



Taking licence . . . far left, Brent Grayburn's *Machine for Migration*, with overtones of *Dr Who*, Lenin's tomb and low-budget cryogenics; and left, Nicole Lister's *Stack Up*, embodying the fictional in sculptural practice.

Mechanical in origin but biological in effect, movement also featured in her previous show at this space. Mel's hidden motors introduce into sculpture a dimension of time which has traditionally been denied to it. How to represent temporality in any form of visual art — it's easy in music or literature — is one of the enduring dilemmas in Western culture, having tested the carvers of the Parthenon frieze as much as Boccioni and the Futurists.

These artists faked it, as it were. Mel opts for the kinetic solution of a Tinguely or a Ken Unsworth. That is, she includes movement as a self-contained, physical element on a par with any other in the work, exhibiting movement as a thing.

Down in Woolloomooloo the exhibition of things, or more generally, of "thingness", hits new extremes, for Artspace is once again playing host to the Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship, presented by the NSW Government with the generous support of the Helen Lempriere Bequest administered by Perpetual Trustees.

In contrast to last year's unpermissive affair, Lempriere 1999, valued at a considerable \$40,000, is a return to form for the venerable award. Thirty-one artists were selected for exhibition from a field of 92. The Artspace team have installed the mainly sculptural works with unusual relish. I'm puzzled that this important event is more or less bypassed in the mainstream media, when in fact it's one of Australia's longest running and most well-endowed benefactions for contemporary art and art study.

The Moët & Chandon Fellowship, whose Sydney run kicked off last Tuesday, has the higher profile, yet on this occasion it can sustain no defensible claim to contain superior artworks. Indeed, the works at Artspace are among the most polished to be seen in Sydney at present.

As a case in point, should the fictional Assunta Grieve ever make a flesh and blood appearance, she'd need to meet Brent Grayburn. This young artist is represented in the Lempriere by a refrigeration unit tailor-made to accommodate Our Lady of the Snows in a questionably sealed

down frame and "spotch" onto the floor. The double-take demanded of the viewer — innocuous substance becomes offensive subject matter before our eyes — relates to age-old strategies and problems centred around illusionism in art.

Nell's work, strange to say, is quite academic in that sense. Her attention to detail is positively obsessive. Each fly is individually, even lovingly, fixed to its relevant piece of board. This board is then inserted into a carefully calculated master scheme of companions, all

contributing to the ensemble effect essential to the viewer's initial, deluded engagement with the work.

It's the weirdest thing, although art is the World Capital of Weird I guess, but the plastic accuracies of this insectivorous installation remind me of Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema's *A Juggler*, 1870.

Recently gifted to the Art Gallery of NSW by Mr and Mrs John Schaeffer, this fabulous early work by the famed champion of archaeological verisimilitude in painting makes its visual point by the same process of increment, the same piling of detail upon repeated detail, evident in Nell's wallpiece.

Alma Tadema isn't diminished by such a comparison, though, to be fair, nor is Nell promoted to the ranks of the Victorian Olympians. However, if *Nellnation*, a show proposed for Gallery 4A, gets the go-ahead, who knows what sensational variations on the fly-brown theme of artistic mimesis might be unveiled?

Meanwhile, Nell's colleague, Mel — yes, it gets confusing — situates several, slowly rotating white pinnacles nearby, suggestive of snow-capped peaks or ice-cream tops. These delicious mounds could conceivably have attracted the swarming flies, though such an obvious deduction, for the very reason of its obviousness, is surely wrong. Mel has proven herself in the past a deft manipulator of perception. The way in which we apprehend movement in particular has come to fascinate her, with a number of her works featuring geared or electrical mechanisms.

With its overtones of *Dr Who*, Lenin's Tomb and low-budget cryogenics, his *Machine for Migration* hums like a Kelvinator and chills like a beauty. Clearly intended for the long-term and none-too-comfortable conveyance of a single human body, it has the cachet of an imported car and the chic of a designer coffin.

Equally, Grieve would learn a "thing" or two about the interventions of the real in art, and vice versa, from Nicole Lister's stack of faux-takeaway cups in slip-cast porcelain balanced on a steel shelf. This brilliant embodiment of the fictional in sculptural practice is the single most resolved in the show, and the most modest. Maria Lonic's winning submissions, *Corned* and *Nainslock Luxury vinyl*, investigate the power of the repeat pattern through wax tablets and wallpaper motifs. She has an affinity for her materials and the single-mindedness of a soon-to-be successful professional.

Nonetheless, Christopher Dean, Deborah West, Matthew Gallois, Anne Kay and the unstoppable Kathy Cavaliere, among others, make contributions which might have been proposed for distinction with equal conviction. Space doesn't permit an extended analysis of the works of these artists, but I recommend viewers make every effort to see the Helen Lempriere '99.

In last week's column I failed to mention that the exhibition Tentcraft, at South Gallery, was a collaborative project between Lisa Kelly and Alex Gawronski. My apologies to both these artists.

FLIES IN THE FACE OF REALITY

Worlds collide as Nell, Mel, Assunta and Brent further blur the distinctions between fact and fiction, life and art.

VALERIE KABOV: WHAT WERE YOU THINKING & OTHER UNETHICAL WORKS ON PAPER
Global Gallery until April 25
NELL + MEL: THE FLY AND THE MOUNTAIN
Room 35 to May 1
HELEN LEMPRIERE TRAVELLING ART SCHOLARSHIP 1999
Artspace until May 2

THE Adelaide-based sculptor and performance artist Assunta Grieve has been transforming the towers of St Mary's Cathedral, Queen's

Stones, as she terms them, the sculptor plans to carve a statue of Our Lady of the Snows. This will be installed in a gilded freezer unit permanently stationed on an aerial causeway linking the towers. As well as gesturing to the many pedestrian walkways that crisscross the nearby Pitt Street Mall, and, of course, housing the votive image of the Madonna, Grieve's bridge is intended to serve as a symbolic representation of the union of dualities and the convergence of parallels.

If the foregoing paragraphs appeared as part of a press release, or were published in the body of a catalogue essay, they wouldn't cause so much as the raising of an eyebrow let alone lead to suspicions of a hoax. Members of the public, as well as professional art curators and critics, are unfazed by the excesses of the literary genre known as the artist's statement.

Art writing of any kind, including newspaper criticism, is generally given licence for a degree of fancy a mere notch or two below the clinically delusional. We expect zany, absurdity, complexity and cheek in printed statements by and about contemporary artists and their activities.

Accuracy and understatement, by contrast, would surprise us. Indeed, if anything were to make us suspicious about an art text, undermining

its legitimacy, it would be the use of plain English throughout. Artists are well aware of this situation. While most capitulate passively to the cliché and the non sequitur, as though there is little to do but lay back and think of Eng Lit 101, others prove themselves capable of combating the devil-may-care conventions of artspeak. For example, in notes supplied with her whimsical, though far from unserious, exhibition of watercolours at Global Gallery, Valerie Kabov advances the following "obscure biography" for the reader's consideration.

"Valerie was born . . . that's pretty definite. Through a historical accident, the place of birth was not Paris. She trained in Europe and Australia in pretty much everything [from drawing Greek statues to throwing acid on zinc plates]. Her attention span [for the past 25 years or so] has only extended to work on paper; recently, the really expensive French stuff. After living and working in London and Moscow for a number of years Valerie has returned to Australia to live, work and cause scandals in the Sydney inner east.

"Despite that, people still seem to think it is a good idea to show her work and even buy it. Through no fault of her own, her work is found in private collections in New York, Jerusalem, Paris, London and the Moscow State Museum.

After years of Biennales, Perspectives and, more recently, sculpture walks and Olympic projects, Sydney has witnessed so many "interventions" on the urban landscape that the difference between a site-specific work and a work site is no longer immediately apparent nor easily explicable.

It would require no effort of logic to take the view that the growing Eastern Distributor was a grand, if messy, installation spawned from the consciousness of a particularly ambitious public sculptor — a Richard Goodwin, say — or that the Cockle Bay/Darling Harbour conurbation was, pure and simple, a conceptual artwork.

In its efforts to enter the arena of the real, art has "fictionalised" itself, made itself into something it is not.

(Artists and their interpreters have helped it along, of course, but there is an eerie sense that art has its own juggernaut-like capacity to self-direct, self-perpetuate.)



BRUCE JAMES

"Valerie is currently preparing for her retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York." Kabov justifies the last piece of braggadocio by adding that all artists, in their heart of hearts, are preparing for their retrospective at the Guggenheim. With a painting style that melds Paul Klee and Edwin Tanner, topped off with a propensity for word play and visual punning which is entirely her own, Kabov is perfectly placed to prick the regimes of near-fiction associated with the publication of catalogues and, more crucially, with the production of art. For her, it reduces to an ethical issue.

She asks: "If ethics is making decisions about right and wrong, can application of colour on a white piece of paper using the same criteria be a method for expressions of one's conscience?"

A critic would add: "Can the application of words on a white piece of paper using the same criteria be a method for expressions of one's conscience?"

After years of Biennales, Perspectives and, more recently, sculpture walks and Olympic projects, Sydney has witnessed so many "interventions" on the urban landscape that the difference between a site-specific work and a work site is no longer immediately apparent nor easily explicable.

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tion was, pure and simple, a conceptual artwork.

Historically, this phenomenon traces back through Arte Povera, Pop Art, Surrealism, Dada and Duchamp to the tradition of trompe l'oeil, that branch of art-making that deliberately seeks to confuse viewers as to the reality or otherwise of the images they behold.

Ancient Greek art abounds with deceived birds bashing their beaks against cleverly painted grapes. Modern art is a bit kinder, since the birds, should they choose, can build their nests in the quasi-industrial manifestations which are its hallmark.

To some extent, a new exhibition by Nell + Mel at Room 35 investigates this notion of the "fictional" in art. Where Flemish, Dutch and Spanish masters often represented life-like insects, especially flies, perched on walls and ledges, the artist known as Nell goes one better by affixing multitudinous flows of plastic flies to one wall of the gallery.

By careful placement, she causes the syrupy result to drip illusionistically around a win-

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the person
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