

Keeping glitz under control

VISUAL ARTS Interregna Moana Project Space REVIEW LAETITIA WILSON

he fledgling artist-run
initiative in the heart
of Perth above Hay
Street Mall is holding
only its second
exhibition since
opening last year.

Interregna features contemporary work by three WA artists — Abdul Abdullah, Casey Ayres and Nathan Beard. The trio have collaborated in the past and come together again for this show, producing new work as a kind of reunion of the brotherhood.

Interregna contains poised conversational juxtapositions between showy, glitzy works and works that display greater control and restraint.

On entering the distorted white cube of Moana, upstairs in Moana Chambers, one is immediately hit by Beard's Buddhist-inspired memorial to Tina Turner. It takes form as a reinterpretation of a death shrine for Buddhist monks.

A Perspex box contains offerings including fake greasy, fried chicken and sundry kitsch within which is couched a video work. This is characterised by a conflation of authentic devotion to the American-cum-Buddhist pop star with crass celebration of spectacle.

The visual flamboyance of this work is dulled (or emphasised) by the puffs of smoke issuing from an exhaust at the entrance of the gallery. A work by Ayres, above which he has hung a bike made of parts fossicked throughout North Perth, as a kind of relic from the dregs of the suburb. Machismo oozes throughout his work.

The obscuring effect of the smoke is echoed in painterly terms in the works of Abdullah, who paints himself and his two brothers, submissively kneeling, with their bodies rendered in monochromatic flesh tone and only their passive faces and hands made distinct. Personal, religious and fictional meanings inform this striking trio of works. Abdullah also has text paintings on display that continue the theme of potent meaning expressed through processes of visual subtlety. They forward his tradition of appropriating racist bumper-sticker slogans.

They might be painted in quiet sickly pastel tones but the message is loud — the text reads “Go Home”, innocuous words explicitly loaded with tangled meanings in the Australian political context.

Text in art can be used mindfully, be elusive and thought provoking, just as much as it can be painfully obvious or applied to humorous effect.

Text paintings displayed by Ayres veer in the latter direction, with tongue-in-cheek sentences such as “When I think about you I f... myself ” mis-referencing a well-known pop song, written against a Mark Rothko-esque background and lacquered with nail polish. These works are self-consciously wedded to absurdity as a critique of modernist art history, from Rothko to Jenny Holzer.

The programming, model and general orientation promoted by Moana directors Kate Mullen and Dale Buckley are in harmony with similar artist-run initiatives across Perth such as OK Gallery, the former Galleria, the former Museum of Natural Mystery and to a lesser extent Paper Mountain. Circles overlap circles in a tight constellation known as the Perth contemporary art scene.

The homogeneity across these spaces is thankfully overwhelmed by an impressive professionalism. It is a welcome relief to see such initiatives popping up against the background of the recent domino-like collapse of longrunning commercial galleries.

Mullen and Buckley have their fingers in a hot little pie with this space. A great deal of potential is steaming from within, blending with the inviting scent of coffee from the adjoining cafe.

They have so far presented shows with high-profile local male artists, though Buckley did assuredly say “We don’t want to become a sausage-fest”.

Here’s looking forward to greater diversity in the future with shows primed towards new media in the expanded sense, installation and temporal works.

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Crass celebration: The Nathan Beard artwork Anna Mae / Tina / Angela (I Idolise You).





Get the message: Abdul Abdullah's Go Home (numbers 1-10).



Tangled meaning: Casey Ayres' I Don't Want Anybody Else.