GARETH Sansom, for my money, the most exciting painter in Australian art today, has shown a substantial body of work in Sydney since 1990. In fact, in all those 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 to 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, of course, is that the show is a first-rate, curated by John Stirringer. It is an unexpected assault of contemporary art that is not just beautiful but intelligent, too.

Cross Currents, the third exhibition in a series of MCA shows surveying contemporary Australian art, The Red Mordiall, I did see; but the second, Interesting Times, was a challenging, thoughtfully conceived show with a political theme and a wide array of media, from painting and sculpture to cinema 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 1960s and three in the 1970s. The emphasis is heavily on painting, with a few sculptures and one suite of photographs.

Stirringer is curator of the Kerry Stokes Collection in Perth. His taste run to minimalist abstraction and refined decoration, qualities much in evidence throughout a selection that aims to be highly personal.

But Sansom, as ever, stands apart. His paintings may be beautiful, in a memorial 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, colourfully, unadulterated and sometimes quite terrifying. But what sets Sansom apart from other painters is his ability to express both love and hate, to make the viewer feel violated.

Of course, there’s no resolution to this process, just as there’s no resolution to the relentless work of the mind. But the ordering imperative is crucial. In Sansom’s paintings, this translates into a disturbingly sensuousdeoer, shape, scale and the formal relationships between the individual parts.

Many of the fine paintings here — The Keep and Sweaty Agnostics — were included in a Sansom survey at the Ian Potter Museum in Melbourne last year. I raved about them then and, revisiting them now, they only seem better.

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

Sweaty Agnostics, as Terence Maloon explains in the catalogue, is a memorial to Sweaty Reed. The natural son of Joy Hester and Albert Tucker, Sweaty was adopted by John and Stanley Reed. The Reeds, Hester and Tucker all worshipped T.S. Eliot, which is how the boy was named — with remarkable headstrong, it seems, after the poet’s brusque, seeking, intellectual creation, Sweaty.

"No doubt there were other factors, negative things eating away at Sweaty Reed, apart from his ill-starred name" Maloon writes. "Making a display of bravado and seeming charm, unlikably 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 1970s, dubbed as a ‘remover poet’ and committed suicide in 1979’).

Sweaty Agnostics is a triumph. Its central panel is loaded with references to the crucifixion. The two side panels are punctuated with segments of text: "Last New Year’s Eve he stayed up alone trilling away”. "It was Sweaty” “But it wouldn’t have been” and so on. The whole painting feels infused with a combination of being hunted down, tormented. It describes a mind flying with its own anatomy.

The Keep, with its strange pile-up of architectonic form, its block-out graffiti and its slope of
told by Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice, is lost.

The rest of the work is in Cresweld, which is less visible. Instead, it invites us in to be taken on a journey through nature, formed by the sensuous and the intellectual, through the physical and the metaphysical. It is a journey of spiritual consciousness. These visions are not without complexity. They create an atmosphere that is soothing and refreshing rather than chaotic and real.

Almost everything is abstract. But even more noticeable is the unexpected preponderance of work based on cross-hatching, grids and the manipulation of line and texture that create a sense of harmony and balance.

The grid-based paintings of Dorothea Dowse at Inoue Gallery, 260-262 Bourke Street, are particularly interesting. They have a simple yet powerful effect, creating an optical illusion of three-dimensionality.Visually, these paintings are stunning. What is most striking about Dowse’s work is the contrast between the horizontal and vertical lines, which create a sense of depth and movement. The use of colour is also noteworthy, with a range of soft hues that create a sense of calm and tranquility. The paintings are not just about visual appeal, however. They also evoke a sense of the natural world, with the use of leaves and flowers creating a feeling of connection with nature. This sense of connection is further enhanced by the way in which Dowse’s work is displayed, with the paintings arranged in a way that creates a sense of flow and movement. Overall, Dowse’s work is a beautiful example of how art can be used to explore the connection between the natural world and the human experience.