

## Keeping Pace with Painters

*The Age*

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VICTORIA THIEBERGER joins a Saturday art tour through Richmond.

IT WAS our first encounter with Difficult Art. "I don't think that artist was very happy," says one woman looking at the large brown and black abstracts by Korean artist Young-Ha Park.

"Perhaps someone had stolen his other colors.

"It's interesting that you should say that," Mark Burt interposes, "Because I am a painter myself and I have worked in monochrome too.

The things to look for are the subtleties in these large works, the elements of landscape. It's more than just the ramblings of some sad artist.

Art, says Mr Burt, is to be shared. "It can be daunting, but what we seek to do as artists is explain or suggest ways of looking at a work.

The whole purpose of these walks is to share our enjoyment. We hope to demystify it.

On Saturday, Mr Burt and about a dozen other painters and sculptors led a walking tour of the Richmond gallery circuit. The artists, from the Contemporary Art Society, hold regular tours of commercial galleries to involve people who feel overwhelmed or alienated by modern art. Encouraged by the prospect of safety in numbers, about 20 of us joined them last weekend.

Maureen Brayne came with a friend from U3A, the University of the Third Age. They had done a course on art and had already visited many of the galleries in the area. "We're not just stuck on the Impressionists," she says. "We're very interested in modern art.

Our trail begins at the bottom of Richmond Hill, through the elegant entrance of the Charles Nodrum Gallery and past an office that looks like a drawing room.

Kath Creedy, one of the CAS artists leading the informal tour, glances in. Entering a commercial gallery, she says, "is like walking into someone's house or into some warehouse". "Either way, it can be very alienating.

As can the things on the walls. Art speaks a language of its own, and it is easy to feel locked out without a translator. Contemporary and non-figurative works in particular can appear to offer no way in.

"I find it very confusing," says one of our group, gazing at the blocks and lines of color in the paintings of Ron Lambert.

So one of the artists talks a bit about the painter's unusual process of scraping back paint to reveal the colors underneath. "With reds and greens like that, it's very hard not to make mud," says Robert Lee. A practicing artist as well as the president of the society, he's speaking from experience.

"People are quite intrigued to find out how the construction of a work has taken place," he says later. "An art work is seen as a finished object, not a transitional piece that had to go from start to finish, to the point where the artist decided to stop.

The Contemporary Art Society holds walks once a month around the gallery ghettos of Richmond, Prahran and Fitzroy. The group was set up in 1938 by George Bell in protest at the conservatism of the art establishment. Bell seceded two years later, leaving the society in the hands of John and Sunday Reed.

Apart from a couple of years in the 1960s, the society has never had a permanent home or gallery space. Its members, mainly practicing artists, see themselves as nomads of the art world, still working to fulfill one of the founding aims of the group: to further understanding of contemporary art.

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Robert Lee says people are often dismissive of contemporary art. "If they even get to a gallery, they walk in and they say, 'Oh, I don't like that', and go. But they don't ask themselves why they don't like it." The tours help people get beyond their initial reactions to some sort of understanding of the art work.

Mr Lee says the artists keep the arts peak to a minimum. "We are very low-tech and it makes people feel easier that they can say, 'Oh, look, all the sculptures are black', and not feel that they are saying something wrong. We can discuss it.

AND onwards up Richmond Hill. A cheerful sculpture by Deborah Halpern, the creator of the fabulous 'Angel' in the moat of the National Gallery, draws smiles of recognition as the group reaches the entrance of the Christine Abrahams Gallery.

Inside, the stark totemic sculptures of Vincent Martino draw a mixed reaction: a long sigh from Sue, leaning on her walking cane; a bubbling response from Anne Gaides, who has just signed up as CAS's newest member. "They really appeal to me, the geometric shapes and the height. And I love black metal.

Ms Gaides, wearing a fur-trimmed parka and a little black hat with yellow flowers and a snatch of tulle, dropped out of art school in the '70s, turned to science, and is now a computer programmer. "I gradually became interested in art again. I find it fascinating to see what comes out of people's minds.

Next stop is Pinacotheca, where visits are by appointment only for the winter months. As we head down a laneway and climb a narrow iron-railed stair, someone asks, "Is this it?" Another gallery for the cognoscenti.

Michelle Stanic, a music teacher, says that apart from the National Gallery she has been to few galleries before this afternoon. "We've been to places I would never have known existed," she says.

"I'm finding there's more to enjoy in the art works. After perhaps looking at something where I can't see any meaning in it, I find it's just a matter of sticking at it and talking about it, maybe coming back to it later.

Not everyone on this Saturday's tour, however, felt enlightened by the excursion into modern art. The musician who kept his sunglasses on for most of the afternoon still dredged up the dismissive "A four-year-old could have done that" cliché. But no one seemed to hear him.

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