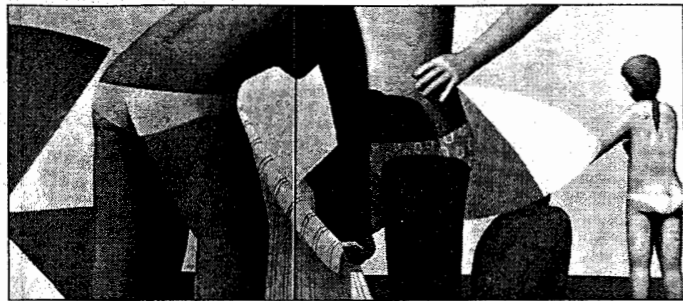


Metropolitan



LENNY ANN LOW
SPOTLIGHT

OPENING



VISUAL ARTS

The paint on Craig Parnaby's *Summer Paintings* (example pictured) may finally be dry for tonight's exhibition opening. Parnaby's scenes of red-roofed houses dwarfed by enormous tropical plants or topless bathers standing languidly under a beating sun are followed by smooth lines and softly warm colours. At Bondi Wadi Gallery, 288 Oxford Street, Woollahra from 6pm. 9387 1101.

In Britain, in the 1920s and '30s, people mourning the death of their loved ones visited famous "spirit photographer" Ada Deane to conjure their late relative into the room for a final family portrait. After singing hymns, and grasping the photographic plates with her living client, Mrs Deane would take a photo of the sitter. Once developed the image would reveal the ghostly impression of a

face hovering beside the relative. Martyn Jolly's exhibition *Faces Of The Living Dead* reproduces many of these supernatural snaps after he discovered them during an Australia Council residency in London. Scott Donovan Gallery, Level One, 86 Liverpool Street, city at 6pm. 9283 6626.

Direct from a successful splash as the sole Australian exhibitor at the 49th Venice Biennale, Lyndal Jones's multi-screen video installation, *Deep Water/Aqua Profunda*, drenches the harbourside environs of the Museum of Contemporary Art from today. Using "plasma screens" Jones's wonderland of large-scale projections mixes the oil-slicked surfaces of Sydney Harbour and Venetian canals with ferry commuters to create a sensorial journey through watery colour and pattern. Museum of Contemporary Art, Level 4 Galleries, 140 George Street, Circular Quay, free. 9241 5892.

TODAY'S BEST



FILM

The Fifth Japanese Film Festival - The Happy Family Plan
Japanese salesman and family man Fujio has lost his job. To save the fortune of his family and

and V. Renowned US ventriloquist David Strassman, with his unnervingly close chums Chuck Wood and Ted E. Bare, is introducing two new characters during his Sydney season.

When heavy metal carries no weight

Many entries in the inaugural National Sculpture Prize answered a secret prayer, writes Bruce James.

Naturalism, narrative, embellishment and emotion are the mainstays of populist sculpture, from ceramic ornaments to cenotaphs. The common public expectation of a three-dimensional work of art is that it will resemble something in nature, a horse, a face and so forth, or that it will symbolise something in nature - speed, sorrow, fertility.

Amazingly, the same criteria have come to dominate highbrow sculpture. In works by modish international artists such as Ron Mueck, Marc Quinn, the Chapman brothers, Stephan Balkenhol, Kiki Smith, Charles Ray and Jeff Koons - make your own shopping list - the impulse towards a resuscitated realism holds sway. And it is the human body, in varying states of health and despoilment, which leads the charge against formal abstraction, informal installation and a few other sculptural orthodoxies of the postwar period.

The inaugural \$50,000 National Sculpture Prize, a joint venture of Macquarie Bank and the National Gallery of Australia, reflects this development with almost punctilious accuracy. It could have been designed as an argument for the resurgence of anatomical concerns in contemporary object-making, or at least as proof of sculpture's traditional obligation to represent things. In many of the works, this means that conceptual scruples give way to a desire to provide cheap entertainment.

Anecdotal in content and detail-conscious in execution, several of them impersonate theatrical vignettes. Mathieu Gallois's three-dimensional realisation of a colonial watercolour, though visually compelling, relies too heavily on prop-making skills - a reservation I also have about

Kristian Burford's *Natalie and Benjamin Are Playing Cubby*. The latter features a rumpled bed which mattress fanatic, Tracy Emin, might refuse to occupy, and boasts a bare backside as ambiguous in gender as it is in age. Burford specialises in muddying distinctions between peep show and crime scene, but on this occasion the only equivocal element is his position on incest.

The carved ensembles of Gunther Kopietz, midway between the knowing and the naif, occupy a similarly uncomfortable zone of moral indecision.

Even Ken Unsworth's *Stonefruit*, quarantined in the NGA foyer to great disadvantage, strikes a note of dubiety in its aggressive proportions and somewhat timid finish. A smooth-branched tree, decked with shapely birds, erupts from a well-built house. Everything is manicured, possibly machined.

It is as if Unsworth has tried to laminate, rather than scratch, the raw psychic gash underscoring his art. Rawness is rare in this prize.

The ad hoc outlands of sculpture, where accident and improvisation are given free reign and mess is savoured as an achievement, have gained no foothold in the event. This might be due to a condition of entry

requiring sculptors to pack and consolidate their own works for transport - a hard ask if you happen to be Kathy Temin, Mikala Dwyer, Clinton Nain, Hany Armanious or any of the other disestablishmentarians whose names are missing from the exhibition check list.

One has to wonder if this pragmatic requirement convinced Janet Burchill and Jennifer McCamley to cast several delicate birds' nests in bronze, an atypical material for them, encasing the results in a sturdy, cabinet-like box mounted to the wall.

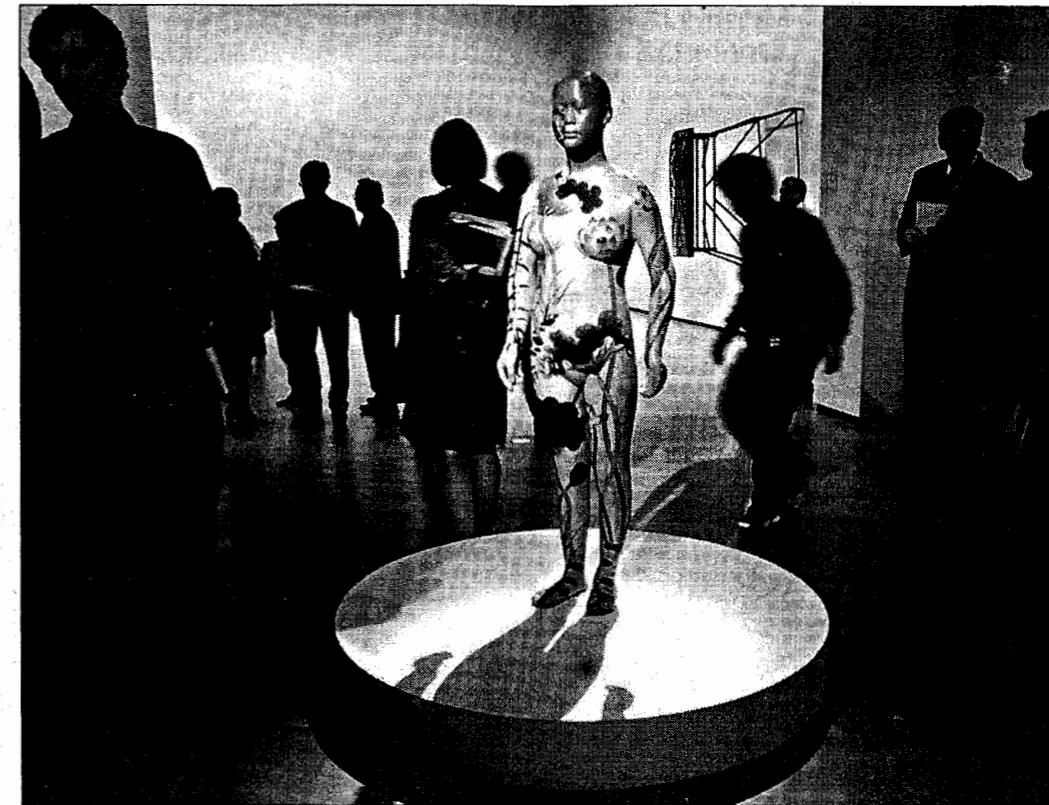
I bypassed this work at first, discounting it as a rather prosaic effort, but subsequent, more serious inspection revealed its singular quality of poetry.

In general, I suspect most competitors toned down their works, or tailored them in some way for the context in which they would be shown if shortlisted. This is not a disreputable strategy, leastways not in isolation, but to encounter it as a mass syndrome in an institutional project is troubling.

Still, the finalists have every reason to be pleased with their treatment by the gallery, which has served them admirably. Remarkably, the sponsor contributed fabricating funds to all sculptors, a collective amount on a par with the individual winning purse. Given the costs of producing sculpture, and the crushing out-of-pocket expenses incurred in participating in competitions of this order, a



Ambiguous... Kristian Burford's *Natalie and Benjamin Are Playing Cubby*



Alone in a crowd... Ah Xian's work spearheads a new tendency in Australian sculpture. Photo: Jacky Ghossein

substantial cash subsidy is welcome.

Add to that the curatorial, technical and promotional services freely provided by the NGA, and you have something of a dream situation for the exhibitors, many of whom are young in terms of professional museum encounters.

The entries that sustain in critical memory are those where the sculptor just goes for it, without concern or compromise: the splendour of Louise Paramor, all baroque updraft; the expressiveness of Lionel Bawden, verging on erotic display; the nastiness of Linde Ivimey, violating yet beneficent; the rogues-gallery array of Kevin Connor, fragments of a toppled godhead; and the infernal machinery of Richard Goodwin - the improbable made useful.

And though the offerings of Ruth Downes are not exactly my cup of tea, her punster variations on hot beverage rituals are a joy to behold. At the level of industry alone, if not intellectual content, they should be lodged with Fiona Hall, whose sensational sardine-can sequence is currently on display in the rooms of Australian art upstairs.

As for the welded metal school, which has many distinguished alumni in

Australia, its absence from the exhibition is total, and totally mysterious.

Was there not one judge among the five, or one submission among the near-500, to wave the flag for the art form known as pure, formalist sculpture? The assertive structures of Ari Purhonen, David Jenz and Geoffrey Bartlett can be enlisted in this heavy metal category by drawing a very long bow. Sarah Robson's flawless slatted wall piece admittedly toys with the surface effects of patinated, milled steel, but its true component is painted timber.

It would be astonishing if artists such as Ron Robertson-Swann, Inge King, Michael Legrand or Michael Snape had not entered the competition, although I understand that numerous exponents of non-representational, welded-metal sculpture spare themselves, these days, the considerable disappointment of contesting contemporary awards - the Helen Lempriere Sculpture Award being a case in point.

In both the winning submission, Ah Xian's enamelled female nude, and the runner-up, Geoffrey Drake-Brockman and Richie Kuhaupt's chrome-plated everyman, a free-standing figure

asserts a commanding place, leaving the viewer in little doubt as to the sensibilities of the artists and adjudicators, or the prevailing interest in craft-based forms of sculptural figuration. When the decision was announced last week to gallery staff, journalists, exhibitors and members of the public it was received not simply with applause, but with the accolades of a congregation responding to a call.

Here were works, especially Ah Xian's, which answered many a secret prayer.

Few would dispute the claims of Ah Xian's tour de force, either for the victory or the larger distinction of spearheading a new tendency in Australian sculpture.

The oddly named *Human Human-Lotus* is not perfect, but its failings are minor in relation to the impressive roster of its sculptural virtues. I would wish the body to be less bland, more individuated, and the floral motifs to splay with greater drama across the skin, but faced with an effigy of such nobility and presence, and with an artist of such unguarded sincerity, it is churlish to quibble.

Even a heavy metal heart should stir.

Until March 10.