

FROM LIPS to ellipse, the abstract paintings of Andrew Christofides at Charles Nodrum are stunning. Vertical ellipses and bars dance in front of chequerboard patterns. Each canvas is carefully weighted, often with a daring division of parts, potentially threatening the unity of the work. Through sophisticated figure-ground relationships, the abstract shapes become protagonists, standing in front of some other motif and having strong presence.

Christofides' skill in giving his forms presence has wonderful aesthetic consequences. He enriches his cool colors with warm glazes: there's always push and pull within his flat planes; and it yields lively dynamism, even within the chaste compositions dominated by horizontals and verticals. The pictorial means are highly resolved. For Christofides' peculiar blend of soberness and vivacity or geometry and evocation, the only other abstract painter in Australia is Ian Friend.

Any reservations I have relate to the catalogue essay. While certainly recognising Christofides' space and figure-ground relationships, Jenny Zimmer nevertheless often talks about "a system of visual universals", "a universal abstract order", "universal abstract forms" and, quoting the artist, "a universal language".

I would argue that nothing cultural is ever universal. To assert universality or the absolute is to deny relativity, cultural difference, the politics of artistic prestige and the interests of

race, class and gender that riddle the history of the world.

My other reservation with Zimmer's essay is that it identifies pre-modern ornament with modernist abstraction. Pre-modern ornament derives from the structures and function of the object it belongs to. It has nothing to do with the universal or the absolute. Pre-modern ornament relates to the peculiar technologies of weaving or building in a given material; it figuratively expresses joining or lifting; at its most esoteric, it marks place, symbolises ritual and establishes hierarchies. Just because it contains geometric patterns, it doesn't become abstraction.

More pout than clout

Ko Itten, a Touch of Scarlet: Penelope Lee.

The Basement, until Sunday.

Andrew Christofides.

Charles Nodrum Gallery, until Saturday.

ROBERT NELSON

APPARENTLY THE Japanese commonly buy disposable surgical masks to protect themselves from airborne particulates. Penelope Lee has strung up a whole series of them and embroidered red lips in their centres.

Photographs show them being worn — embroidered lips and all — by a handsome Asian female. Only one photograph lacks the lips and it seems disconcertingly impersonal. Impersonality is Lee's theme; but those outrageously full lips (unnecessary in equipment for hygiene) are provocative.

As shown in the photographs, Lee's provisional lips are worn on the outside. They aren't a smudge of lipstick left on the inside of the gauze, but some gratuitous and sick sign of smooch-power.

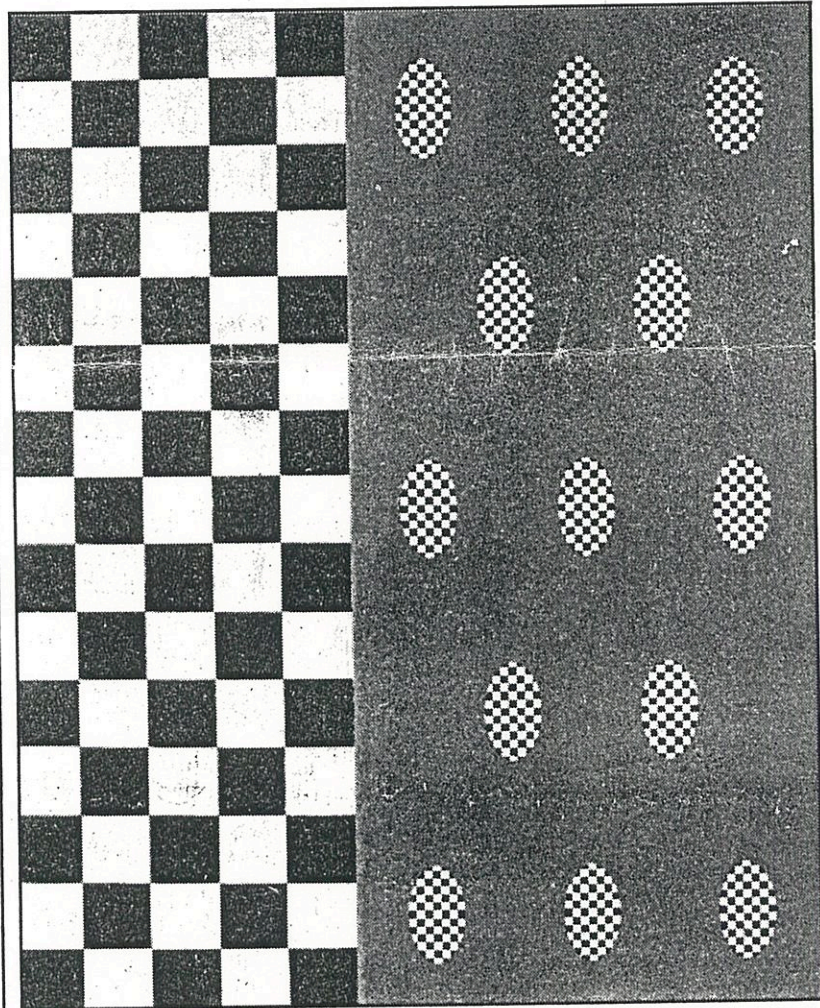
Against the pristine cleanliness of gauze and lips, a single, fouled example reminds us that the used masks collect unspeakable gunk around the cakehole.

Millions of gorgeous mouth-holders, Lee seems to say, will all be soiled and thrown away like the filth they collect.

An excellent essay by Zara Stanhope enhances this melancholy thought with a critique of women's masks and veils.

The installation is softly unnerving; the sense of insalubrious breath is oppressive.

The beauty of this installation is its teasing tastefulness. You've never been so close to so many lips; and yet they're all concealed beneath fears of inhaling pollution, or exhaling their own infections. The social message is less clear. On a corporal, spatial level, the installation is suffocatingly good; on a political level, it perhaps has more pout than clout.



Andrew Christofides: Vertical ellipses dance before chequerboard patterns.