

Remembrance of things present

Visual arts

Remember Who You Are,
200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, until
July 1.

Review **Peter Timms**

FLAUBERT wrote that "everything is interesting if only you give it proper attention". It's the sort of statement that seems profound until you give it proper attention, at which point it turns into the bleeding obvious.

Remember Who You Are is the latest in a whole raft of recent exhibitions that exploit the fashionable post-pop idea of "the everyday": drawing our attention to commonplace things that (it is assumed) we usually overlook.

Kenneth Pleban shows us two kitschy suburban interiors; Annalea Beattie arranges minuscule pictures of household objects on shelves; Mark Wingrave takes photographs of bathroom tiles, grill doors and brick walls; Peta Clancy's three pictures document the cleaning of a laminate benchtop; Nicola Loder gives us a video of a man sitting at a table for half an hour without moving; Alison Weaver's video camera follows a machine as it fills cracks in a bitumen path;

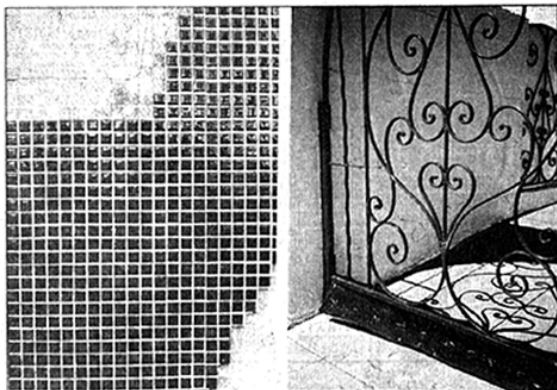
and Ken Arnold photographs suburban walls and fences. Despite my offhand descriptions, this is a handsome show with a bright, sunny, suburban feel to it. Most visitors will enjoy its lightness of touch and the innocent nostalgia underlying it.

Conceptually, however, there are problems. The effect of any such unalloyed celebration of the banal is to disallow all consideration of values. One reason we often disregard things like brick walls, old tiles and bitumen pavements is that we prefer to invest other things with greater value.

Predictably enough, the curators of this exhibition remind us (as if we needed reminding) that the modern urban environment constantly bombards us with visual information. Well, yes, but that is precisely why we all take the sensible option of electing what to take notice of and what not to.

It is, of course, very interesting to consider why and how we make those choices, but these artists avoid those questions, preferring the much easier option of just telling us, in effect, that we shouldn't be making choices, or at least that we ought to be making different ones — those they are making for us.

What so-called "high art" used to do was to argue that certain



Mark Wingrave: Bathroom tiles and screen doors.

things or qualities were more important than others, which contributed to an ongoing dialogue about what people valued and why. So art helped to constantly redefine the culture and was, in this respect, fluid and democratic.

Pop art and its derivatives, on the other hand, try to convince us that the whole notion of cultural value is dead, that we shouldn't be concerned about it at all. Instinctively, we know this to be nonsense, since we make informed value judgments all the time. But what this sort of art does, in effect, is to close down the dialogue.

The exhibition is on potentially more fruitful ground in its second aim of recommending slowness. Loder's video (as boring as it is) and Arnold's photos of the side of

a house gradually being dampened by rain are helpful in speculating about the process of seeing rather than the material things we see. They are right to suggest our understanding of the world will be enriched if we spend more time looking, but it's hardly a revelation.

While obviously it's true that everything is interesting if only we give it proper attention, it misses the point (as Flaubert was well aware). We must ask what "proper attention" means and how it can be achieved, and why, in spite of post-modern theory, we all persist in believing that certain things are more worthy than others.

A couple of these artists show interest in such problems but seem unwilling to step outside accepted patterns of thinking. ■