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Vehement in expression but limited in experience

DAVIDA Allen (Ray Hughes Gallery) is sometimes presented as the housewife superstar of Australian painting, proof that good art can be made out of the mundane incidents of suburban domesticity.

Her pictures are about life at home and on holiday, getting the children to eat their breakfast and driving them to school. They are also about the sexual life of the housewife: in the past about her fantasies, now about the difficulties of being a mother responsible for her children while also having a sexual relationship with her husband.

There is no doubt that she has intimate knowledge of the world she deals with, and at times the conflict of wife and mother roles is effectively captured.

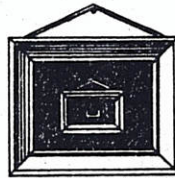
In *Child at Door*, for example, a little girl appears in a doorway, staring at her naked embracing parents. On another wall, between two pictures titled *It's nice feeling sexy*, a work called *Mother* is covered with the word scrawled again and again.

Perhaps the most successful pictures are those that deal with the artist's vision of female sexuality, which is presented as basically submissive: *Troll lover* has a pink, spread-eagled female body embraced by a black male form, while in *Couple* a blue man grapples quite violently with, once again, a pink woman.

In *It's nice feeling sexy*, the female body, supine, arms hanging down, is composed of a thick mass of pink and white pigment, with only the minimum reference to anatomy: "feeling sexy" is represented as a passive state in which the body, devoid of will, melts into pure matter.

Unfortunately the range of experience in these works is very limited, not only in extent but in depth. The longer one looks at them, the more one is convinced that the artist has little understanding of anything beyond her own immediate and personal feelings.

She has no sense of the *other*, either as the natural world (the landscapes do not work), or as a grasp of the specificity of other human beings: the male figures, for example, (sometimes titled or



GALLERIES

CHRISTOPHER ALLEN

Even the children, ostensibly the subjects of many of the pictures, are hardly seen except in relation to the mother: fighting at breakfast, interrupting their parents' intimacy.

This self-centredness is itself characteristic of children (that is to say, of immaturity), and it seems appropriate that Davida Allen's style is based on the primitive forms of child art.

Davida Allen uses the forms of child art as a starting-point for expressionist elaboration; but there is an economy in expressionism, in the relation between "expressive" effects and the weight of what is expressed, for which she seems to have little feeling.

All her subjects, regardless of specific differences, are painted in lurid colours, using far too

much paint and excessively vehement brushwork. For this reason, some of the drawings and lithographs, where she is limited to quieter effects of line, are more successful.

Euan MacLeod's work (*Watters*) can be considered, beneath his own surface expressionism, as a meditation on photography. Most of the 48 paintings in this exhibition look compositionally like holiday snapshots: figures are caught in random groups, children arrested in mid-movement, heads are cut off, bodies seen in *contre-jour* are blacked out by the violent glare behind.

The photograph, indiscriminately reproducing a given reality, represents a world that is intractable to the intellectual organisation of composition. At the same time the expressive brushstroke asserts its own presence and freedom in this deterministic environment, never allowing itself to be reduced to that environment.

On the contrary, MacLeod's naked paint uncovers its disturbing rawness and, as in *Bridget in Shadows*, where brilliant light on the child in the foreground washes out her features, the sometimes uncanny face of a deadpan world.

