

Abstracts fail to raise the status of symbols

ART

By TERENCE MALOON

AN exhibition curated by Paul McGillick, provocatively titled *The Subject of Painting*, is now showing at the Art Gallery of NSW. The exhibition and its catalogue mount an argument for "pure" painting, painting which takes its own materials and processes as its subject, or identifies the "subject" with the viewer's perceptual experience and subjective response.

It is tiresome for anyone to have to defend abstraction in 1985, so long after the achievements of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Pollock, Rothko and dozens of other painters.

Yet the majority of people who go to art galleries today continue to look at abstract painting askance, with mistrust, bewilderment or indifference. For them, "abstraction" has much the same meaning that the word carried in the 19th century. (Anthony Trollope, in his novel *The Eustace Diamonds*, refers to "the abstraction of Lady Eustace's diamonds". Abstraction was a synonym for disappearance, in this case for theft).

Geoffrey Odgers's three photo-realist still lifes of a plastic doll and high-heel shoes laid out on the studio floor will at least convince the public that the purge of imagery hasn't affected all contemporary painters. Nevertheless, Odgers's paintings seem inconsistent with the exhibition's abstract bias. Perhaps the avowal in his catalogue statement, that "all art is essentially abstract", admits him into the fold.

THE introverted and pernicky neo-symbolist canvases of Geoffrey De Groen also seem in odd company, but De Groen's catalogue statement, "The subject is not the object and the object is not the subject", supports McGillick's contention.

Andrew Cristofides' pseudo-architectural plans are abstract enough. At least, they would be illogical and impracticable as piazzas or airport tarmacs. It is the "ordering of these abstract elements which I see as being the true subject of painting", he declares. But the ordering of his sub-Ludwig Sander, or sub-Charles Biederman designs seems banal and sterile to me.

It is a curious paradox that this exhibition, arguing hard for the superiority of the perceptual over the conceptual in art, seems to give much more weight to doctrinal purity than to an empirical assessment of work. What the artists *don't* do seems to count for more than what they *do* do.

In fact, I found the greater part of the exhibition very dull and disappointing, particularly in the light of McGillick's claims for the formal excellence of the painters and the superiority of the generation of Australian artists who came on the scene in the 1960s and are now in "mid-career".

It is a truism, of course, that painting is a matter of filling a rectangle and activating a surface. Yet if the curator and some of the artists maintain that this is the be-all and end-all of painting, I fail to understand (or maybe I understand too well), why these tasks prove a pitfall for several exhibitors.

While the craft aspect of painting cannot be underestimated, several of the artists here seem to emphasise it to the detriment of expression and meaning.

The craftiness of their work tends to interfere

with our appraisal of their neighbours, so that Paul Partos and Elizabeth Coats fall under suspicion of "knitting", despite the fact that they paint quite intuitively and there is a thought behind every touch they put to the canvas; it's not just mindless filling-in.

Juxtaposed with Andrew Cristofides' neat geometries, Robert Hunter also looks like an artist who expects due consideration for his long hours of boring slog in the service of a "professional" finish. But, here again, the suspicion is quite unwarranted. The magical performance of his matte-and-glossy, or glossy-and-less-glossy paintings, when they are shown in a changing, natural light, tends to be paralysed by artificial lighting. The strange, fugitive illusionism of these two works, which was evident when they were shown at Yuill/Crowley last year, has been "abstracted" by the harsh spotlighting.

Since Paul McGillick almost goes so far as to equate formal scruples with moral decency, I could not understand the inclusion of two paintings, apiece by Tony McGillick and Ross Jackson, which seemed to me particularly clumsy and confused cases of formal mismanagement, as well as being very bad pastiches of the English abstract painter John Hoyland.

Modern artists have continually been involved in speculating about, and testing, what is sufficient in painting. What is the bare minimum for a work to hold our attention and live on in our imaginative life?

I find the three, square, symmetrical, delicately flecked canvases by Elizabeth Coats are plenary, not "minimal" paintings. They have something of the hypnotic fixity and palpitating energy of Aboriginal art from the Western Desert. The unity of light in Coats's painting is related to nature and the painting's symmetry and integrity relates them to the human body or the human face.

THE same comment could be made about Michael Johnson's three, mellow, piercingly beautiful paintings. The dark centre of the painting *Quasar No. 1* makes a strange blend of purples, olive green and brown. Yet the darkness is full of light and it seems possible to peer right through the dense pigment, as if into the depths of the polished woodgrain of an antique tabletop. Two slender horizontal "sticks" of colour — one black, one venetian red — give a tug of spatial illusionism to the painting's interior.

The sophistication of Johnson's new work, its subdued sensuality and its lyricism may achieve all the goals which *The Subject of Painting* projects in theory. Yet I would attribute its power, the power of the best work in this exhibition, and the power of the best abstract art in general, to quite different causes than Paul McGillick does.

It seems to me that great abstract paintings always achieve the status of symbols. They may be symbols of nature, of Eros, the city, the self, the fear of death, or of any other abstract, but pressingly real, condition of our lives.

If this makes the paintings moving and meaningful to us (as I believe it does), then the materials and processes of painting are never sufficient in themselves. They are no less means to an end in abstract as in figurative painting. If an abstract work has no symbolic import, it will no doubt be felt as vacuous, trivial and considered a failure by the viewer.

With all the goodwill in the world, more than half the works in *The Subject of Painting* lack anything I could identify as a subject.