

Ambivalence leads to a sense of timelessness

IN CONTRAST to Australian painting, which generally falls into neat figurative or abstract pigeonholes, some of the best painting to emerge from Britain in the past few decades evades such definitive categorisation, occupying a nebulous territory between the two genres.

At the Beatty Gallery, new paintings by London artist Peter Griffin exemplify the British penchant for mnemonic ambivalence over representational clarity. In recent years Griffin has spent time in Italy, New York and Australia, collecting visual data that recurs throughout these uncharacteristically small paintings. As a mid-career painter, Griffin brings to his evocative travelogue a repertoire of highly personal concerns and cryptic motifs.

The exhibition is unimaginatively titled *Time, Memory and Association*. In fact, the paintings have a timeless, enigmatic quality, addressing as they do universal themes of alienation, loss and displacement. Weighty areas of dark tones connote heaviness of spirit, sometimes lightened in adjacent panels by the ephemeral lines of Aboriginal body painting or automatic drawing entanglements. The spirits of Henry Moore's dark monolithic figures and Philip Guston's delineated objects hover close to the core of Griffin's essentially romantic canvases, their flat, modernist forms punctuated with traces of linear expression.

The works on paper are among the most forceful works here, displaying a spontaneity sometimes lacking in the more carefully composed oils. While conjured memories and associations are inevitably drawn from Griffin's own experience, the images are unspecific enough to provoke a range of associative references in us all. They are in the end notations from the underbelly of modern

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FELICITY FENNER

society, symbols of a common human experience in a time of diminishing cultural eclecticism.

A 1989 painting by Aida Tomescu at Eva Breuer's gallery shares this ambivalence between abstract and figurative representation. Like most of Tomescu's work, *Paspermia* initially impacts as a purely abstract composition of intersecting line, form and sombre colour, but upon lengthy inspection a pair of crowned figures can be discerned, one with an arm slung casually around the other, as if poised for a social photograph. It's an intriguing painting on its many levels, both as a barely veiled narrative and as an example of Tomescu's painterly prowess, often less evincible in the darker palette of her more recent work.

Group exhibitions at commercial galleries tend to be hit-and-miss affairs. Either they are organised thematically or thrown together with work fast approaching its use-by date in the stock room. The exhibition at Eva Breuer Art is more of a hit than a miss, boasting major works by such luminaries as Rosalie Gascoigne, Emily Kngwarreye, Tim Maguire, Susan Norrie and Dick Watkins. The pair of paintings by Susan Norrie, in particular, should please those fans unimpressed by her subsequent installation-based work, being quintessential examples from the visually seductive *Peripherique* series of 1989.

Ildiko Kovacs, whose abstract painting elevated the standard of this year's inebriating Wynne Prize, has here a minimal abstraction of rich red and hot pink, her palette in brave defiance of the dictums of conventional taste. Form and colour is Kovacs's strength, as it was for New York School abstractionists of the '50s. The Rosalie

Gascoigne is another wonderfully minimal work, a grid of weathered panels of Schweppes crates, less coloured and less crafted than some of her better-known pieces. Also notable for its sparse understatement is a diminutive black-and-white drawing by the late and underrated Margery Edwards.

Now showing at Crawford Gallery, Gaye Chapman has done her best to avoid the humiliation of being underrated. In the flash brochure accompanying the exhibition, she has quoted every word (totalling four sentences) that critics have directed to her work, so the following words are chosen with care.

Chapman's background as a graphic designer and illustrator dominates these realist paintings. Similarly, her experience in public relations dominates the presentation of her first solo exhibition, which brags an array of support and sponsorship from the Australia Council to glossy women's magazines, art journals to television networks. The paintings are drawn from memories of a matriarchal childhood in a rural setting. Though evidently subsumed by self-importance, they are technically impressive, catching our eye like Pop Art greeting cards and touching our collective memory like the nostalgic GM card television commercial.

CRITIC'S CHOICE

● *Critical Spaces*, Artspace (and other participating venues), 43-51 Cowper Wharf Road, Woolloomooloo, until Sunday (forum 2-5 pm Sunday).

● Andrew Highton and Ambrose Reich, James Harvey Gallery, 8 Evans Street, Balmain, until Sunday.

● Meg Cranston and Chris Wilder, Sarah Cottier Gallery, 36 Lennox Street, Newtown, until June 3.

● *Young Dissonants*, UNSW College of Fine Arts Gallery, Selwyn Street, Paddington, until June 6.

