Contemporary fantasies in the State of the art

THE purpose of a press release is to announce an exhibition, an artist's work or an important event in a concise form. But sometimes, particularly if they come from a public relations office or a law firm, press releases go overboard with extravagant claims that occasionally border on fantasy.

I always take notice of them because they are a good indicator of how some people think and should be sold to the public. Each year on April 20, the birthday of Sherlock Holmes, some event or other occurs that traditional English detective fans will find irresistible.

This year's no exception. For 24 hours, there will be a special exhibition of Holmesiana at the Sherlock Holmes museum in London. The exhibition will include a collection of original manuscripts, letters, and documents from the great detective's personal life.

And if that isn't enough, in another communication we are all invited to join "the fun and festivities of people's day at the National Gallery of Victoria on February 24. The celebrations at Australia's first gallery" will mark the opening of the new Murdoch Courtyard, which has been converted into a much-needed gallery of contemporary art, and the big survey, "Australian Art 1855-1987: Field of Play."

But wasn't "The Field in 1977?"

Not to be beaten, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) has jumped the gun with the opening of its first exhibition space. Ohakama has its survey with the fringe on top, but now Melbourne, "Australia's premier State of the arts", can boast a Victorian cottage with a gallery of contemporary art out the back as "a measure of the high level of sophistication and taste of the people of Melbourne."

The new building has been designed by architect Daryl Jackson to fit into the picturesque garden surrounds and its exterior is bland enough to achieve this purpose, even if it is painted with green and white stripes.

To christen its new architectural pride and joy, ACCA is planning host to a touring exhibition of Paintings for the 2nd Venice Biennale by the "colourful, imaginative and witty self-conscious" Sydney artist, Imants Tillers.

In a recent interview, Trevor Winkfield, an English artist and translator of Roussel's "How I Wrote Certain of My Books", recalled how he became a modernist: "When I was growing up in Leeds, the only paintings available to me were reproductions, either in books or on postcards... So I grew up believing all paintings were small, glossy and flatly painted. It came as something of a surprise to discover years later that they could be bigger than myself, and the paint sufficiently encrusted to induce cracking."

The childlike notions of "we tots." Winkfield are not unlike those expressed in grown-up Tillers' "re-articulation of reproduced images found in magazines and catalogues". They are the basis of his multi-panel paintings, Australians, including Tillers, are big travellers, but that doesn't stop him from stating that "in Australia the experience of works of art through mechanical reproduction always precedes their direct experience."

In the early 1970s, conceptual purists (Mel Ramsden, for one) dismissed the work of Awatapu because of the Japanese artist's tendency to dress up ideas in aesthetic clothing. The same criticism was sometimes levelled at Tillers' earlier works, but seems less relevant when applied to his large, conceptually-activated works of recent years. Once completed — using a rather time-consuming method of transferring source images from artists such as Polke, Cuocolo, Keifer and the late works of de Chirico to a series of small canvas boards — his paintings have two lives. They can be stored into semi-anonymous piles, like old newspapers awaiting collection, or they can be assembled in galleries as big complex, reorganised pictures.

Despite ACCA's (or Tillers') insistence on absurdly subdued lighting, the Venice paintings are still stunning. They are at their best when Tillers achieves, through judicious section, an almost seamless fusion of contemporary painting's most marketable icons and certain obscure remnants of the artist's personal history.

Robert Rooney

The Hyperborean and the Speluncean by Imants Tillers.