Air of trepidation in world of contrast

OPINION

Popular opinion suggests that abstract painters — whacking down anything they like — are less concerned with tonal continuities than figurative painters. But abstract painters such as Jennifer Goodwin, John Buckely or Magda Cebokli at Dianna Tanzer are scrupulous in balancing their lights and darks, creating systematic contrasts with great subtlety.

Figurative painters on the other hand, are more likely to use fierce contrasts of tone or colour. For reasons that defy perception. Each has his or her own reasons for exaggerating contrast. Stephen Bush at Sutton Gallery (254 Brunswick Street) begins his paintings with a chaotic field of spills and smears, then builds his alpine imagery into the peaks and creases of tone and colour. The mountains and hills tussle with the wild will of the medium itself.

Peter Davertington also handles alpine peace with sunny paint, dashing from snow to eerie nocturnal light at Art One Gallery. But whereas Bush sees his imagery arising out of the primordial sludge — from time to magenta — Davertington overlays the craggy summits with a cerebral matrix of fiders. Nature sits behind the universal geometry of the built environment.

Even when figurative painters do straight pictures, the continuities of landscapes do not always yield lyrical mellow tonal contrasts. Quite the contrary, especially if you look at an artist like Jeffrey Makan. His Landmarks at James Makan Gallery is quite fierce in tonal contrasts, as the painter juxtaposes golden foliage with inky cypresses (Yarra Valley Pastoral).

Nearly all Hearman's pictures have the air of the broken jug, as if the light cannot really bear the murky corruption it encounters.

Hearman's light — with its love of double luminaries and staged backlighting — reveals a photographic sensibility that search for the exceptional glow that clinches a pregnant moment. It matches the repertoire of bizarre types — the sinister cat, the super-sized dog's head, the freakish teeth — all painted very confidently in a mercurial tonal manner with lots of glitter and highlight.

Hearman's pictures are about rupture rather than capture. Nearly all her pictures have the air of the broken jug, as if the light cannot really bear the murky corruption it encounters. Often the light is blinding itself unhomely and punishing to the eye, as in the headlights poking down a tunnel of trees.

The European tradition of pictures in low light tends to reflect the gentleness of contours, registering how light spills or caresses the surfaces. Hearman understands these vulnerable picnics but her interest isn't sensual in a rhapsodic vein.

For Hearman, the air is foggy with less glare and trepidation: her protagonists are startled and odd. She offers a pregnant dog to a transfixed child. Aeronautic parts are left abandoned and the trim on suburban houses seems ludicrously marked out as points of entry by the streetlamp. Hearman's pictures are all Untitled, almost as if intentions of meaning are consciously consigned to amnesia; so the stories that go to the phantoms and sultry children are curiously suppressed. We keep wondering about what happened, who owned the madness, what grimness or suffocated hope muffled the mind.

There are no answers, only indefinite questions. And here the rub: each contemporary untitled picture is set up for a further horrid emptiness, a combination of glum and glare, urgency and deferral, scariness and obscurity. These contrasts pile upon one another, finally amounting to a signature style of ambiguous rhetoric.

Louise Hearman's Untitled 727 (1999, oil on composition board) is at Glen Eira Gallery as part of a major survey of her work.

Robert Nelson

THE AGE
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2003

METRO ARTS & CULTURE

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VISUAL ARTS
PETER DAVERTINGTON
Art One Gallery, 45 Flinders Lane, until November 8 artofonegallery.com

JEFFREY MAKIN
Landmarks, James Makan Gallery, 716 High St, Armadale, until November 8
jameismakanstudio.com

LOUISE HEARMAN
Hello Darkness, The Art of Louise Hearman, Glen Eira City Council Gallery, until November 2
www.glenira.vic.gov.au

Robert Nelson Reviewer