

Three rooms with a very different view

THREE ROOMS, Three Artists, the current project of the Centre For Contemporary Art, could well be subtitled Three Ways Of Looking at Painting, for each room and each artist offers a differing and at times conflicting view of contemporary art.

Howard Arkley, Juan Davila and David Larwill are the three artists involved. Each has been commissioned to paint, in whatever way he likes, one room in the small house in Dallas Brooks Drive.

No doubt these three artists were chosen as painters who might fill the given site imaginatively. But more than that it is interesting to see how each room and each artist makes a comment upon the other, setting up a dialogue about the nature of painting that is perhaps particularly pertinent to the beginnings of a new contemporary art institution.

The key room in this regard is Juan Davila's because it takes as its basic premise the idea that paintings and images interact with each other and that the artist is continuously involved in a debate about art and its wider social function.

Hence the characteristic use of quotations from other artists' work which Davila incorporates into a critical statement of his own. His room not only comments on the birth of the new centre, but takes up issues sparked at the Sydney

ART

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Biennale — in particular by the clever and vociferous English-based Art and Language group, whose work in the Biennale, reputedly "painted by mouth", is intended as a conceptual critique of expressionist painting.

Davila's room, which is a complex parody of Art and Language, makes a caricature of The Artist in his studio who is pictured in the mural sitting at his easel, a composite figure made up of various elements from other artists' work. Where Davila's art gains its strength is in its active response to a dialogue about art and its stand against the naivete of the artist.

In the room across the corridor Howard Arkley takes his point of departure from the graphics of the comic strip, filling his walls with characteristically stylised swirls and explosions. Arkley has painted murals before, using prefabricated designs and patterns which he draws from such sources as wallpapers, Laminex and computer cards. His mural at Dallas Brooks Drive is not one of his most challenging pieces but it nonetheless adds its piece to the discussion.

David Larwill's room stands as the temple of expressionism in its typically gestural explosion of paint and figuration. It represents the opposite end of the dialectical

pole from Davila, embodying a naive attempt at primitivism in art. For all its spirit of fun and vitality as a colorful display, such art lacks the level of idea and therefore content to make it really significant art.

None of the murals are major works within the artists' oeuvres, but that is not the point. In June the three rooms will be demolished and all that will be left of the project is the ideas that have been aired. Then, in August the new centre will open with a program designed to cover both Australian and international work.

I hope we are on the edge of something exciting, a new focus for ideas and debate which might bring contemporary art to the fore.

(Centre for Contemporary Art, Dallas Brooks Drive, ends 2 June).