

If it ain't baroque, it ain't here

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MELBOURNE ART FAIR 2012

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THE keynote for this year's Melbourne Art Fair is set by the commissioned work by Ian Burns. Called Clouds, the imposing structure at first resembles a windmill or Ferris wheel. As you approach this Quixotic folly, you realise it's made of household ladders and tables supporting elaborate electrical circuits.

Upon this baldacchino from Bunnings, lights periodically shine into glass bowls and create moving clouds on screens; other lights send random beams upon magnifying glasses and their cusp-curves create lettering. The lenses ingeniously concentrate the light into ivy-leaf patterns (known as caustics) that trace a bright pathway like skywriting.

Word by word, the light slowly spells out "only one moment" on one side and "in the imagined" on the other. Sitting beneath the giant dome, the electrified tabernacle echoes cloud iconography in the Victorian fresco above; and, like an animated observatory, it makes you think of heaven as a function of physics.

This engaging work would have been more elegant without the two video monitors to the sides which rehearse a live feed from the lo-tec optics; but in this decade and at this art fair, no one is saying "less is more". The fair is full of exuberant works, riddled with a rollickin baroque excess and complexity.

Many of the works are riotously overblown, with boisterous joy and bizarre extravagance, as is Paul Yore's copious confusion of erotomani and nursery toys at Gertrude Contemporary. A similar baroque profusion of colour and twisted imagery can be seen in the work of Kate Rohd at Karen Woodbury. In lurid colour, her resinous fibres confound the sinews of creature and cave, the design of a fountain or jug.

Baroque ornament is parodied by Stieg Persson at Anna Schwartz and richly overtakes the field in eX de Medici at Sullivan & Strumpf. He etching in partnership with Ros Atkins with two gas masks blowing evil molecules towards one another is like a baroque emblem for today security neurosis.

Similarly sinister are the heads of Ewen Coates at Anna Pappas. They wear perverse sex-masks or balaclavas, painted to resemble archaic chainmail, and include an allegory of authoritarian relations. The baroque love of power is contemplated by Rew Hanks in a gorgeous historicist linocut called The Hunter and Collector at Watters Gallery, showing a lord with art, hounds and gun.

Troy Emery at Gould Galleries represents the prey and hunting companions. With lattices of bead-like fluffy fibre, the animals are gaudy and luminous, as if already endowed with the character of domestic cushions. Their textile bodies match Geoffrey Ricardo's elephants at Australia Galleries.

Julia deVille at Sophie Gannon presents creatures on decorative trays as if for a baroque banquet. There's a brushy baroque pope by Crai Waddell at Gallery 9, brushy baroque allegories of household insurrection by Chris Aerfeldt at Helen Gory, and vanitas pictures with baroque tenebrism by Fiona Pardington at Two Rooms.

One of the most striking works is a group of sculptures by Gao Xiaowu at Ausin Tung Gallery. Three clowns bow into our space, proffering their imbecilic visages in our direction as if grotesques at a theme park. Suggesting the chauvinist caricatures produced under the Whit Australia policy, the obsequious and inscrutable white ghosts invite you to play a game that you don't actually know; at the same time, the throw back at us our history of racial vilification.

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International galleries are scarce this year. Arndt from Berlin stands out, with thoughtful work by artists like Sophie Calle and Chiharu Shiot; who has suspended a camera in a matrix of string inside a cube.

An equally baroque statement is the NotFair exhibition behind 361 Little Lonsdale Street. You approach this show from an alley off Heap Court, where a baroque architectonic theatre greets you, beginning with Roy Chu's ingenious signage that makes the letters of NotFa scintillate, disappear and replicate as you move.

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