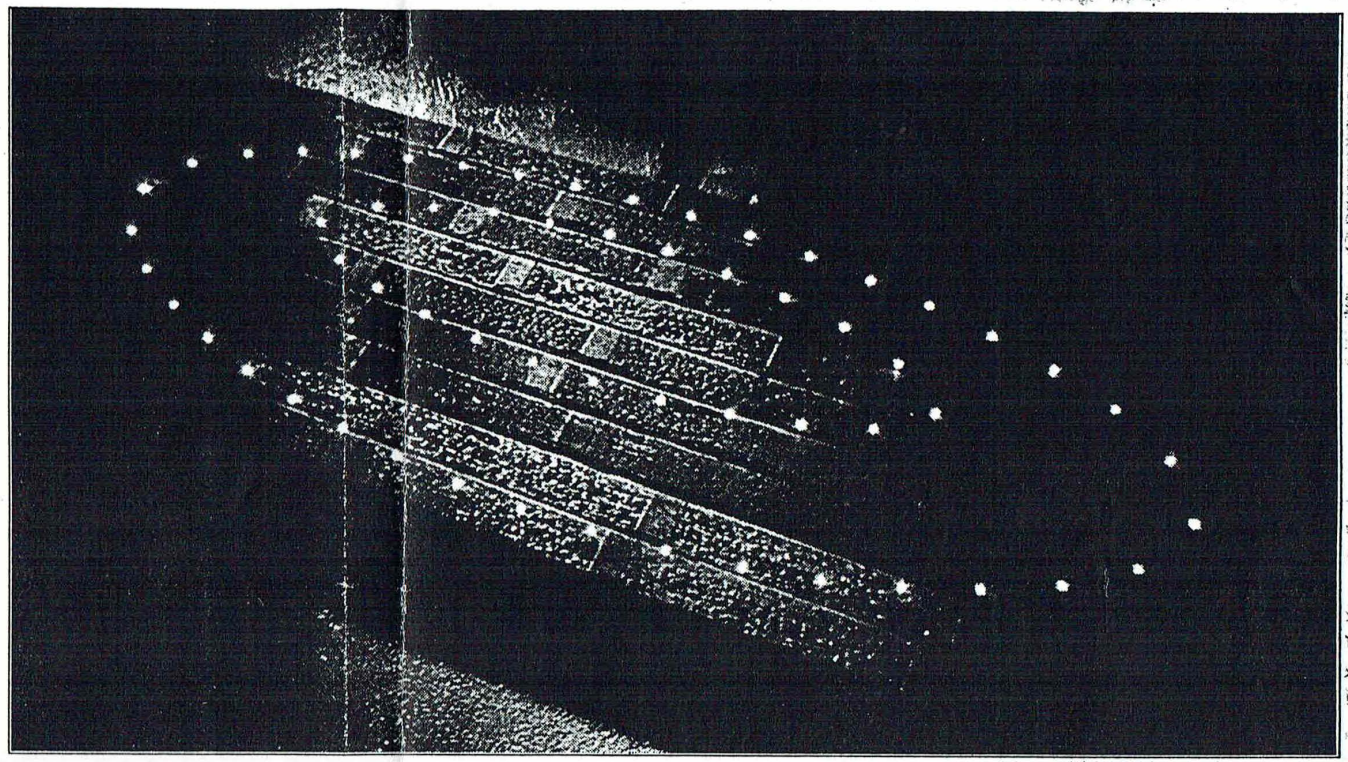
The spiritual dimension to contemporary art

FIRE AND SHADOW: Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Art. By Nevill Drury and Anna Voigt. Craftsman House. 184pp. $75.

ANDY LAKEY: Art, Angels, and Miracles. By Andy Lakey and Robert Walker. Turner Publishing (Hodder Headline). 176pp. $39.95.

Reviewer: SASHA GRISHIN.



Synthesis, from Sebastian di Mauro's Praepartio Physica Series. Burnt timber and electric lights.

THE CONCEPTS of spiritual art and of the spiritual in art are as old as art itself. If one applies the broadest definitions of spirituality, then virtually all art must have an appeal to the spirit.

Some art draws on a religious or spiritual iconography and has a deliberate function of communicating a spiritual message, relating a didactic narrative or serving as a cult object. In this manner all religious art and any art which communicates a series of beliefs, can be interpreted as spiritual art. Other art may have a less overtly spiritual imagery, for example, the non-figurative paintings of Kandinsky, Rothko and Ryman, but nevertheless, their spiritual dimension is central. Outside of deliberate function and intent, there is also the question of the viewer's response. I found recent retrospectives of the American minimalist Don Judd and the neon artist Dan Flavin to be moving spiritual experiences. I am uncertain that either artist intended this to be the case.

The work of Californian painter Andy Lakey is a good example of explicit spiritual art. The second book under review is a promotional publication, which comes complete with a list of dealers handling his work. In 1986 Lakey faced near-death from a cocaine overdose and came into contact with visions of angels. Later he had a revelation that he was to paint 2000 pictures of angels. The production line is in full swing, the prices are high, and we are told that Ronald Reagan, Stevie Wonder and Dudley Moore are among the owners of Lakey angel pictures. If the reproductions are accurate, the paintings are examples of decorative interior design whose commercial appeal lies in the sincerity of the artist's spiritual experience.

Fire and Shadow is a serious investigation into aspects of spirituality in the work of 15 contemporary Australian artists. At first glance the choice of artists is somewhat eccentric — James Gleeson, Kate Briscoe, Inga Hunter, John Coburn, William Ferguson, Rover Thomas, Mirlkitjungu Millie Skeen, Gloria Temarre Petyarre, Tim Johnson, Marion Borgelt, Anne Judell, Wendy Stavrianos, Lyn Plummer, Sebastian di Mauro and Ted Snell. Yet in each instance, a case is made for considering the artist as possessing in his or her work a type of spiritualism. In a sense, the book becomes a collection of different types of spiritualism coexisting in Australian art.

A strength of the book lies in the intellectual integrity of its authors. They tackle a complex theme and resist the temptation to arrive at a simplistic formula, allowing the artists to articulate their own ideas.

There are some parallels amongst the artists, both in what they endeavour to achieve and their paths to revelation, but these are never forced. Both Rover Thomas and Wendy Stavrianos experienced traumas which released a stream of pure spiritual creation. John Coburn and Anne Judell found inspiration in the meditative icons of Rothko, while William Ferguson and Marion Borgelt work to some extent from the sense of tyranny of place, to create their visions. Borgelt puts it beautifully when she says "the spiritual thing is the basis of seeing and being — everything. It informs my language, and art is the means through which I express that understanding."

The book is studded with such lovely personal revelations.