

News, Analysis and Comment

REVIEW: Sydney College of the Art degree show
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Arts Hub

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It's easy to be cynical about Visual Art degree shows and just as important not to be. Each degree show represents the culmination of three or four years work towards an undergraduate Bachelor of Fine Arts or Visual Arts degree.

Over these years students are saturated with a variety of influences, exposed to a bewildering array of art theory and practice, and often confused by the contrasting views of their lecturers. It's all about finding your own way through this jungle of ideas.

A few students typically use these years, perhaps with an eye to commercial realities, to formulate an identifiable and marketable style. Others experiment wildly, regarding the tertiary environment as a honeymoon period in which to develop their creativity. Some emerge feeling scarred, disillusioned and not wanting to set foot in another tertiary institution. And a smaller group of students just seem to be there for the parties.

This range of student responses seems to be typical of art schools and the work on show at most degree show tends to reflect them. With Sydney College of the Arts displaying the work of over 150 students, I viewed the work in the Painting and Print Media studios and the Honours work being exhibited in the permanent gallery spaces.

Generally the standard of work on show is very good, with some excellent pieces, and the criticisms that can be offered tend to be applicable to most artists at this stage of their development; occasionally work was overly derivative or unable to transcend its source material, immature or technically rough.

SCA is housed in a series of old sandstone buildings and most of the work was on display in the actual

studios rather than in purpose built display spaces. The architecture complemented some work and got in the way of others. At its best the space conveys sweeping Victorian grandeur with long hall ways and twisting staircases; there are picturesque views from the studios of old trees and moss green lawns.

At its worst it's like a Silence of the Lambs basement where you stumble from one little room to another, peering in through small doorways to see what art objects you can spot.

The work of Painting Honours student Sylvia Schwenk stood out: she displayed a series of photographs of performances involving large numbers of people in urban spaces. Typically shot from the roof of buildings and high above the street, yellow clad participants are invited to form the shape of a cross. In one image yellow clad people are lying in the middle of a street blocking four lanes of traffic: it's a celebration of the creative potential of civil disobedience.

The cross symbol signifies both a threat and a promise: drop the bomb HERE/dig for treasure HERE. Schwenk has organized her performances, titled 'X', in Sydney and Vietnam. She has said that she "uses the city as a canvas because it is such an essential space for interaction, for exchange and social activity across people of different demographics".

Honours student Honi Ryan also looked at the subversion of an ordinary social interaction through a piece titled 'Serving Silence.' The 'social sculpture' is an ordinary wood dining table with a small screen set up at one end which is showing footage of a dinner party in which participants are not allowed to speak, write or read to each other. It comes across as an entertaining and profound comment on communication technologies: it was interesting to see how direct, funny and human communication becomes without reliance on linguistic systems or tools.

Jonathan Niesche exhibited a series of paintings which were notable for their polished, deceptively simple and charismatic paint applications. There was humour in his work too: an expensive linen canvas depicted a well executed image of a rubbish skip.

Another student exhibited witty, glossy photographs that subverted the 'food porn' tradition of glamorous food photography. An image showing a pea pod pierced by a nasty looking sharp object titled 'three peas in a very unhappy pod.'

Upstairs in the painting studios, and housed inside a Perspex box, was what appeared to be human or animal poo covered with a heavy dusting of gold glitter and adorned with a few specks of mould. Although it was untitled I nicknamed it 'glitter-shit' after the name I have given a particular shade of metallic brown paint that you tend to see on late model Holden utes.

Further along from this there was claustrophobia in a small room filled with giant black plastic tubes running from floor to ceiling. It was an occasion where the space did work well for the art.