

ARTS

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GALLERIES
FELICITY FENNER

IN her analyst's office in an opening scene of the movie *sex, lies and videotape*, Andie MacDowell confesses her creeping obsession with garbage, a peculiarly 20th-century anxiety that has since moved rapidly from the personal into the main political arena.

Inside the tiny Pendulum Gallery behind Redfern railway station, the sculptor Martin Sims has constructed a metaphorical monument to the noxious by-products of consumer and chemical indulgence. *Spill* is a large polystyrene structure that uncomfortably dominates the tiny gallery space, personifying the strangulation of the natural environment and of the postwar material dream: in the 1970s, we naively embraced the notion of living in a disposable society; a generation later we're up to our ears in the stuff, no longer able to bury our heads, let alone our rubbish, in the sand.

Five utility loads of TV packaging is densely stacked into a perfect white cube, neatly subverting the minimal aesthetic of the modernist creed. There is pathos in the droplets of brittle plaster that seep from below the cancerous construction like the spillage of a conquered humanity, victims in the battle between the craftsman's poetry and the industrialist's profit or, in an art-historical reading, between expressionism and a cooler modernism.

As such, the work has something in common with that of a younger generation of artists, like Kathy Temin and Hany Armanious, who transform synthetic refuse into parodic compositions invested with echoes of humanity. Ungracious, ugly and ubiquitous, Sims's pile of polystyrene invites, as the above suggests, endless speculation on very contemporary cultural issues. Like the incessant white noise that is a background to our daily lives, it cannot fail to provoke a reaction, if only by its monstrous presence.

A more metaphysical portrayal of impending social cancers endears the work of David Walker, showing at Coventry Gallery and best known for his symbolic claim to the humble toaster. The current series of pastel/acrylics on paper continues the artist's journey into an apocalyptic urban terrain not too far removed from the gluttonous underbelly of the contemporary society we know and love to hate.

Emblematic to Walker's rabid crowd scenes are icons of the past and present: historical and art-historical protagonists, domestic icons (always the toaster, but also the iron, ghetto blaster and others), and eclectic symbols of greed and doom.

In *Festival of the Emperor*, the lead role is played by an architectonic dictator with a toaster head, hovering above a sea of anxious

heads. The numerous octopus-like arms extending from below the royal furs are those of a business suit, holding either a football, banknotes or dangling carrots over grappling suited men on stilts. In the background, a giant sewing machine stitches the Australian flag; Mona Lisa, Van Gogh, Picasso and Rembrandt are squeezed into the foreground crowd.

The work's density of unambiguous symbolism is not its only strength. In the combination of a pastel base deepened by touches of acrylic paint, the artist has defined an idiosyncratic technical vocabulary that contributes to the visual complexity of his images.

Though oppositional in its concerns, Walker's practice is as singular as that of Lindy Lee, who continues to refine her inextricably bound technical and conceptual processes in her latest exhibition of photocopy/acrylic works at Roslyn Oxley's Gallery.

Groups of sequential panels, with shadows of faces appropriated from art history emerging and receding into blackness, demonstrate Lee's commitment to the post-modernist concepts that have informed her work since the mid-'80s. The death of painting, of the author, find expression in transient and ephemeral images.

The number of artists represented by some leading galleries is diminishing, including at Roslyn Oxley and Yuill/Crowley. The first of the Christmas shows opened at Yuill/Crowley last week with works by its now small but sturdy stable of artists, including Janet Burchill, Dick Watkins, Robert Matheron and Bronwyn Clark-Cooke.

Among the Matherons is a 1988 *Frog Poem*, altered this year to include three native boat paddles from the Solomon Islands and Tonga and, on the heels of a strong exhibition last month, whetting the appetite for his forthcoming survey show at the Art Gallery of NSW.

In contrast to some of its more high-profile colleagues, the young Legge Gallery in Redfern continues to burgeon. Almost 70 works by 40 artists comprise a lively Christmas selection of stormy works under the theme of *Tempest*. While much of the work here hardly rivals the standard set by some of the art schools' graduate shows around town this week, paintings by Emma

Jones, Tim Burns and John Bartley are among the few luminaries.

Deej Fabyc's lipstick slogans ("where are you sucker"), a three-panelled oration under the title *Oral Anal And Endogenous*, seductively confronts delicate sensibilities, while a more whimsical brand of feminism characterises Catherine Hearse's quirky ink drawings over watercolour. A rosy-cheeked and smiling winged woman flies high

into the blue sky and another looks down into her body to discover an inner child ready to play.

Another hotch-potch exhibition with enough gems to sustain one's interest is at Rozelle's Fire Station Gallery. In recent exhibitions from China, such as the MCA's *Mao goes Pop* and the Chinese component of Brisbane's Asia/Pacific Triennial, Australia's interest in China has focused on contemporary rather than traditional artistic practice.

The current show of Chinese craft from the rural outskirts of Shanghai redresses that balance to a modest extent, with a collection of around 200 decorative and utilitarian domestic objects from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These are the real-life domestic backdrops of traditional Chinese society. The most interesting objects include a cat-

shaped wooden pillow and an unimaginably tiny pair of women's shoes.

Folk art was nurtured by communist revolutionaries as an apt symbol of a happy and productive peasantry. New technology and widespread industrialisation have all but curbed the continuance of these time-consuming skills, which form the focus of the Fire Station collection.