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T.J. McNamara

The galleries: Tracing the thought behind the technique

By T.J. McNamara

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An artist's work can be brilliant in one way, flawed in another. Emotion, thought and technique make art. Virtuoso technique can be impressive in itself, yet not make a complete work.

This week there are three shows that are technically excellent but, in some measure, do not achieve the balance of the three elements. In the work of Anita De Soto, at Oedipus Rex Gallery until April 19, the drawing is immaculate and the representational element of the painting is completely convincing.

The exhibition is called Pie in the Sky and gives its title to one of the works. There are references at the top to several martyred women saints. Eyes on a stalk is the iconography for St Lucy. A floating scarf, a twirl of pearls and a breast on a plate is the attribute of St Agatha who had her bosom hacked off by an executioner. Then there is a breast-shaped glass bowl, some rocks, more pearls, a flourish of drapery, a hand pointing down to a transparent sphere balanced on the head of a moody dog lost in the gloom of the lower part of the painting.

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The draughtsmanship is flawless but what is the thought behind it? Does the dog aspire to sainthood? Is the desire for martyrdom a black dog that haunts our mind? There is an emotional surge in the rising force of the painting and yet the ideas are oddly yoked together, puzzling without being truly mysterious.

Much more convincing are the male and female figures of Holy Smoke I and II. Here the smooth, young muscular bodies do not have the little irregularities of realism but are idealised representations of the human body. We feel the pangs of love as the woman clutches a wound in her side and the man has his palm pierced with a stem of a rose.

This power does not extend to the little paintings of naked children. These have a certain charm and range from Limbo which shows the spirit of a dead, unbaptised child flying free, to the coy naughtiness of a picture of a piddling child called Holy Water. Here the technique does not support an idea of any force. The power returns in a smaller painting called The Allegory of Error where, in the glass case of memory, a severed head of someone who strayed is held by the lilac glove of romance in a reversal of the Salome situation.

It all adds to a striking exhibition, where the technique is startling but sometimes the ideas run thin.

There is a technical brilliance of a different kind in the work of Gregory Bennett whose exhibition Blacknoise is at the Vavasour Godkin Gallery until April 26. His expertise is choreographing computer-generated figures into patterns of movement and recording them on DVD. In a further step, he makes large digital prints from moments in the computer-generated patterns.

The DVD called Blacknoise is at the heart of this show. Sequences of animated movement of masses of his android figures move diagonally across the screen. The naked figures can form a dense ring that will suddenly grow and expand into a shape like a sea anemone and then just as quickly fold in on themselves. Each sequence is like an extraordinary, impossible ballet in formations that could only be achieved electronically.

The big prints that make up the rest of the show are really a commentary on the moving images but they too are amazingly complex. In Blacknoise

1 the acrobatic figures cluster while in Blacknoise

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2 they spread in an even but immensely intricate pattern across the large print.

In its own brilliant way this exhibition is flawless. Only one solitary figure, on a small quartet of DVD players, is awkwardly articulated as it shades its eyes. The general feeling of this work is cold and inhuman. As an exhibition, it is unmissable but also unlikeable.

A similar sense of unquiet is part of the huge, vividly coloured photographs that make up Toy-Land, a show by the veteran photographer Ans Westra at FhE Gallery until May 7. These very large prints have all the technical brilliance of display art but by enlarging these tiny emblems, supposedly typical of New Zealand, all sorts of irony and tension is uncovered.

A cheerful chicken advertising jandals is inoffensive but the layers of reference in The Sheep are much more uncomfortable. The grinning marketing mascot has a woven headband, a piu piu, and the animal is wearing a fake greenstone tiki around its neck. The image is saved from complete insensitivity by the looming dark presence of a true ancestral spirit behind.

Westra intends a horrid irony but achieves something that could easily be read as brightly humorous.

By T.J. McNamara | Email T.J.

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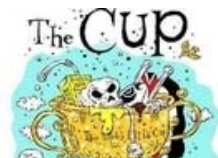
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