

Art Gallery

Orange, Australia

"A Conjunction of Beauties"

by Alan Sisley

There is a line by the Dada/Surrealist hero Comte de Lautremont that goes something like, "As beautiful as the chance conjunction of an umbrella and a sewing machine upon an operating table." I am reminded of this line (which possibly I have misquoted as to both form and author) because of two very fine exhibitions we are currently showing which owe significant debts to the philosophy of Surrealism. The exhibitions, Eduardo Paolozzi "Artificial Horizons and Eccentric Ladders and Bill Davis' "Portraits of Rite" are two international exhibitions of consequence. Paolozzi is a leading British Modernist of the post war era, and Davis an emerging black and white photographer not quite 30 years old and just beginning to establish an international reputation.

While the presence of these two exhibitions here is not a chance conjunction, they seem to mesh in that inexplicable way beloved of the antirationalists, and have formed a gestalt, which is much more than we had hoped for.

As with the original surrealist artists, there is a paradoxical mixture of charm, wit, observation and interstitial power in this art. Both Paolozzi and Davis have been influenced by the tenets of International Surrealism as formulated by Andre Breton in the 20's and developed by many artists since then.

But whereas the work of Paolozzi had since his days of revolt at Slade school in 1945 retained a political and anti-authoritarian edge, and still seems to hold much of Breton's paradoxical egalitarianism, Davis has lent more towards visceral and body centered art, claiming Frida Kahlo as a hero.

Both artists use techniques of surrealist conjunction of unlikely objects in order to reach a state of heightened awareness, Paolozzi through the collagist techniques he has developed since seeing the work of Schwitters and Ernst in Paris in 1946, Davis through his techniques of layering his photos using a field camera and a series of supports to superimpose objects and images.

Each artist uses deliberately simple means. They like the hand of the artist to be apparent, but each has an excellent aesthetic eye that makes difficult compositions look deceptively easy. As both artists hope to transcend the limitations of reason, they run the risk of baffling their audience. But as they are both masters of their particular techniques, and have solid grounding in the traditional practices of art making, composition, modeling, etc.- they are able to impart a beauty that

overcomes initial incomprehension.

Also, each artist has based his work soundly in his own experience. Although they owe large debts to surrealist and other theory (one of Paolozzi's major works is a brilliant series of portraits of Wittgenstein) their practice has developed directly from matters of fundamental importance in their own lives. As a result, their work has a sincerity and directness that transmits itself to the viewer. Bill Davis has suffered physically from car accidents and genetic predispositions. This has left him with permanent pain in certain areas of his body, particularly his hips and feet. As a result his photographs made powerful use of body parts imagery, notably, images of feet juxtaposed with various other objects in an almost shamanic ritualized way. Davis reminds us that we take so much for granted the efficient functioning of our body. The many lovely nude studies take on additional meanings beyond most nude photography through his juxtapositions and masterly control of lighting. Whereas many post modern artists have focused on the politics of the body (some say this, with sexual politics, is the last radical politics still acceptable in western society), Davis' use of bodily images has little in common with this sort of theoretical art, but springs directly from his own experience of things unknown to most of us.

Both artists make unpretentious and accessible art that moves the viewer despite their occasionally arcane subject matter. Sir Eduardo Paolozzi has for a long time been recognized as one of the major British artists of the century.

Paolozzi runs to Oct. 11. The fine work of Davis to Oct. 18.