

Save us from perfection



ART

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LAST Tuesday, in front of the State Parliament House, students of the National Art School revived a quaint, old-fashioned ritual — the public demonstration. They were not trying to save the whales or the trees, or protesting against American imperialism; they were striving for one thing only: to extricate their art school from the deathly, bureaucratic bear-hug of TAFE.

The current students are justly proud of an art school which has produced many of the leading Australian artists of this century, a school which has clung to a solid program of studio-based learning when so many other colleges have lost their way. This was the only demonstration I've ever seen in which students yelled slogans such as "Save our tradition!"

It is sobering to think that the students are now the traditionalists, while the administrators and bureaucrats adopt radical stances and claim the NAS is entering "an exciting new phase". One shudders to imagine the kind of mind which could find anything "exciting" about Competency Based Training (CBT) and module-based learning. Neither is there anything particularly stimulating about the flow of jargon in which TAFE has couched its proposals.

Staff have been issued with a page-and-a-half of Vocational Training Reform Acronyms, (my favourite is "ROT" — Recognition Of Training), and an Outcome Based Education Assessment Map. Nothing could be further from the spirit of art, and more detrimental to an art education.

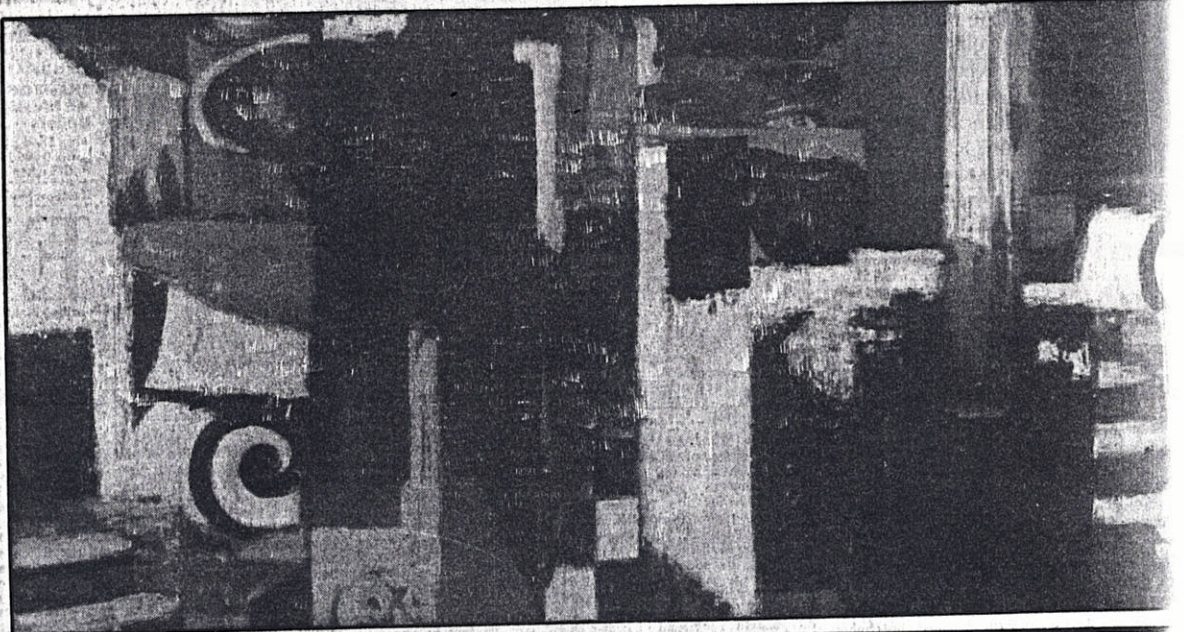
Most significantly, there is now so much hostility between the administration, students and teachers, that, instead of increasing efficiency, the new programs threaten to bring the college to a standstill.

The one-and-only solution was voiced many times in last Tuesday's demonstration: if it's not broken, don't fix it.

One turns with relief from the throttling structures of TAFE-style instruction, to the seductive grids of Hilarie Mais, in her exhibition at Sherman Goodhope, but while not wanting to cast any reflection on Mais, I'm tempted to extend the comparison a little further. One of the reasons the TAFE proposals are so stultifying is their desire for an impossible perfection — as though every student's progress towards artishood can be measured with scientific precision.

Mais's work looks perfect at first glance, yet closer acquaintance reveals that much of its charm comes from small but insistent imperfections.

Viewed from the side, Mais's grids and trellises relinquish their austere geometry in favour of a more casual



Hinting at a Cubist approach to pictorial space... *Double Up*, above, by John Bartley. Right: *Her Voice of Whirlwinds* by Hilarie Mais.

approach to carpentry, it is similar to the experience of looking at a Mondrian painting after only knowing the work in reproduction. Those works which appear so puritanical with their stark grids and primary colours, are humanised by their unfussy brushstrokes and wobbly lines.

Mais paints thin lines of colour on the sides of her wall constructions and dark squares on the surface, to conflate easy distinctions between two and three dimensions. Only at extreme close range can one tell whether one is looking into a hole, or at a patch of dark paint.

If this was all Mais did, it would be a minor paradox on which to base an exhibition, but the essential conflict is more than optical. There is also the opposition between the painstaking, deliberate construction of these works and the dreamy passivity they inspire in the viewer. It is easy to lose oneself, or one's sense of self, in the contemplation of these repetitive, non-hierarchical structures.

The eye is lured into this trap by the soft, flickering brushstrokes which cover the larger works. Light seems to emanate from pieces such as *Her Voice Of Whirlwinds* and *Buried Sheba*, but the effect is generated largely by Mais's fastidious paintwork. Either way, the spiritual metaphor is unmistakable: in the heart of the labyrinth, one finds an inner light. Mais's colours are cool, but I'm sure I'm not alone in detecting a strange warmth in these tightly meshed wooden slats.

With John Bartley's new paintings at the Legge Gallery there is a similar

fascination with grid forms, but here the structure seems always on the verge of dissolving. Similar to one of those puzzles in which sliding squares are rearranged to make a picture, fragments of landscape and still life peek out between patches of bright or dark colour. There is something teasing and slightly frustrating about this method, as though the artist was unable to make up his mind whether he belongs in the figurative or abstract camp.

THE true story, so I'm told, is that Bartley has always built up his compositions as montages of images drawn from magazines. He rearranges these disparate images until they assume a cohesive form, then paints a picture based on the arrangement.

This initial reliance on collage is identical to the way James Gleeson plans his large-scale surrealist landscapes. Yet until this exhibition, Bartley's work has been predominantly abstract. To leave the figurative foundations intact he has had to muster his courage — since it is often the case that an unyielding commitment to abstraction provides an armour plating for painterly incompetence.

Bartley need not worry on this score, but he still proceeds with utmost caution. All of these paintings feel like exercises rather than major works. They are stages on the path to some higher goal.

Many of these works hint at a Cubist approach to pictorial space. A painting called *Double Up* is simultaneously an interior and exterior view

of a shadowy building. Other works, such as *Still Life At the Knees*, with its vivid repertoire of disjointed, fetishistic images, read like small forays into Pop Art.

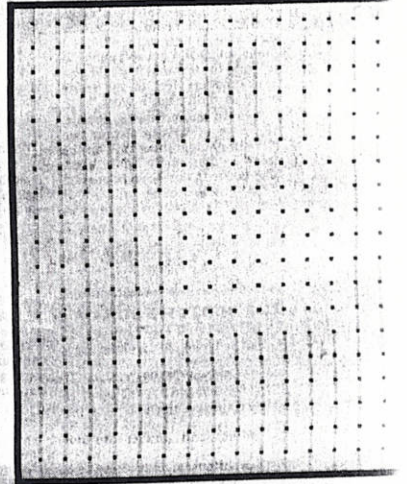
From out of this tug-of-war between influences and ideas, the originality of Bartley's work is emerging by degrees. One can also chart a stylistic evolution in the paintings of Roger Byrt, at the Robin Gibson Gallery.

A work from 1990, called *Cairn*, shows a set of monumental, disembodied arms and a huge wine glass in a rocky, barren landscape. Painted with the characteristic exactness (and stiffness) of Magritte, this work is readily identifiable as a kind of latter-day surrealism.

Turning to more recent paintings, such as *Quarter Acre Block* (1993) or *French Curve* (1994), the evocation of a dream world is no less pronounced, but Byrt's technique has completely altered. These canvases are awash with white light, speckled by tiny dabs of colour in vague emulation of Seurat or even Godfrey Miller.

The symbolism is equally insistent and oblique, with time and transcendence being constant preoccupations. If there is something a little too delicate, almost precious, about these paintings, Byrt's imagery is strange and thoughtful enough to demand a more considered response.

It wouldn't be fair to end this column without mentioning the Holdsworth Galleries' 25th anniversary, which was celebrated on Wednesday evening. In a graceful speech, director Gisella Scheinberg related how difficult it is for a commercial gallery to decide just how



commercial it should be. If one sells too much, the critics, curators and vanguard artists deride you for crass commercialism; if you sell too little, your artists grow disaffected.

"Commercialism" is a dirty word in some sectors of the art world, but to me it is far preferable to the false seriousness and political posturing which characterise so much "non-commercial" avant-gardism.

Holdsworth Galleries has an hon-

ourable place in S. history. It has shown the leading new art, and continues consistency to give many young artists

If Mrs Scheinberg pleasure from the works they responding to art in fundamental fashion her, all the best.

Reviews for
'upstairs' show
Legge Gallery
6th Sept - 24th Sept
1994