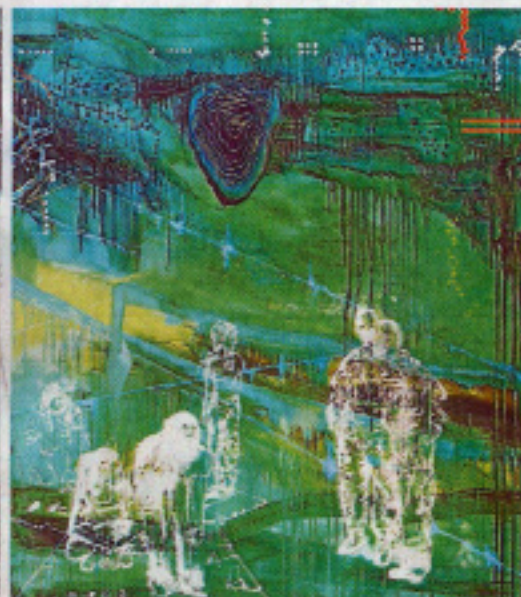


VISUAL ARTS



Attempts at touching the void

RAAFAT ISHAK

Recipes for Aversion and Strategy
Ian Porter Museum, Swanston Street,
Perth, until July 25

JON CATTAPAN

Viridian Eye
Sutton Gallery, 254 Brunswick Street,
Fitzroy, until July 24

MARK OGGE

St Anthony III
Flinders Lane Gallery, 137 Flinders
Lane, until July 3

AT THE heart of contemporary painting, there is a void. Sometimes it's an empty zone in the picture and sometimes it's a gap between an illusion and a narrative. Contemporary paintings are often highly notational, like a kind of schematic drawing: they show objects or spaces floating in the abyss or deposited abstractly on a neutral field.

Raafat Ishak is a master of graphically suspended spaces. His retrospective at the Ian Porter Museum shows an artist of great consistency and subtle iconography. Curated by Bala Star, the exhibition is boldly called *Recipes for Aversion and Strategy* and many of the

beautiful pictures deal with topical themes of national differences, the insularity of governments and machinery of state reflected in a bureaucratic style of architecture.

In most of the pictures, you see the world like a kind of linear skeleton laid out against the void. Often, the void is the chewed-up grain of the MDF or chipboard, those ubiquitous planks of pulp in bland contemporary construction, which makes a fluffy empty bed for the pale and chaste hands of colour that Ishak prefers for rendering his architecture. At other times, Ishak lets the linen perform this role: it's the anti-space of the support, the void, that always makes everything upon it seem provisional.

Ishak's idea justifies the emptiness, because in his conspectus the world is not full of continuities but arbitrary placements, conventions, commandments, borders and rupture. It suits Ishak that things appear on a kind of page rather than the three dimensions of lived space, because our controlled world is drawn up by bureaucratic design, and the space we inhabit has as much subjective integrity as the void.

Similar things can be observed in Jon Cattapan's exhibition, *Viridian Eye*. Cattapan has also had a long-standing interest in depicting cities in a ghostly transparent manner against a washy backdrop, but his latest exhibition at Sutton Gallery does away with those architectural coordinates and instead has ghostly figures positioned over a colourful void.

One of the pictures is reddish; most consist of a layered curtain of green. The pictures are inspired by seeing the temporary military bases in Timor Leste. As we have troops there, Cattapan could photograph at night using infrared vision. His pictures reflect the technology

mingling with eyesight, yielding patches of digital nocturnal data laid over the vaporous film of the optical landscape.

So things are there in reality in a way that makes them seem only abstractly there. The combined visualisation is half lyrical and half eerie; but with all its uncanny depths, it empties the earth of its platforms and shadows. Wherever one treads, the feet have nothing to rest upon but the void.

There are still painters around who convincingly represent space in its regular continuities of foreground, middle distance and background. Mark Ogge provides a fine example at Flinders Lane. His pictures are more than

competent by the old criteria of picture-making. They're joyful and confident things, exploring with gestural fondness a theatrical world around the circus and fantasy.

For all his spatial consistency and rich volumes, Ogge's project also concerns a void. It's the empty rationale for the bizarre subject, which includes hand-to-hand combat with dragons or St Francis communing with a lion and a horse.

These brave paladins and charismatic saints belong to the latter 15th century. True, Ogge's style has some ironic Renaissance echoes, with its looser treatment recalling the precise Uccello or the gentle Bellini. But then, the chivalrous myths and naive hagiography weren't aligned with the bizarre. In Ogge, they're all capricious, akin to the entertaining whims of the circus.

At the heart of the project, then, there's a void, an ontological vacuum, where the artist can fill physical but not narrative space. There's no evolving point to the tale but perhaps a joke; but that doesn't tell a story beyond the confession that the void does not contain sense.

Jon Cattapan's
Setting Up
(above) at
Sutton Gallery.
Mark Ogge's
St Anthony III
(right) at
Flinders Lane
Gallery.

