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Uneasy on the eye

Wendy Walker | July 03, 2008

Uneasy: Recent South Australian Art. Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide. Until August 17.

CURATED by Brisbane-based Timothy Morrell, Uneasy: Recent South Australian Art presents 15 contemporary artists whose work reflects or creates a sense of uneasiness.

Nudity in art has recently been the subject of vigorous debate, and three paintings of nudes - by Annette Bezor and Daryl Austin - are among the standouts in this survey, though I would query their inclusion in an exhibition with the title Uneasy. There are no confronting Jenny Saville-like folds of flesh, for these are paintings of mature, but nonetheless beautiful bodies. Does scale make a difference? The subject of Bezor's immense 2002 painting *Blush* - poised and coolly returning the gaze of the spectator - is an unequivocal affirmation of womanhood.

Austin has contributed two large and beautifully executed nude male portraits, of acquaintances from his local hotel. These represent remarkable new territory for the accomplished Austin, whose precise, often ironic paintings have more typically focused on the subject of painting itself.

Not so much a dark side as a rich vein of eccentricity is uncovered by Sarah crowEST in her short black-and-white film *Caught in a Loop*, winner of the 2008 Tropfest award for best screenplay. Actors lip-sync to real-life accounts of people's obsessive tendencies: lurking in libraries to draw underwear on images of naked bodies, for example, or a compulsion to cook onions. The film concludes with crowEST making repeated revolutions (loops) of her studio on a bicycle.

From Hossein Valamanesh's rhythmical, saffron calligraphy, to the tattoos on a naked body, and John Barbour's erratic, embroidered mark-making, patterns of an unexpected kind punctuate this exhibition and are an indication of its diversity.

Tracy Cornish's videos, for example, draw their shifting patterns from the unpromising realm of computer programming errors. The branching, vein-like tracery of Ariel Hassan's mysterious black Nerves sculptures complement the fine vinyl fronds on the Perspex coffin in Fiona Hall's powerful ecological statement, *Mourning Chorus*.

Nici Cumpston's photographic images reveal leaves interwoven with manufactured wire fencing, and the strange patterning of Aldo Iacobelli's 2002 painting *DP* (displaced person) is an abstracted representation of the shrink-wrapped bales of clothing displayed in front of the work.

Annabelle Collett also uses textiles as a medium for sociopolitical commentary with her tortured orange overalls in *Gitmo Gear* (the worst of the worst). Her ongoing project, *Disruptive Pattern Syndrome*, obliges viewers to reconsider the facile integration into fashion of camouflage patterns by offering examples in the form of a toy bear, a child's frock and so on.

In the way that Melbourne-based artist Mike Stubbs in his 2006 exhibition *Burnt* made a connection between boys' toys and military weaponry, Matthew Bradley appears to draw a link between youthful delinquent escapades or fantasies and their possible outcomes. In *Uneasy*, Bradley recreates the notorious image of David Hicks manipulating a rocket launcher, and presents it alongside crackling footage of a flaming car tyre.

As curator, Morrell must have experienced some uneasy moments leading up to this exhibition, since his theme had the potential to overlap with the 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, *Handle With Care*.

Ultimately, however, the biennial's focus was the fragility of the environment, whereas the manifold concerns expressed in *Uneasy* are part of a sometimes indefinable anxiety, a shadow that is universal. With the return from Iraq of the last of the Australian combat troops, at least one cause of national uneasiness has been quelled.