

# True colours

In an art world dominated by money and fashion, flair for line and colour stands out, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Several friends have sent me an article from *The Guardian* about the American art critic Dave Hickey, who says he is quitting the art business because it has become "calcified, self-reverential and a hostage to rich collectors". This diagnosis is nothing but the unvarnished truth. If we're shielded from the worst of it in Australia, it's only because we have so few rich collectors. Nevertheless, the reverence the Art Gallery of NSW has lavished on John Kaldor suggests the syndrome is alive and well.

In an age when governments would like to divest themselves of the responsibility of funding the arts, public galleries are being thrown into the arms of private and corporate interests. This transforms curators and gallery directors into courtiers who can't risk alienating a wealthy patron by criticising the works he or she has acquired.

There are other pernicious effects. For instance, the state government recently handed the AGNSW a huge budget cut, leading to a nasty scheme to outsource the jobs of guides and security staff. Whatever savings this creates in the short term, it will inflict a body blow on the morale of an institution that relies so much on the goodwill of employees and volunteers.

Add to this the disgraceful decision to drop art courses from TAFE colleges, and you have a picture of a public sphere coloured by philistinism and economic rationalism. The latter is not only a contradiction in terms, it is a way of protecting wealth and privilege at the expense of those less capable of asserting and defending their rights. Both sides of politics are complicit in the process.

Returning to the article that records Hickey's criticisms of the art world, we find a number of (unidentified) curators complaining that works by artists such as Tracey Emin, Antony Gormley and Marc Quinn are the result of "too much fame, too much success and too little critical sifting" and are "greatly overrated". One curator says he finds Emin's work "empty", and laments that one always has to defend it "because of the huge sums of money involved".

This suggests many contemporary curators are neither stupid nor lacking in

**JIM DINE: MASTER  
DRAUGHTSMAN**  
**SAM FRANCIS: MASTER  
COLOURIST**  
**MASTER VISIONS**

Annandale Galleries, until  
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insight – they are cowards and hypocrites who fear for their jobs if they say what they really think.

The list of contemporary art's overrated superstars could be extended a long way, but nothing will change as long as curators, critics and artists remain complicit in this corruption of the spirit. With every budget cut and every abnegation of responsibility, our political masters ensure these humiliating compromises become institutionalised.

In a climate of cynicism, anyone who believes an artist may be judged by their understanding of line or colour risks being viewed as a crazy idealist. Bill Gregory of Annandale Galleries has taken that risk, with a display that puts *Jim Dine: Master Draughtsman* alongside *Sam Francis: Master Colourist*. Not stopping there, he is holding a

supplementary show called *Master Visions*, which features works on paper by Chuck Close, Richard Diebenkorn, Helen Frankenthaler, David Hockney, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, Donald Sultan and Andy Warhol.

Although most of the works on display are prints, one cannot easily dismiss these exhibitions. A lot of collectors feel etchings and lithographs are a secondary art form, but this is unfair and perhaps naive. There is more sense in acquiring a top-quality print by a big-name artist than a second-rate and overpriced painting.

There are many well-known artists who so hated to part with their paintings they turned to printmaking as a way of disseminating images. Edvard Munch provides one famous example, but even Picasso had this tendency. With such figures, prints must be acknowledged as an integral part of their output, and the same might be said about Jim Dine (b.1935) and Sam Francis (1923-94).

Dine is usually categorised as a pop artist, although he has always disavowed any association with the movement. "I hadn't got anything to say to Warhol," he once admitted. "He came to my studio early on and bought work, and I was aware of him as a very successful graphic designer."

In the early stages of his career, Dine was involved in those theatrical events called "happenings" that took art off the wall, put-

The real deal ... (from left) Jim Dine's *A heart on the Rue de Grenelle* (1981); Sam Francis's *Untitled from the Pasadena Box* (1964).

ting it on stage or in the streets. He has retained a willingness to experiment with different media such as sculpture, photography and even poetry, but he is essentially an old-fashioned draughtsman who has never lost the ability to find something marvellous in the most ordinary things.

Dine's favourite motifs include tools, flowers, bathrobes, statuettes of the Venus de Milo or Pinocchio, and a cartoon heart that has become his trademark. Such imagery, which flirts with banality and kitsch, is entirely compatible with pop art, but there is no implied critique or celebration of consumerism. For Dine, these motifs become obsessions that demand to be reworked continuously. He's one of those artists who is not so much in control of his work as controlled by it.

For some reason Dine has always had a rough time with the critics, but put his drawings alongside those of a latter-day idol such as Emin and he looks like Delacroix. There is a tremendous energy and variety in Dine's line work, shown at its best in his coloured etching *The Venus Dances* (2005). By way of contrast, take a glance at the book *One Thousand Drawings* by Emin, and be confronted by page after page of flaccid, lazy squiggles on the theme of Me, Me, Me.

In *A Heart on the Rue de Grenelle* (1981), Dine has hand-coloured an etching and aquatint, turning an editioned work into a

unique item. In this work and others, the artist's colours are lurid and aggressive, more likely to unsettle a viewer rather than seduce them.

His co-exhibitor, Sam Francis, takes the opposite route. A second-generation abstract expressionist who drew inspiration from artists such as Rothko, Pollock and Gorky, Francis is distanced from these painters not only by time, but by location and temperament. By choosing to live in Paris, then California, when New York was the undisputed capital of world art, he demonstrated his willingness to branch out from the mainstream.

Although Francis studied medicine and psychology, served in the US Air Force during World War II and dabbled in Zen Buddhism, he did not feel the need to emphasise the content and meaning of his works. Unlike Rothko and his peers, there is no attempt to imbue paintings with a sense of existential tragedy.

Francis's works might be better characterised as heroic decorations in the tradition of Monet, Matisse or Bonnard. He had an unusually clear and pure feeling for colour, seen at its most vibrant in a small gouache painting, *Untitled from the Pasadena Box* (1964), which weaves areas of yellow, green, blue and red into a complex and delicate relationship.

Another consistent feature of Francis's

work was his willingness to leave large areas of blankness, or "negative space". These blanks might appear in the middle of a picture, surrounded by dancing flickers of red and blue, as in the lithograph *The East is Red* (1970); or enclose bands of splashed and brushed colour. In *Untitled 093*, his swath of colour surges through the picture like a river cutting through a landscape. In *Untitled* (1974), Francis has used masking tape to divide the rectangle into vertical columns, breaking up the whiteness of the sheet with tiny spatters of paint.

All this may sound a bit humdrum in an art scene in which skill with a pencil or a feeling for colour are of less interest than the gigantic price tags commanded by the most fashionable practitioners. Perhaps it's a good thing for those collectors who buy works for pleasure, not for investment purposes or publicity. While the museums and the megarich are buying up high-priced junk, there are plenty of opportunities to acquire works by important artists who are being temporarily overlooked.

We don't know if the art world as described by Dave Hickey is a fixture or an aberration, so let's be optimistic. One day it may no longer be the case that the vital ingredient for success in the contemporary arena is a talent for self-promotion, rather than a talent for art.

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