

by Maria Prerauer

An ambiguous world

Art

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THERE could hardly be a greater contrast between the two New Yorkers presently on view in Sydney, Judith Cotton at the Wagner Gallery, and Keith Haring with five large prints at the Roslyn Oxley Gallery.

Albeit Judith Cotton is an Australian who lives and works in New York and lets the Australian landscape whisper through her delectable paintings.

Through deliciously diaphanous floods and veils of colour, sometimes with transparent incrustations that both halt the movement and record climaxes, slip thin lines that suggest tree trunks and in works like *Molestone* bush tracks that could also be branches.

Cotton's is an entrancingly 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 *Scheherazade*?

Indeed, a lot of the paintings are lyrically balletic with luminous silken areas like garments tossed by thin, sinuous lines or animated by scribbles. Those on grey, like *Solstice*, have an ease and grace with distance kinships to Helen Frankenthaler's pastoral poetry. Some, like *Bunyip*, are pyrotechnical displays in a foggy twilight.

The unobtrusive lines which give a fleeting structure to the equally 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 smudged, positive and poised. Some are surrounded by collages of crisply cut, 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 about some of the plodding painting now at the Art Gallery of NSW... or are we supposed to adore them all?

Certainly, Gunter Christman at the Yuill-Crowley Gallery, in a series of outlined figures, some with their doppelgangers for company and needing extended analysis, demonstrates the power of suggestion over mere description.

There are no subtle delicacies, ethereal intimacies and invitations to daydream in Keith Haring's prints which are as sudden and undeviating as his rise to international fame. Not 28 until May this year, he has established a completely recognisable and indelible imagery as Nolan did with Ned Kelly when he had just turned 25.

Haring's work should now be familiar enough; he has shown in Melbourne and drew on the walls of the Art Gallery of NSW in 1983, the year the first work of his bought in Australia by the Power Gallery went on show and a book on his work appeared.

Its first photograph is of Haring today in a horizontally striped shirt, then there is Haring as a child in a vertically striped suit, but in between is his well-known baby drawn in thick lines, on all fours and, as in one of the prints, giving off those conventional strokes that implicated the glow around electric bulbs and happy heads.

The Radiant Child, as he was dubbed in *Artforum*, 1981, by the poet Rene Ricard, became a central performer in Haring's work whether on



Screen print by Keith Haring: an explosion of colours.

plastic tarpaulins or in New York's subways.

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, submarines, flying saucers, men with six arms, men with snakes as arms, barking 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 celebrating 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 paint on Guernica, oddly enough probably then the closest thing to Haring in New York.

Haring, in fact, emerges not from the palimpsests of graffiti on New York's rolling stock, but from the clarity of direct advertising, from William Copley's plump nudes often graced with nothing, and from Roy Lichtenstein's outlines and benday dots, which can be enlarged by Haring to puce discs encircled 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

five 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 puzzling 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 *Da Da Da Da-Beuys*.

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 untrivial, visual and intellectual games.

Three bananas in stages of being unpeeled are called *Striptease*. Hiroshige's fishing boat has hooked

five tiny pieces of the human body and is titled *Didn't Catch Much Today*.

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