The other side: Death wasn't a dark abyss, says artist Sebastian Di Mauro
Photograph: Martin Johnston

Eternal blue

Matters of life and death are examined in the works of Sebastian Di Mauro

ART BEAT

WHAT colour is eternity? Well, blue, if the work of Brisbane artist Sebastian Di Mauro is any indication. His suite of eight paintings Pagine dal Libro Muto ("Pages from the Mute Book") now showing at Grahame Galleries + Editions investigates eternity, among other things, in deep, deep blue.

The titles hint at the artist's metaphysical preoccupations, not to mention his Italian heritage: *Viaggio* (voyage), *Cambiare* (change), *Comincare* (begin), *Sensualita* (sensuality), *Crestia* (growth), *Vuoto* (void), *Respiare* (breath) and *Luminoso* (luminous).

The immediate effect is one of spiritual and intellectual calm. (They do say blue is a therapeutic colour — although Picasso may not have thought so during his blue period.)

But here Sebastian Di Mauro has put together a series of what seem to be intelligent hymns, composed of the colour. He uses blue pigment in conjunction with an acrylic medium, paint and sand to create these works on paper. They have rather crusty surfaces suggestive of the pages of some weathered, arcane and sacred tome.

The effect of staring at them close-up is rather like what you might imagine it'd be like staring into the void. But Sebastian Di Mauro's void is not a black nothingness. It's a rather friendly one.

And he's been closer to it than most. Sebastian — who is the creative director of Live Worm Studio at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University — has had a near-death experience, which goes some way towards explaining his metaphysical themes.

"That was in 1981," he explains. "I had an horrific car accident whilst driving to Toowoomba. I don't know whether I left the planet or not but I had an out-of-body experience.

"I tried to put it into the back of my mind but after six years it started surfacing in my work.

"For me the death experience wasn't a dark abyss."

Sebastian experienced the "tunnel with the light at the end of it", which many who have had near-death experiences also report. The cynics scoff about such things and the medicos grapple for technical explanations but those who have had the experience insist it is spiritual reality on some plane. Sebastian is no different and refers to a "fourth dimension".

His experience with that dimension has made him challenge many orthodox ideas of existence and has committed him to spending more time pondering the eternal and getting in touch with the cosmic reality.

In daily life we do the opposite: we worry about superannuation and politics and spend our time watching television or surfing the Internet so we won't have to ponder that hoary old chestnut, the meaning of life.

"The metaphysical hasn't been an important part of people's lives lately," Sebastian says. "We should take time for contemplation. We need to make time."

And on one level his works can be mandalas to help us into that contemplative frame of mind.

◆ *Pagine dal Libro Muto, Grahame Galleries + Editions, One Fernberg Road, Milton, until 16 March.*

— PHIL BROWN

ART SNIPPETS

FOCUS ON PLANTS

BOTANICAL illustrator Sally L'Estrange continues to chart the botanical world in her latest exhibition, Naturalised, now showing at Savode, first floor, 11 Stratton Street, Newstead. "These are botanical illustrations which describe a particular geography," the artist says. "Most botanical imagery either isolates the plant from its habitat or portrays a native habitat before European settlement. This work, however, describes some native food-bearing plants and those which have been imported and assimilated into the region. These sustain us, not only nutritionally but as indicators of our national origins and as objects of interest and beauty."

Sally is known internationally and her work is represented in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and most State galleries. The exhibition continues until 17 March.

POPULAR PLACE

WE ARE flocking to art exhibitions more than ever, according to the Queensland Art Gallery's annual report. The report trumpets plenty of good news, including the fact that in the financial year 1994-95, the gallery attained its highest attendance level in six years. Total gallery attendance was put at 428,356, and 87,800 of those went to see the Matisse show and another 102,027 to the Renoir. During that period, the gallery presented 22 exhibitions and acquired 320 art works.

"The year 1995 marked 100 years since the Queensland Art Gallery opened," gallery director Doug Hall says. "The centenary provided an opportunity to examine the gallery's current place in Queensland's cultural life."

VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

PEREGRINATION — a journey from one point to another — is an exhibition by artists from non-English speaking backgrounds.

All have travelled from one place to another, either physically or spiritually. Their experiences are charted in this exhibition which features various media including paintings, photography and installations. It opens on Friday 1 March in Gallery Two, Level Two, Metro Arts, 109 Edward Street, the City, and runs until 18 March.