

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Social taste for 'beauty'

GALLERIES

By JOHN McDONALD

GOETHE once observed that "everything that has had a great effect can really no longer be evaluated". This implies that when we look at the art that previous generations found beautiful, questions of taste should play second fiddle to our sense of history. Even if we instinctively loathe certain works of the past, we may still have to recognise their historical value.

Of course our notions of beauty are very much determined by history and tradition. Particular paintings which have been endlessly reproduced in art books, advertisements, and school corridors, have led many people to believe that indisputably good art must look something like the *Mona Lisa* or Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. (Perhaps after *Golden Summers*, a new wave of artistic nationalism will sweep through the school corridors, replacing Dutch masters with prints of Roberts and Streeton!)

Bette Mifsud's photographs and mixed media works at Union St. are intensely conscious of the way our ideas of "beauty" are worked out for us in advance by social tastes and conventions. Better still, Mifsud has set out to expose those abstract underpinnings of taste which remain relatively constant over the centuries. She puts together a Morandi still life, a Van Gogh portrait, a Greek

torso, some geometrical abstraction and a few free form squiggles, and leaves it up to the viewer to draw the connections.

After a brief period of adjustment, these connections proliferate with remarkable fluency. A simple arrangement of chair, table, mirror and frame outlines a rough crucifix shape against a bare wall. This arrangement is repeated with variations of colour and contrast in four separate photographs.

The crucifix motif is echoed by the shape of the Greek torso, by a Byzantine Christ on a gold leaf backdrop, and by the formal composition of the Van Gogh painting. The geometrical abstraction of a multifaceted white rectangle finds a surprising parallel in some loose sketches in paint and charcoal. A continuous exchange exists between images pulled together into small groups, and between the groups themselves, with each fresh glance registering another unlikely connection.

A nice feature of Mifsud's show is the largely intuitive nature of her juxtapositions. She hasn't so much mapped out a conceptual strategy, as merely rearranged disparate images until they "looked right" next to one another. Viewers are invited to read as much or as little meaning into these arrangements as they desire, with no grounding in art history being necessary.

On the other hand, Rosemary Laing's *Table Suite* at The Performance Space, does seem to require a degree of conceptual sophistication from the viewer, if one is to follow the play of

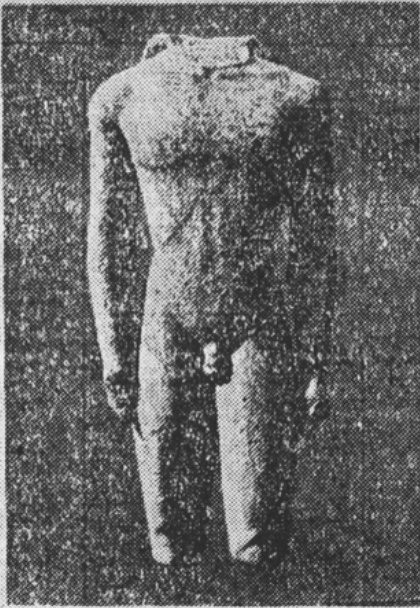
theoretical and art historical reference bubbling away in these works.

This is not to say that the show *can't* be appreciated in its own right, since Laing's paintings show quite a stylish hand, and her images can be arresting enough even if one doesn't feel prompted to puzzle over her abiding fascination with surreal style. Yet where Mifsud has followed her instincts, Laing has thought things out thoroughly that her work has a pronounced feeling of self-consciousness.

This creates a sort of inbuilt "inadequacy effect" for viewers, who may feel that Laing has done their work for them so efficiently that anything less than complete comprehension fails to make the grade. In fact, this level of understanding is impossible given the cryptic construction of these images, since at key is more likely to be found in the concept rather than in the actual work.

One woman who has reached a mature plateau in her work is Judith Cotton, presently showing at the Wagner Gallery. Though Australian by birth, Cotton now lives in New York where her paintings have met with a deal of success.

Cotton's works are elegantly and economically composed, with apparent roots in landscape art. They fall into a fairly well-defined style of lyrical abstraction and contain just enough novelty to provide a recognisable signature in the form of a transparent gluey substance with an occasional handful of sparkle thrown in. Her drawings upstairs are perhaps even more stylish.



Bette Mifsud's Pictures...remarkable fluency.