

Standing out to find art's commercial soul

MELBOURNE ART FAIR

Royal Exhibition Building
13 - 17 August

Great festoons of red garlands, loops of brocade and fringe, rope and tassels spill out of a vertical plane, creating a wall presence, like a baroque mirror with ebullient knobs and baubles.

As you approach, you observe that the lyrical swathes awkwardly sprout like plumbing from a curving tiled wall, as in a shower, like a baldacchino for the bathroom.

This wonderful caprice by Joana Vasconcelos at the Pearl Lam Galleries' stand at the Melbourne Art Fair is matched by one other work by the same artist, a bundle of knitted cushions that tumble over one another inside a leonine frame of massive cornice: it's a melee of pillows, a massacre of the innocents in decorative bolsters.

The art fair is a great occasion to observe which works stand out with cultural significance rather than novelty and mannerism.

In art it's natural that artists pursue the new or distinguish themselves with different technique. But in a large collection, such as you see at the art fair, novelty side by side tends to cancel itself out. In this context, the works with a deeper historical resonance stand out and suffer no fatigue.

Almost escaping his own mannerism as a painter, Ben Quilty at Tolarno Galleries has taken an amazing turn into cultural significance, and with a similarly baroque sensibility, through the medium of ceramics. His anthropomorphic jugs caricature various traditions of the grotesque, marrying wild physiognomies with fluxing flanges, dancing lips and feet.

Ceramics have long held on as a contemporary medium in Japan, as you can see with the work of

Ryoji Koie and Kazuhiro Shimo at Yamaki Art Gallery; but at least the medium no longer needs to feel so embattled. Now that the dominance of painting is receding, the promise of greater receptiveness to other media is consoling.

There are still good paintings to be had but they're looking less and less contemporary. One takes an interest in Stewart MacFarlane's *Ranch View Motel* at Cube Contemporary Art Projects, rather than the nudes by the same artist, because the image has a fine satirical meanness about it.

The gesticulating orators by the ocean by Joel Rea at Gallery One, though a little derivative, succeed in their corny symbolism, because you can imagine news headlines for which the pictures might be cartoon illustrations.

A community of black poodles painted by Michael Zavros creates a fine conundrum: were the dogs all so affable together or are they just one dog cloned and repainted? In digital media, you'd be in no doubt, but in painting the replication makes a claim for a group portrait. In all events, the tribe make good company for the Rolls-Royce and a whole performative exercise in brand-naming the artist.

Brian Martin's drawings *Methexical Countryscapes* at William Mora display fascination for the subject matter of the bush, even if they seem dependent on photography. Against the backdrop of robust work by indigenous artists at Fireworks and Alcaston, Martin makes you feel the fragility of contact with country.

Photography is intriguing, with much latitude between the spectacular documentary, such as PJ Paterson's *Genesis* at Sanderson Contemporary, and highly con-

structed narratives, as with the photography and stop-motion animation by Juan Pablo Langlois Vicuna in collaboration with Nicolas Superby from Galeria AFA. But even documentary photography can yield conceptual amusement, as with an image by Glenn Sloggett at Stills with graffiti that says "sux".

Sculptural works literally stand out, like a beautiful faceted equestrian piece by Ben Foster at Sanderson, recalling Futurist fantasies of abstracted dynamism but also preparing to saddle up for the post-petrol age.

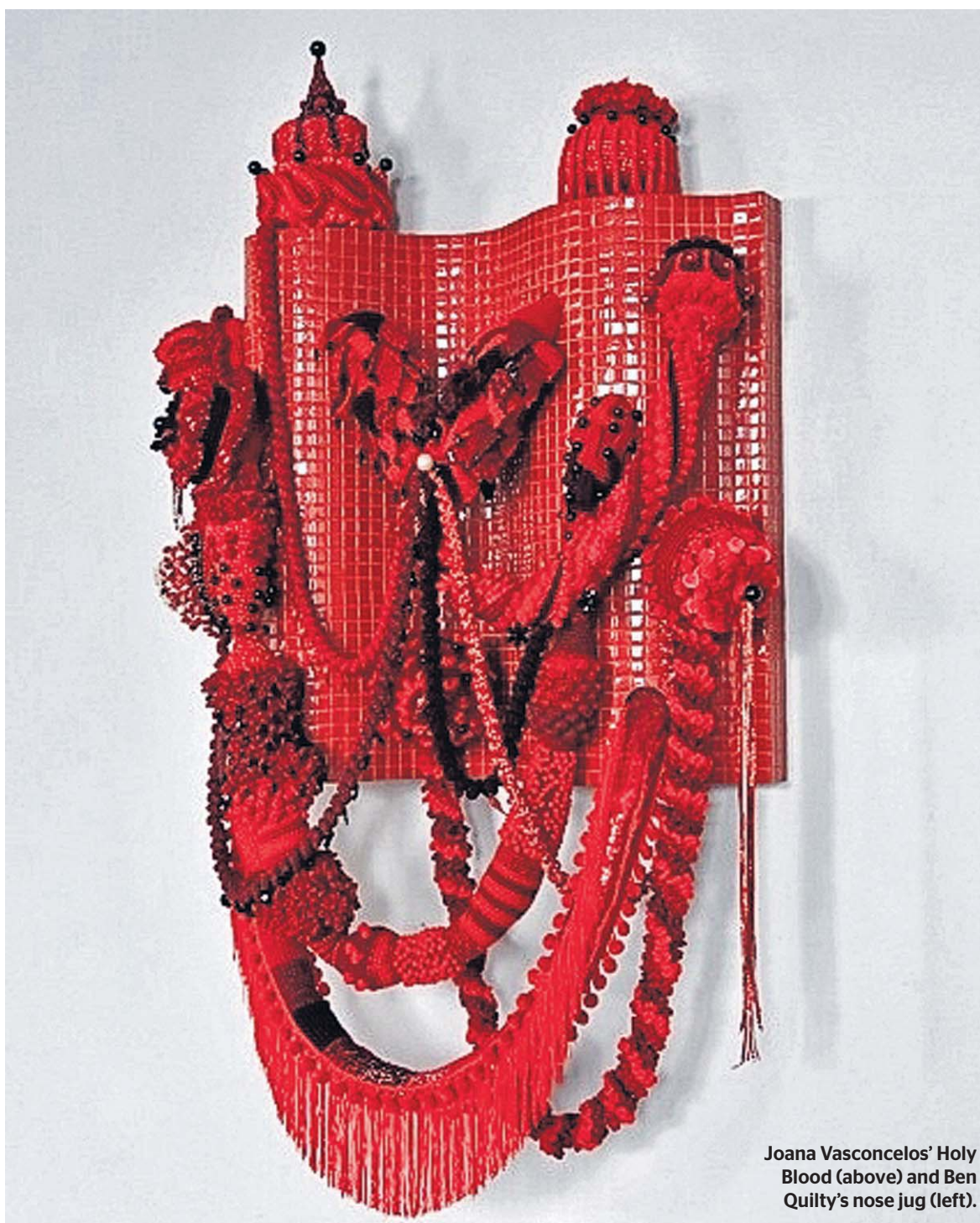
Simon MacEwan's architectural interpretation of the Berliner Stadtschloss is both exquisite and dark, like a necrotic shell; though, for the most part, sculptural installations are upbeat.

New media struggle to feel at home at the art fair, in spite of MAF video. As a sign by Kristin McIver asks at James Makin: "Is selling my art the same as selling my soul?"

Art at the art fair needs to be commercial; fortunately, however, most artists when offered the chance are happy to discover their commercial soul.

robert.nelson@monash.edu





Joana Vasconcelos' Holy Blood (above) and Ben Quilty's nose jug (left).