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art ——— The great debate

Commentary and debate over conceptual art versus traditional art has been rife for nearly a century. Two exhibitions at Cairns Regional Gallery last week, *Passeggiata Italiana* and *Pane E Zucchero* provided Barfly's art writer, HELEN JONAS with an opportunity to enter the fray. But first here's a little basic background information ...

In 1917 French artist Marcel Duchamp challenged traditional ideas of what art is. By taking a 'ready made' porcelain urinal and entering it in an art exhibition he created a new art movement called 'Conceptual Art', where it is the concept behind the work rather than the technical skill of the artist in making it that is important.

The press and art writers of the time were mortified, viewing Duchamp's act as one sounding the death knell of art, and some purists continue today to see conceptualism as the enemy of painting, sometimes with good reason.

Certainly conceptualism has done little to enhance the formal education of art students pursuant of careers as painters because even in some of the most esteemed art schools in Australia it's not always easy to find teaching staff who have, and are willing to teach, the many technical skills required for painting. The essential art of drawing has also been devalued.

Another criticism of conceptual art is its inherent inability to be easily understood just by looking at it. And although the same may be said of all good modern or traditional artworks if they comprise a marriage of imaginative intellect and skill, the majority of conceptual artworks require far lengthier explanation than traditional artworks do. For art writers this need for written text to accompany artwork is heaven. And there lies what I see as the greatest problem to arise as a product of conceptualism - 'art-speak'. This term encapsulates a manner of art writing which for most people is unreadable and therefore alienating. One such 'Artspeak' article I tried to read recently seemed more like a script from *Star Trek* with its description of an artwork which "dramatises processes of metamorphosis and mutation in order to convey a sense of spatial dissimulation".

Still regarded as avant-garde, not only has it bred a wave of writers working in a most obscure style but many art magazines, and particularly those supported by government funding, write about little else other than conceptual art works. It's almost as if this artform has created its own peculiar literary industry.

In *Passeggiata Italiana* - Italian Promenade, twenty eight of Italy's more prominent artists are represented, with around fifty examples of contemporary figurative art (art that depicts recognisable images of the world around us) which allude to Italy's great tradition of painting. And in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition some of these artists voiced their distaste for conceptual art by printing the following: "Many of the younger artists wish to state their intolerance of artworks that have become readymade, repetitive, intellectually blocked formulas which do not provide the possibility of doing art."

But above all these criticisms, many of which will be ironed out

in time, the main concern with conceptual art, as in any other art form, is in its use. We've all seen bad examples of painting. However, when a conceptual artist fails, the result is doubly miserable because there's so little evidence of any visible skillful attempt.

At Cairns Regional Gallery currently there's a very successful example of conceptual art in Sebastian Di Mauro's installation *Pane E Zucchero*, which translates as 'Bread And Sugar'. In it Di Mauro has used ordinary everyday things such as sugar and oil as metaphors that relate to his migrant family's history in Australia and Italy.

This artwork is stark - a path leading through the Gallery flanked by carpet underlay upon which Di Mauro has formed sugar mounds containing wells of olive oil. And there's several lines of text written in Italian around the Gallery walls. The more you come to understand Di Mauro's intentions and his family's history, the more you understand the connection to the various elements he has used constructing this artwork which as its accompanying catalogue says, "Sees the artist embrace his past in the form of a beguiling and intriguing narrative".

Indeed Marcel Duchamp succeeded in turning the artworld on its head with his readymade art and nearly a century later conceptualism remains as a controversial art movement.

But the fact remains, nothing can ever threaten our appreciation of painting because the tactile quality of paint - the ability to see brush strokes and layers of colours - and the great skill, intellect and imagination required to use it well - is unique.

- Helen Jonas

• PICTURED: Sebastian Di Mauro's installation *Pane e Zucchero*.

New connections

An exhibition by members of Flying Arts Inc., on show at the Cairns Regional Gallery until Sunday October 25, asks questions about regional arts practice and explores the work of artists from Port Douglas, Mount Isa and Cooktown.

"Many artists working outside metropolitan areas often feel that they don't have access to some kind of mainstream, 'the place where the action is,'" said Michael Snelling, Director of the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, who opened the exhibition, *(dis)connections*, last weekend. "However this is all relative - many artists in Sydney and Melbourne want to be in Berlin, New York or Tokyo!"

"Throughout the latter part of this century, there has been a push to globalise, both economically and artistically," he said. "Regionally specific practices, however, resist this push towards homogeneity."

"This exhibition aims to ask: What is a regional practice? How does the immediate physical, social and political environment play a part in content, materials, styles, ways of working, of the art we make and the art that influences us?"

The Australian Flying Arts School, now known as Flying Arts Inc., was founded by Mervyn Moriarty 27 years ago in response to requests from regional artists for access to contemporary visual arts practice.

