



**Onshow**

David Bromfield

**big weekend** Saturday November 20, 1999 7

---

# The boldness of Ballidu

**I** LEFT town last week to hear Thomas Hoareau open an excellent exhibition by Perth painter Cynthia Ellis at Ballidu Art Gallery in the Wheatbelt. I had wanted to see this remarkable space for some time. It was started by farmer and sculptor Peter Phillips, with a group of enterprising friends who became the Ballidu Contemporary Art Society. They repainted the local masonic temple in dazzling ice-cream colours and refurbished it as a gallery. They are also keen to develop an artist-in-residence program based at the former Ballidu bank, where Ellis was ensconced.

Her small, uncompromising abstract paintings are far from the usual country art show. Ellis treats her paint like a pastry cook, soaking the canvas until it stands rigid, piling her colours up a few centimetres thick and turning them over and over like a slab of multi-coloured marbled ice-cream.

It is a surprise that this robust procedure can produce anything but chaos. Yet a magical combination of chance and sensibility has given each work a unique, intense, highly structured presence, so that nine small pieces easily fill the gallery.

The most enjoyable were all titled for different qualities of light. Starlight, was a swirling blinking turmoil of dark blue blacks and greys. All sorts of colours could be glimpsed in the crevices between the muscular frozen waves of impasto. Lakelight was all maroon and faded gold, a perfect summary of the purple moment before night falls over inland water.

Ellis also encrusts layer upon layer of paint on found objects in response to their form and function. For instance,

Pillow, is a pillow made rigid with light blue, yellow and white paint.

In his speech, Hoareau emphasised the value of art for the community and the necessity of seeing art as something beyond, though not apart from, everyday getting and spending. This is certainly true of Ballidu where every member of the small population visits every exhibition. The promise of art may well be able to bring people together when banks and other institutions have long abandoned their community responsibilities as profitless.

Yet everywhere the foundations of community life are disappearing and with them many of our assumptions about art and artists. I was told that some country towns, not so far from Perth, will soon vanish from the map. Perth itself is desperately short of the