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## Article: VOL 14 NO 1

From: **Vol 14 no 1**  
**Art & the Feminist Project**

### Modest Perfection

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Bunbury Regional Galleries November 1993

A Biennale is normally understood as an expensive, international exhibition, an exercise in setting the pace for the local art scene. A local Biennale in a regional gallery might be expected to be faintly ridiculous, perhaps even a sign of provincial stupidity. Yet the Bunbury Biennale put together by Tony Geddes Director of the Bunbury Art Galleries was none of these things. Indeed it was a pacesetter for the West just as powerful in its own way as Sydney's arty megathron. Geddes and the Collections Committee of Bunbury Galleries conceived the show as a means to acquire a collection of the finest contemporary local work by buying the best from each exhibition over several decades. Bill Wright of Sherman Galleries, Sydney was asked to open the inaugural show and to buy several pieces for the gallery. He faced a daunting task for the show was a very good cross-section of the idiosyncratic contemporary vision that has grown up here in the last few years.

Not surprisingly sculpture and assemblage work was the most immediately radical element in the show. Under the guidance of Tony Jones, Hans Arkveld and Ron Gomboc a school of local sculptors has arisen whose work moves between funfair horror and ironic humour. Alan Clark's extraordinary Juggernaut would fit well in any house of horrors. A nude male figure carved from wood and painted with a pale flesh-coloured gloss lies on its back encased by the base of a timber tower like a mining rig. Round the rig runs a track for a series of bright silver balls that appear to power the forward movement of the huge meaningless vehicle. The combination of an ancient communal fetish and a perpetual motion machine suggests a number of interlinked themes ranging from the futility of progress to the infinite misery of

mechanical masturbation.

Harry Hummerston's beautifully made ironic, ocean vessels made a similar but much broader point. One carefully moulded hull was filled with plastic creatures wallowing in liquid black filth. Hummerston explores contradictions of imagination, image and unpleasant environmental realities without ever becoming pious. His work too belongs in the penny arcade.

By contrast Susanna Marchant's Irony I and II was a piece of pure ironic fantasy on pseudo-feminist themes. In Irony I she arranged a group of burnt ironing board covers in a circle on the ground like the petals of an enormous flower. Each petal was given its own character by having more or less iron burns in different depths of brown. At the centre of the circle a group of miniature electric irons cast in lead clustered together like a genetic memory of domesticity. Irony II was a group of prints made by burning expensive paper with the shoe of iron, an anti-art complement to Marchant's floorpiece and no doubt a backward glance at Tzara's instigation to "Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board."

Aadje Bruce's amusing but intensely disturbing Domestis Bliss 1 took up where Marchant left off. She attached rubber feeding teats to a silk cushion with silk ribbons so that the finished object looked like a nurturing porcupine. Another version of the same thought used needles instead of teats. In each case the overload of the commonplace shifted the viewer into very strange territory indeed.

Simon Gilby's Teleology or the mind of God was a single wilfully heroic male nude standing in one of those disingenuously awkward postures best known through the work of Lehmbruck. Such stances are normally used to endow the figure with far greater presence than the simple skills of the sculptor could achieve. We notice the awkwardness and read it as profundity, abashed by the rawness of the universe. Gilby knows all this and has used our response to different ends.

His figure has writing inscribed all over it sunk to different depths beneath its plaster surface as if the body were only possible because of language. Around its head is a series of wire circles made into a sphere of orbits like a mediaeval orrery. Caught between mechanism and language the modern subject is dissolved by muttering in a self-made cage.

Cynthia Ellis also explored the slippage of the subject in her scintillating group of tiny portrait studies - Naso Eight Times. The repetitive image subjects her command of the virtuosic aspects of painting and her way of giving the face a gratuitous pseudo vitality, to a tragic read-out. This is miniature, hand-made Warhol, a much finer comment on the slippage between the needs and ambitions of art and the shape of human experience than anything made by the master of banal beauties.

In general, the painting at Bunbury was far less impressive. Miv Egan

and Carol Shepherd offered geometric renderings of the new high rise Perth. Shepherd's version of the concrete canyons was the more terrifying whereas Egan's easily recognisable brightly coloured architectural pastiche of Northbridge seemed a little too comfortable. Mary Knott, best known for her sculpture, showed an even more mysterious view of an urban underground passage with the shadow of a solitary stroller cast across it.

The best painting in the show was Indra Geidans Cucina, a brilliantly observed image of a small dog curled up on a corner of kitchen floor. Every detail of the dog's carefully folded limbs was fitted into an unbelievably animate silhouette. Such simple concerns may be a far cry from the angst and aggression of major interstate shows. Yet somehow Geidans tender work moved me much more than anything to be found in shows like this year's Perspecta. Perhaps the future of good art here can indeed be found in modest perfection.