

Gems behind the verbiage

By Anne Loxley

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◆ Tony Schwensen's piece is at Front Room, 92 City Road, Chippendale. Until April 19.

◆ *Parthenogenesis*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, Selwyn Street, Paddington. Until May 3.

◆ Dale Frank's *Views from the Bruce Highway* and Destiny Deacon's *Postcards from Mummy (work from Documenta 11)*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, 8-16 Soudan Lane (off 27 Hampden Street), Paddington. Until Saturday.

Tony Schwensen's work at Front Room is a fine piece of public art. In large shiny green capital letters, the words "NO WAUGH" are emblazoned on a yellow rectangle.

Through the gallery windows, Schwensen's billboard is visible to City Road drivers and pedestrians, and the national sporting colours and cricket reference ensure accessibility for all Australians - especially, the artist points out, our cricket-loving Prime Minister.

Schwensen was motivated by the period of weapons inspections before the current war with Iraq. While the front pages of Australian newspapers reported the movements of the UN inspectors, the back pages were devoted to a national cricket crisis - the dropping of Steve Waugh as one-day Test captain. The selectors' decision was a burning issue for many Australians. With an irony as powerful as it is populist, Schwensen's "no war" message is equally critical.

The Ivan Dougherty Gallery's *Parthenogenesis* offers a complex change from Schwensen's resonant simplicity. The curatorial premise of this group exhibition reeks of sophistry - the catalogue essay says the title means "virgin birth" and states "what we are looking for here is a vaccine against the more virulent strains of global uniformity".

Verbosity aside, curators Gary Carsley and Liz Ashburn have assembled a very thoughtful, international collection of first-rate works. To bravely paraphrase the curatorial premise, the works explore contemporary notions of identity through the conventions of merchandising (Keith Haring, Barbara Kruger and Cary S. Leibowitz, Chintan and Hema Upadhyay and Mambo) and role-play (Cindy Sherman, Craig Russell, Luke Roberts, the Kingpins and Julie Rrap).

The works in *Parthenogenesis* articulately and poetically express realities and opinions that are worlds away from "global uniformity". The Australian artists look very good in such illustrious company. The Kingpins' drag interrogations of masculinity are inventive and wildly funny, while the gender bending of the seminal drag artist Roberts is countered by Rrap's wonderful reworkings of key 20th-century icons of femininity. The artist poses as a hirsute Raquel Welch, and a cloven-footed (and handed) Elizabeth Taylor.

At Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, the sophistry continues with Dale Frank's *Views from the Bruce Highway*, a virtuoso exhibition of the artist's trademark varnish paintings. Titles like *View from 11 minutes South of Tiaro past Gympie* and *View West from Apple Tree Creek Flats Apex Park toilet/shower block* are especially absurd as the names of bold abstracts. Pools of toffee-coloured resin rambunctiously swirl over monochrome surfaces. In some, paint is suspended in the resin, creating embalmed splatters of colour.

A good deal of the power of these works lies in their contradictory character. While claiming to be landscapes, they are also abstract action paintings, sparring but sensuous, highly skilled but immediate.

Made in 1998, Destiny Deacon's *Postcards from Mummy: The first third of a life* is an installation of laser-printed photographs, tea towels and a video. Understated lyrical views of Queensland country and towns are crowned by reproductions of worn photographs of Deacon's mother and grandparents at various ages.

For this extremely personal work, Deacon has abandoned her usual double-edged humour to create a restrained, quietly affecting tribute.