

Gareth Sansom's paintings stand out in a well-curated survey of Australian art, writes Sebastian Smee

Cross Currents: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
Until November 26.

GARETH Sansom, for my money the most exciting painter in Australia today, has not shown a substantial body of work in Sydney since 1993. In fact, in all these years he has not shown much outside Melbourne.

So his inclusion in Cross Currents, a new show at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, is reason enough for anyone who can go see it, even if it means getting to Circular Quay by ocean liner (you've got until late November).

The cherry on the cake is that the show as a whole is first rate. Curated by John Stringer, it is an unexpected avowal of contemporary art that is not just beautiful but intelligent, too.

Cross Currents is the third exhibition in a series of MCA shows surveying contemporary Australian art. The first, Meridian, I did not see, but the second, Interesting Times, was a challenging, thoughtful show with a political theme and a wide array of media, from painting and photography to video and installation art.

Cross Currents, by contrast, concentrates on older artists whose careers, in most cases, the curator has followed for several decades. (Two of them were born in the 1920s and three in the '30s.) The emphasis is heavily on painting, with a few sculptures and one suite of photographs.

Stringer is curator of the Kerry Stokes Collection in Perth. His tastes run to minimalist abstraction and refined decoration, qualities much in evidence throughout a selection he admits is highly personal.

But Sansom, as ever, stands apart. His paintings may be beautiful, in a mercurial kind of way, yet beauty is but one of their many strengths. These are urgent works of art that dare to describe the workings of the mind. They are large, cacophonous, unstable and sometimes quite terrifying. But what sets Sansom apart from other painters in love with hectic, crowded canvases is that, even as he flirts with chaos, he makes visible to the viewer the process of sorting it out.

Of course, there's no resolution to this process, just as there's no resolution to the relentless work of the mind (except death). But the ordering impulse is crucial. And in Sansom's painting, this translates to a captivating sensitivity to colour, shape, scale and the formal relationship between the individual parts and the whole.

Two of his four paintings here — *The Keep* and *Sweeney Agonistes* — were included in a Sansom survey show at the Ian Potter Museum in Melbourne last year. I raved about them then and, revisiting them now, they only seem better.

BEAUTY and



Much of what we see in both is abstract. But it is never psychologically neutral because Sansom detonates pure form with literary and emotional content that crackles and blisters.

Sweeney Agonistes, as Terence Maloon explains in the catalogue, is a memorial to Sweeney Reed. The natural son of Joy Hester and Albert Tucker, Sweeney was adopted by John and Sunday Reed. The Reeds, Hester and Tucker all worshipped T. S. Eliot, which is how the boy was named — with remarkable heedlessness, it seems

now — after the poet's brutish, seething, idiotic creation, Sweeney.

"No doubt there were other jarring, negative things eating away at Sweeney Reed, apart from his ill-starred name," Maloon writes. "Making a display of bravado and sweeping charm, strikingly good-looking but evidently fragile and damaged underneath, he tried to make a career as an art dealer (Sansom exhibited at his gallery in the early '70s), dabbled as a 'concrete poet' and committed suicide in 1979."

Sweeney Agonistes is a triptych. Its central panel is loaded with references to the crucifixion. The two side panels are punctuated with snippets of text: "Last New Year's Eve he stayed up alone sniffing amy!"; "It was there"; "But it wasn't there"; and so on. The whole painting feels infused with a consciousness of being hunted down, tormented. It describes a mind flirting with its own extinction.

The Keep, with its strange pile-up of architectural form, its blocked-out graffiti and its slice of

ENTRIES NOW INVITED
MAJOR FINE ART AUCTION

SYDNEY 5-6 DECEMBER 2007 ENTRIES CLOSE 24 OCTOBER

MENZIESARTBRANDS

DEUTSCHER-MENZIES



For free, confidential appraisals by our art specialists please contact
Sydney 02 8344 5404 Melbourne 03 9822 1911 www.deutschermenzies.com

deutscherandhackett
specialist fine art auction house & private gallery

important fine art auction
sydney • november 2007

now
consigning

For obligation-free appraisals, please call

Sydney Melbourne
02 9287 0600 03 9865 6333

info@deutscherandhackett.com
www.deutscherandhackett.com

Deutscher and Hackett Pty Ltd is not associated or affiliated
with Deutscher Menzies Pty Ltd

BRAINS



Workings of the mind; Gareth Sansom's *The Keep* (2004), left; Debra Dawes's *Parallel Planes*, above, from the series *Double-Dealing* (2007)

grid-based paintings of Debra Dawes. Dawes was born in Queensland and lives and works in NSW. Here she has a series of tall, patterned canvases that use horizontal strips studded with brightly coloured trapezoids to create an optical illusion of three-dimensionality.

Visually, these paintings are stunning. What keeps the eye engaged is Dawes's encouragement of irregularity within what looks to be a predetermined design. A hue will lighten here, an angle shift there, with the result that the whole structure seems to slip out of joint as you look.

Abstract artists often struggle with a yearning to be more socially engaged. Ad Reinhardt, the American minimalist whose work was adamantly devoid of content, was nevertheless resolute in his determination to act politically, as a citizen, as an illustrator and as a commentator.

Dawes, by contrast, wants to unify her art with her political convictions. She gives her paintings a political twist with titles such as *Cover Up* and *Double-Dealing*, implying camouflage and deceit in the political realm.

It's not a bad ploy: something about the optical trickery in Dawes's work does make you reflect on the difference between appearances and reality, which is a conundrum at the heart of politics everywhere. But to be truly convincing, I think, political art has to specify its targets. And that is hard if you are an abstract artist.

Of the several other artists working in an overtly pattern-based, textile-influenced manner, I was most impressed by Vivienne Binns. Binns revels in domestic and surface patterning made by anonymous, long forgotten designers. She has worked on a series of paintings she calls *In Memory of the Unknown Artist Since 1994*. Her friends send her examples of patterning they think she will enjoy. She studies those she likes, sometimes for a long period, analysing their aesthetic structure, then works up a kind of translation or interpretation in paint.

The suite of paintings on show here is extremely impressive. Each canvas is unabashedly decorative, like the design it was inspired by. But Binns's control of paint, her feeling for scale and her sense of colour give her humble sources an intoxicating new life.

One of the distinctive characteristics of her patterning is her penchant for moiré effects, patterns with a watered or rippled effect. If you can imagine looking at the grille of a screen door through frosted glass, and this brought to life by beautifully harmonised colour, you have something like the effect.

Of the several artists not overtly engaged in patterning, I found (apart from Sansom) Tobias Richardson's suite of paintings most impressive. Richardson is interested in what he describes as "the psychology of buildings".

It's hard to think of a building more psychologically loaded than the Ka'aba in Mecca, and it's this that Richardson has chosen as a motif. He has rendered it — with utmost respect, he insists — in dozens of paintings in different sizes in enamel on board, all of them installed, one over the other, across three walls of a room. The paintings look rough: the paint is slapped on over coarse supports and there are lots of drips and splatters. But look closely and you see each one has its own logic.

Richardson's repertoire of effects is thrilling. The play between abstraction and figuration and between each painting's symbolic force and its raw "thingness", is captivating.

All the work in this show is interesting. Unfortunately, there isn't room to single out each of the 16 artists. But it would be crazy not to mention the series of monotypes — one-off prints made, in this case, using oil-based coloured inks — by Elisabeth Cummings, one of Australia's greatest living painters.

Cummings, now in her 70s, is best known for her landscape paintings and interiors. These monotypes continue in the same vein, but the change in medium adds something new: it lets oodles of air and light into her patchwork compositions of shifting, intangible, colour.

How much longer must we wait to see sizeable retrospectives of work by artists such as Cummings, Sansom and Binns?

text from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, is no less powerful.

The rest of the work in *Cross Currents* is much less volatile. Instead, it invites us to bask in a set of mature, formally hyper-sensitive visions, each in its way seeking harmony, simplicity and a kind of humming spiritual consciousness. These visions are not without complexity; in most cases overt minimalism opens on to a set of gorgeously unfolding nuances. But they create an atmosphere that is soothing and rarefied rather than chaotic and real.

Almost everything is abstract. But even more noticeable is the unexpected preponderance of work based on cross-hatching, grids or the warp-and-weft structure of textiles. Even American-born photographer David Stephenson fits this mould: his blown-up time exposures of stars in the central Australian sky show one set of parallel arcs intersected by another, making the heavens seem wrought with ineffable elegance.

Or take the work of Karl Wiebke, who was born in Detmold, Germany, and came to Australia in the '80s. Wiebke's paintings, more than any in the show, resemble gorgeous, floating textiles, not only because the cross-hatched lines he paints are so fine but because they stretch, twist and contract in relation to one another, like the woven threads of a flowing wall hanging.

Wiebke is a scintillating colourist (he once put out a book called *My Favourite Colours*; its pages were simply rectangular monochromes). To try to analyse what he achieves here — the delicacy of nuance, the pitch of emotion — with simple combinations of two or three colours is to be defeated before one begins.

Enjoy, too, Wiebke's earlier paintings, each taking many years to make, with long skeins of different coloured paint thickly built up on the surface. The resulting particoloured ridges and deep crevasses have a chromatic intensity as well as a sculptural presence that could never be conveyed in reproduction.

For all their optical movement, Wiebke's paintings have an underlying structure that accords with their support, the rectangular canvas. Other artists deliberately make this structure, the grid, manifest rather than latent.

Hilarie Mais, for instance, has a series of square wooden grids painted in subtle colours suspended, like windows, from the ceiling. Mais's sensibility is resolutely minimal, but her sense of colour and her love for very subtle variations has sustained a long career. On the seesaw balancing sensuous pleasure and severe restraint, so characteristic of minimal art, Mais sits right in the middle. It is hard not to be impressed by her devotion, though occasionally I long to see her venture a little further to either side.

More involving, at least in this show, are the

2007-08 Programmes: Applications Open
Residencies and Awards (Round 2):
- Hong Kong, Taipei, Beijing
- Accommodation Subsidies
- Some travel grants are available
Closing Date: 19 November 2007
Australia-China Council Churchill Fellowship:
Valued at around \$25,000 for projects involving travel to China for four to eight weeks.
Grant funding; next closing date 4 February 08
Information on all Council programmes:
Website: www.dfat.gov.au/acf Ph: 02-6261 2806
Email: auschina.council@dfat.gov.au

AUSTRALIAN ICONS
AUCTION SUN 21 OCTOBER AT NOON
ON VIEW THUR 18-SAT 20 SEP 10AM-5PM

A one owner collection. Over 200 items devoted to The Sydney Harbour Bridge, Arnotts, Minties, Bushells, Ginger Meggs and more.

Includes advertising displays and posters, original tins, paper ephemera, glass and metalware, textiles and a large selection of period photographs, postcards, personal letters and playing cards.

Enquiries 02 9326 1588
Catalogue on line www.ahapiro.com.au

SHAPIRO
162 Queen Street Woolahra • www.ahapiro.com.au

General Manager buzz

Buzz Dance Theatre seeks an energetic and experienced leader with exemplary business planning and advocacy skills to join this award winning company.

As General Manager you will have outstanding HR management ability as well as strong financial & marketing skills.

You will be based in Perth, WA and receive a package up to \$70K including super.

To obtain the requisite selection criteria please contact Sarah Hodgson on 08 9226 2322 or admin@buzzdance.com.au

Applications close 29 October

ACGA AUSTRALIAN COMMERCIAL GALLERIES ASSOCIATION

QUEENSLAND
HEISER GALLERY 906 Arthar Street, Fortitude Valley 07-3254 2049 Tues-Sat 10-30-6
JANE BURTON Wornwood
JAN MURPHY 486 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley 07-3254 1358 Tues-Sat 10-5
JULIE REEVES New Work
PHILIP BACON 2 Arthar Street, Fortitude Valley 07-3358 3555 Tues-Sat 10-9
RAY CROOKE

TASMANIA
BETT GALLERY Hobart 209 Elizabeth Street, North Hobart 051-231 9311 Mon-Sat 11-6
BUE LOVEGROVE New Paintings

VICTORIA
ALCASTON GALLERY 11 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy 03-9418 3434 Tues-Fri 10-6 Sat 11-5 www.alcastongallery.com.au
WARAKURNA ARTISTS and **TIANPI DESERT WEAVERS** Last day from Oct 18 **EUBENA HAMPTON** and **ATTERDORA MUDGAL**
CHRISTINE ABRAHAMS 77 Diggs Street, Richmond 03-9428 5099 Tues-Fri 10-30-5 Sat 11-6
THORNTON WALKER
DIANNE TANZER 106-110 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy 03-9410 3068 Tues-Fri 10-5 Sat 12-5
ASH KEATING Project Space: **MERRIN BIRTH** Feet
MOSSERSON GALLERIES 41 Derby Street, Collingwood, VIC 03-9418 3434 Tues-Fri 10-6 Sat 11-5
WARRAKURNA ARTISTS and **TIANPI DESERT WEAVERS** Last day from Oct 18 **EUBENA HAMPTON** and **ATTERDORA MUDGAL**
NELLIE CASTAN Level 1, 12 River Street, South Yarra 03-9804 7366 Tues-Sun 12-5
DENNIS MONA Zagreb **KATE SHAW** minor matter
NIAGARA 245 Punt Road, Richmond 03-9429 3500 Tues 11-6 Wed-Sat 11-6
ROBERT BRIDGEWATER
TOLARNO Level 4, 289 Flinders Lane, Melbourne 03-9554 6000 Tues-Fri 10-6 Sat 10-12
LOUISE NEAPMAN

NSW
ANNANDALE 110 Talagar Street, Annandale 02-9552 1099 Tues-Sat 11-5
GUY WARREN Miscellaneous and **Sharonbook** Dances
GODWIN BRADBEER Aspects of the Metaphysical Body
BRENDA MAY 2 Danks Street, Waterloo 02-9316 1122 Tues-Sat 11-6
PETER TILLEY Sculpture **MAYDEN WILSON** Paintings
MARTIN BROWNE FINE ART ROY JACKSON Paintings
ROSLYN OXLEY 8 Soudan Lane, Paddington 02-9331 1919 Tues-Sat 11-6
JENNY WATSON Star Material
ROBYN BACKEN It's me...I'm here...where's you?
SHERMAN 16-20 Goodhope Street, Paddington 02-9321 1312 Tues-Fri 10-5 Sat 11-6
HERO DOND and **JANET LAURENCE** Artbox: **ELEANOR** & **JAMES AVERY**
STILLS 38 Goodell Street, Paddington 02-9331 7775 Tues-Sat 11-6
GLENN BLOGGETT and **REBECCA ANN HOBBS**
TIM OLSEN 83 Jersey Road, Wollshalls 02-9327 2022 Tues-Fri 10-6 Sat 10-5
DEAN BOWEN and Group Show Annex 72a Windsor St. **JOHN OLSEN** Prints and Works on Paper

The Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships

2008 **samstag**

The University of South Australia is pleased to announce the following Samstag Scholarships, awarded for study overseas in the visual arts from 2008

Tracy Cornish
Hayden Fowler
Giles Ryder
Simon Terrill
Joshua Webb

Each scholarship includes a tax-exempt stipend equivalent to US\$32,000 (United States dollars) for twelve months of overseas study, plus return airfare and institutional fees

Hayden FOWLER *Gout Odyssée 2006* (production still 2) photographer Michael Randall

UNISA **samstag** www.unisa.edu.au/samstag