An ambiguous world

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There could hardly be a greater contrast between the two New York scenes presented on view in Sydney. Judith Coton at the Wagner Gallery, and Keith Haring with five large prints at the Ruskin Oxlade Gallery. Though Judith Coton is an Australian who lives and works in New York, and lends the Australian landscape visible through her delectable paintings.

Through deliciously diaphanous floods and veils of colour, sometimes with transparent incrustations that both halt the movement and record climates, slip thin lines that suggest tree trunks and in works like Mole-toe bush tracks that could also be branches. Coton's is an enthrancing ambiguous world. Is it a hillside or drifting fog? Is it a slope or a misty waterfall? Can a landscape blush as it seems to in Ablaze? Or can it become quite red in the face as with Schoenazerade?

Indeed, a lot of the paintings are lyrically baleful with luminous alken woods as parnassus tossed by thin, subtle lines or animated by scribbles. Those on grey, like Solid, have an ease and grace with distance kinships to Helen Frankenthaler's pastoral poetry. Some, like Bunyip, are cybernetic displays in a foggy twilight.

The undistractive lines which give a fleeting structure to the equal fleeting drifts of evanescent colour emerge in full force with the drawings of palm trees in black and white. They are like horticultural totem poles, are both robust and delicate, plain and decorative. Lines are brisk and smeared, positive and poised. Some are surrounded by collages of cruddy eddies, darker drawings of palms, and these reveal a theatrical emphasis kept in check in the rest of the exhibition.

Solo, her dashing version of a golden summer, must make us think twice of the word of the painting now at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Or are we supposed to admire them all?

Certainly, Gunter Christen at the Yull-Crowley Gallery, in a series of outlined figures, some with their dopplegangers for company and needing extended analysis, demonstrates the power of suggestion over more descriptive constructions.

There are no subtle delicacies, ethereal intimacies and invitations to daydream in Keith Haring's prints which are as sudden and un-deviating as his rise to international fame. Not so with this year, since he established a completely recognizable style with these immediate prints. Nolan did not meet with Ned Kelly when he had just turned 25. Haring's work should now be familiar enough: he has shown in Melbourne and dressed on the walls of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1978, the year the first work of his bought in Australia by the Power Gallery went on show and a book on his work appeared.

His latest photograph is of Haring today in a horizontally stripped shirt, then there is Haring as a child in a very badly striped suit. But in between is his well-known baby drawn in blue lines, on all fours and as in one of the paintings, giving off these conventional strokes that implicated the glow around electric bulbs and happy heads.

The Radiant Child, as he was dubbed in Artforms, 1981, by the poet Rene Ricard, became a central performer in Haring's work whether on plastic tarpaulins or in New York's subway. More tidy than you might expect, the Metropolitan Transit Authority blocks out expired billboards on its stations with black paper which Haring has taken as an invitation to draw his white planes, submarine flying saucers, men with six arms, men with snakes as arms, barley dogs, dolphins, men going to heaven or down manholes, all for the edification of subway riders.

Naturally, Haring has been arrested and convicted of "criminal mischief" as they put it. At present this legend at an early age in his own lifetime is being celebrated not, the Radiant Child but Radiant Motherhood or, more accurately, pregnancy in these vivid prints published by the Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

Mr Shafrazi being himself a legend, having splashed on Guernica, oddly enough probably the closest thing to Haring in New York.

Haring, in fact, emerges not from the palmleaves of graffiti on New York's rolling stock, but from the clarity of direct advertising, from William Copley's pum pudes often grazed with nothing, and from Roy Lichtenstein's outlines and bendy dots, which can be enlarged by painting to puce discs encrusted by orange. Radiant Motherhood or pregnancy is jubilantly presented with tautly curved stomachs, but otherwise the bodies are uniformly flat. A puce figure may embrace two pregnant black women outlined in yellow: a baby floats in the sharpest, pale, and green while below adoration comes from four orange women outlined in puce: a pregnant green woman with orange trimmed puce dots is encrusted by nine small yellow men outlined in red. They cavort in their environment.

The colours explode: the placement is as powerful as it is impenetrable. Despite the rupture there is no extravagance for in this alliance of concept and minimalism the aesthetic restraint is remarkable and the creative intelligence undeniable.

The intelligence in Doug Bracken's work at the Hogarth Gallery is of a different order: his 86 tiny collages of reproductions of noted artists with yw additives, mordant, erudite and sometimes quite elusive.

Three bananas in stages of being unpeeled are called Strippease. Haring's fishing boat has hooked live tiny pieces of the human body and is titled Didn't Catch Much Today. Man Ray's flatiron faced with a row of nails points outward and stands near an ironing board that is like a red tongue while Magritte's nightdress with breasts hangs above it. It is called A Woman's Work Is Never Done.

There is a punning de Chirico with a view of an un-Italian countryside seen through one of his habitual archways: it is called A Slave in the House of Love and is just as mysterious as a photograph of a skeleton with a label and titled Du Du Da Da.

I have an explanation that might be unconvincing as it is long, so let us dispense with it. Meanwhile Miro, Gauguin, Warhol, Seurat, Wesselman and others assist in these quite enthralling visual, and intellectual games.