

Gesturing helpless flashers

DONALD BROOK

IMANTS TILLERS: *Watters Gallery, Sydney.*

THE LAUNCESTON PURCHASE, *Launceston.*

THE WORK that Imants Tillers showed recently in *Object and idea*, in Melbourne, is now back in Sydney in an expanded version. And with it returns the conviction, reinforced by the vulgarity and myopia of Victorian criticism, that this is a major enterprise, fit to be seen in the context of Duchamp's *Great glass*. As seen in the local context of saccharinous lyrical abstraction it provides a shock as profound as if one had turned over the social page of the Sunday paper, some time in the 1950s, to find oneself reading Crick and Watson's paper on DNA in *Nature*. Naturally, most readers embarrassed in this way would hurry on to the comics, the football or even in desperation to the art criticism.

The breathtaking thing about Imants Tillers' work is its prodigious ambition; and I do not mean the "ambition" of the latest color painter to pick up the torch from Cezanne or Braque or Pollock or Olitski and carry it, to the thunderous applause of art historians, from chapter MCMXXXVI to chapter MCMXXXVII of their bestselling art investment serial. It is rather the uncalculating ambition to explore-by-making the very idea of art, of art objects and of art institutions, and to comprehend them all in one great dynamic metaphor. To this task the artist brings an imagination well stocked with general ideas about relationships and systems that he could only have found outside the studio, in a world where people have more options than to be painterly or linear, post cubist or neo dada.

Imants Tillers was not trained in art school, and in a sense he does not know what an artist ought to

do. In another sense he knows exactly what an artist ought to do, and can't do otherwise, any more than Leonardo could have abandoned his studies in anatomy or metallurgy on the strength of contemporaries' assurances that it was all very interesting, but not art. He is inner directed to an astonishing degree; but these directions originate in an inquisitive, responsive relationship to the world, and not from that kind of inner malfunction, analogous to obsessional neurosis, that keeps senescent abstract expressionists gesturing like helpless flashers.

The esthetic reward for patient unscramblers of the dense connections in Imants Tillers' work is distinctive, and hard to characterize. It is by no means a purely intellectual pleasure like that of mathematics or logic, without empirical content, yet it is more like the satisfaction of problem solving than it is like being soothed by pleasant sounds or colors.

One section of the works (Nos. 411 to 447) is available for exchange by barter, and it is significant that the best artists in Sydney, many of them working in utterly different ways, are bringing offerings of their own to trade for fragments of this remarkable unfolding oeuvre. Joan Grounds and Alex Danko are actually competing with offers for one piece and, incidentally, setting Imants Tillers one more decision problem. I have myself made a bid with a small bunch of theoretical writings on art, and am flattered to learn that it has been stolen. It may still qualify for exchange with one of those 91 "missing works" that are, in a very curious sense, in the exhibition.

THE CITY of Launceston has a small but vigorous art gallery with a collection of space occupying art works (as near as dammit sculptures, but with more room for conceptual manoeuvre) that has suddenly been boosted by 500 percent. There were three pieces in the collection last week, and now there are 15.

The technique (for the benefit of small, ambitious, non profit-making centres) is to collect a couple of thousand dollars through some local agency such as the Tasmanian National Theatre and Fine Arts Society, and to persuade the Council for the Arts to match dollar for dollar. You then invite some good artists to offer works for selection; and if you are obviously serious and genuinely needy it is likely that the artists, who incline to generosity, will put a low price on their submissions.

In this way Launceston has been able to acquire, almost instantly and very nearly painlessly, a decent Hilary Archer, a John Armstrong, a Rodney Broad, Peter Cole, Tony Coleing, Erwin Fabian, Herbert Flugelman, Gary Greenwood, Robert Jenyns, Trefor Prest, Petrus Spronk and a large Stephen Walker.

In spite of that, the mayor thinks that they wuz robbed and several people think that the Petrus Spronk (true) shouldnt have an upholstered lady who shouldnt have a fur pubis that shouldnt be fitted with a zip that oughtnt to reveal, on opening, a delicious little hoard of smarties. Dont give the kids the wrong idea is the bleak message from Launceston, and they may be right. The ironic feminism of the work may not stay the greedy finger.

AVANT GALLERY

Teura Maffei Presents

INVESTMENT ART: Sydney Ball Painting, Persian Series.
Fred Williams Water Colour, William Frater Portrait, Greg Irvine
Oils and Gouaches, Loudon Sainthill Oil Painting, Robert
Dickerson Charcoal, Michael Shannon Oil Painting.

Consignment Japanese Scrolls and Swords

342 Punt Rd., South Yarra, Victoria 3141. 26.2009, closed Mondays.