more often they are adjusted just a little. In any case, a necessarily important event has taken place — our outlook has changed.

The exhibits in Andrew Simmonds's show seem to be entangled somewhere in the midst of this type of debate. Instead of making recognisable paintings or sculptures, he has produced a sequence of dysfunctional furnishings: tables, basins, cabinets and modular units, none of which are in "working" order.

Every object is designed with a trendiness that borders on camp, the artist fashioning each piece from laminated surfaces, chromed steel, smoked glass and aluminium panels. But they don't physically do anything other than take up floorspace. Simmonds's very gauche sinks, for example, lack taps.

Of course, these stylish things would seem quite absurd if they were not presented in an art exhibition, for the gallery affords a zone where anything goes. Even such blatantly non-utilitarian objects as the base of a shower recess that has been lined with black velvet are not out of place here.

In this respect Simmonds's bizarre show certainly bears thinking about; and yet, after the inevitable moment of mirth, there seems little to be de-

Art

Andrew Simmonds Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, until 9 October

Artworkz 5 101 Collins Street, until 2 October

Diane Mantzaris Verity Street Gallery, until 9 October

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post-modern times. But there is no food for the soul in these dysfunctional objects.

THE ANNUAL Artworkz competition for younger artists has been through a rather bad run over the last few years. Exhibition standards have been uneven, and one wondered why some pieces were deemed worthy of hanging.

Such complaints cannot be directed at Artworkz 5, which surveys Melbourne's younger sculptors. It has been selected and judged by Ken Scarlett, Carlier Makigawa and Maudie Palmer, who seem to have adopted imagination and ingenuity as their basic criteria.

The 104 exhibits included in this competition therefore give one a sense of what is going on in sculpture beyond the established gallery circuit, as well as indicating what our better young artists are up to. The show's size means that it takes up three large spaces in 101 Collins Street.

The larger, solid floor pieces (including arresting statements in plasticity by Ann Kay, Shang Xiano-Feng, Julie Collins) occupy a cavernous space at the front of the building. Smaller and more surreal entries (such as the quirky objects of Robert Bridgewater, Richard Byrnes, Deborah Ostrow) are displayed on a mezzanine level. While the tall, more conventional freestanding sculptures (like the impressive excursions into visual metaphor of Bronwyn Bain, Noel Hourigan, Elizabeth Ruth Hone, Jamieson Miller, Nicole Mott) are gathered in a gallery at the rear.

THERE is an unexpected political edge to Diane Mantzaris's computer-