



JOHN McDONALD
ART

Ken Whisson, Paintings
Watters Gallery, Until November 4.
Euan Macleod, Paintings
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Angus Nivison, Paintings
Coventry Gallery, Until October 28.

IN an old interview, Ken Whisson muses: "My paintings seem ... to remember a lot of things that I don't remember." This is a deceptively casual insight into the artist's mind, since his new paintings at the Watters Gallery are filled with images half-glimpsed or half-remembered. Whisson gives us a view of the world seen from the window of a speeding train, a vista onto endless suburban backyards, paddocks and factories, reduced to simple schematic forms. It may be the backyard of Melbourne, where the artist was born in 1927, or Perugia, Italy, where he has lived since the late 1970s, but the actual locations do not seem to matter.

Like fellow-expatriate Jeffrey Smart, Whisson conflates perfectly ordinary scenes from Australia and Italy into open-ended symbols of the modern condition.

Like Smart's, his work is one long meditation on the problems of picture-making, although he seeks out radically different solutions. While it is easy to respond at once to Smart's meticulous, realistic works, Whisson's pictures are more of an acquired taste. A typical Whisson painting may look awkward and haphazardly constructed. The artist has abandoned conventional perspective and the rules of composition in favour of an ambiguous, shifting space, where objects seem to recede or come forward as though endowed with a desire to rebel against nature.

Ideas of "skill" or "technique" are anathema to Whisson. To appreciate his work, one must jettison a great deal of cultural baggage, since his paintings may look utterly shapeless at first. Little by little, their interest grows, as one becomes more familiar with his distinctive touch, until this language becomes not only legible, but addictive. It is even possible to see this dogged, eccentric artist as one of the great unsung influences on recent Australian painting.

Perhaps because of its greater insularity, it was in Brisbane that Whisson's work made its greatest impact. His regular exhibitions with Ray Hughes obviously had a lasting impact on the work of younger artists such as Robert Moore and Scott Whittaker, and even on a senior painter such as William Robinson, whose farmyard pictures of the early '80s owe a debt to Whisson.

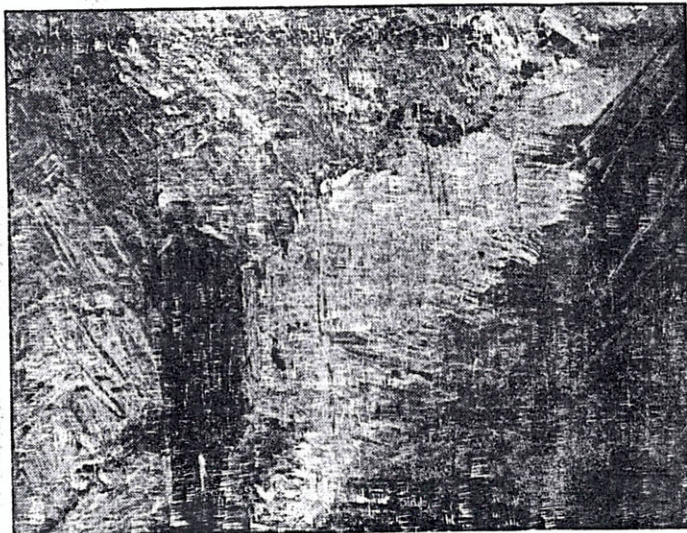
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the plug on this process, leaving the canvas littered with empty fragments of landscape and architecture.

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Euan Macleod's *Figures, Harbour*... sensuous appeal.

the problem is that there is no problem. In the same vein, one might invoke Picasso's comments when people said they wanted to understand the meaning of his work: "One might as well ask what does the song of a bird mean." Yet the poet W. H. Auden offers one glimmer of possibility, in discussing the terms "Primary and Secondary Imagination" found in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. The Primary Imagination, he writes, is concerned only with "sacred things and sacred events". The sacred strikes us with the force of revelation, and we respond with awe — with wonder or with dread. The Secondary Imagination is the domain of conventional aesthetic discrimination, of judgments about beauty and ugliness. There is always room for argument about beauty, but there can be no dispute about the sacred and the profane.

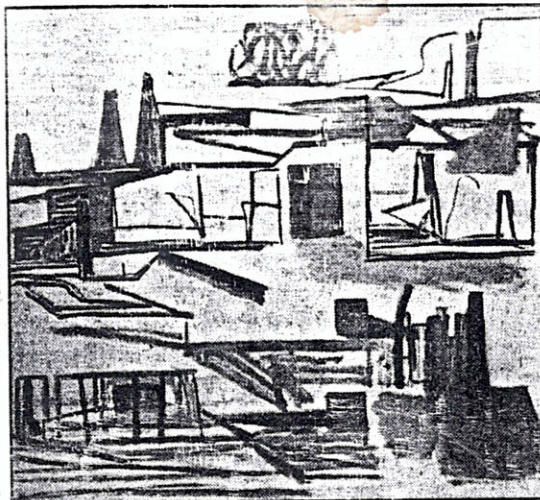
Whisson, I believe, aims to go beyond those Secondary arguments about the nature of things and convey something of their primal force. While his paintings have no obvious bearing, he fashions his

cannot call Whisson a realist, an expressionist, a surrealist or any other convenient tag. If we are not left with a feeling of "awe" in front of his buildings, backyards and paddocks, neither can we judge them as more or less faithful depictions of real places. He never sacrifices appearances altogether, in favour of abstraction, but pares each form down to its essence.

IF we did need a label for Whisson, we might call him a Sceptical Realist. He clings to everyday subject matter, but throws our perceptions and preconceptions into crisis. He realises that the imagination adheres to what we know, rather than what we see, and he sets traps for our habitual, visual complacency. He invests every form with a hint of the sacred because he presents it as an object that finally surpasses our efforts at understanding. In such a manner does he ask us to continually see the world anew.

Euan Macleod, showing in Watters' downstairs gallery, is neither so subtle nor complicated as Whisson, but his paintings have their own

ALONG THE PATH TO understanding



Ken Whisson's *Landscape in Various Browns, Greys and Yellows*.

impression of an artist who can barely contain his natural energy and enthusiasm. While some painters feel a tremulous anxiety before the blank page or the bare canvas, I can imagine Macleod's eyes lighting up at the sight of a fresh surface.

Picking up a dripping palette knife, he must go running towards the picture yelling "Kill! Kill!", waving his implement like a broad sword.

Perhaps this is a little fanciful, but there are no fewer than 66 paintings in this exhibition, crammed into the less-than-spacious confines of a converted terrace house. There is a handful of large pictures, but most works are small to medium. They divide into various subsets: a group of small portraits and self-portraits; several studies of an empty diaphy; numerous landscapes, with or without figures. Macleod is not concerned with subject matter, but with the internal dynamism of a painting. His palette is restrained and inclined towards sombreness, while his compositions are based on the simplest geometric configurations. To look at a wall full of his paintings is to feel one's eye pulled in a zig-zag from one piece to the next by the works' sharp angles and tilted planes.

The dominant feature here is the purely sensuous appeal of the painted surface.

While Whisson's paintings are full of air and space, Macleod covers every millimetre of the surface with a thick, shiny skin of oil. The darkness of these pictures gives the illusion of depth, but at close quarters one finds only an opaque screen covered in broad swathes of paint. This in itself can be exhilarating and I know that many younger painters find in Macleod's work an antidote to the depressing novelty art that excites our contemporary art institutions.

Macleod wants us to recognise that, for him, painting is a serious, if not obsessive occupation. I can appreciate that concern and can respond positively to many of the

consider a more economical hang, where the quality of the work is not obscured by its sheer quantity.

TODAY is the final chance to see Angus Nivison's new paintings at the Coventry Gallery — an exhibition that reveals an artist growing in confidence and ability. Nivison lives on a farm in the New England area, and his large abstract paintings have a decidedly rural bent. A maroon painting, with a grey, cloudy mid-section is called *Waiting for Rain*, while the major work in the show bears the title *Hard Rain*. This work captures that ecstatic moment of the breaking of the drought; red and black lines descend like streamers from the top of the canvas, crashing into the parched earth and splashing upwards. In its repetitions and earthy colours, this piece is oddly reminiscent of Aboriginal art.

Yet if Aboriginal painting has had any influence on Nivison, it remains a distant one. More unmistakable is the example of Ian Fairweather, whose recent touring retrospective confirmed his reputation as Australia's leading "artist's artist".

In a painting of a seated female figure, titled *Gift*, Nivison borrows Fairweather's loose tracery of white lines, his grid forms, his meandering brushstrokes and dribbles of paint. It seems to be a conscious piece of homage, because no other work in the show is so much under the sway of this reclusive artist.

Instead, one notices how Nivison has distilled certain aspects of Fairweather's art into a more personal idiom. The large painting *Bridge*, for example, is a patchwork of interlocking and overlapping shapes, setting squares of red and blue against a neutral grey, the colour of corrugated iron. The way the picture is constructed has echoes of Fairweather, but Nivison's work is neither so dense nor detailed. It is nevertheless an impressive painting in a show filled with varied experi-

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