



Freudian symbolism: figurative linocuts of swallows sit oddly with Pelchen's three main abstract landscapes.

Back to the land

THE PROBLEM of meaning has always dogged abstract painting. From the beginning of this century until the '60s, which might be called the glory days of Modernist abstraction, artists could call upon the spiritual and the mystical to justify even the most reductive images.

So Mondrian's squares of red, yellow and blue, or Barnett Newman's big fields of flat color cut by vertical stripes, managed to transcend their apparent banality and say important and original things about metaphysics.

Today, sadly, our beliefs about anything immaterial have increasingly been deconstructed out of existence.

It's pretty hard to be seriously interested in metaphysics, and the spiritual now suggests nothing more exulted than New Age psychobabble.

Undeterred, many abstract artists have simply decided to make a virtue out of meaninglessness.

Their bland parodies of what they call "the pretensions" of High Modernist abstraction succeed in taking the mick out of a great tradition, but the thing about parody (especially humorless parody) is that it is one-dimensional and becomes boring quickly.

When it is not parody, on the other hand, contemporary geometric abstraction can so easily look like decoration or cold technical exercise.

So it is surprising to find a young artist such as Anthony Pelchen unashamedly making big geometric abstracts that appear to make no refer-

REVIEW

visual arts

Anthony Pelchen

Where and when: Temple Studio, 36 St Edmonds Rd, Prahran; until June 1

Reviewer: Peter Timms

ence to postmodernist hand-wringing and go right back to the spiritual source (especially in Australia) of abstraction: the land.

The three big abstract landscapes in Pelchen's current exhibition at Temple Studios might be described as Barnett Newman's *Sublime* brought to ground.

For, while the sense of emptiness is there in the form of huge flat planes, we are prevented from getting lost in these voids by the tactile, earthy nature of their materials.

For one thing, Pelchen's big fields are not made of paint but of untouched brown linen canvas. There is little chance of us going off into transports of bliss before them when they are so insistently palpable.

And, as if to reinforce this hard-headed materiality, they are crossed here and there by roughly sewn joins.

To complement these ruggedly textured fields, Pelchen has inserted areas in which strips of dung-colored canvas have been woven like basketwork.

The temptation to read these areas as

worked, or ploughed, fields in contrast to the fallow paddocks that surround them is not quite as simple-minded as it sounds, because the suggestion in these works is of a contrast between Nature and culture, emptiness and fullness, the ethereal and the material.

Still, Pelchen's emphasis on craft is disconcerting. It subverts the spiritual and mystical "pretensions" of High Modernist abstraction, but without a hint of parody or disrespect. That, in itself, is quite an achievement.

By suggesting the sublime while at the same time emphasising materials and process, Pelchen creates a perfectly believable metaphor for landscape.

These paintings are subtle and austere, yet rich in association.

ACCOMPANYING them is a series of linocuts of swallows in flight, printed over the pages of old ledger books. Apparently they are intended to contrast the artist's feelings of freedom and exultation in nature when he visits the family home in western Victoria with his parents' daily grind in running a small business there.

Nature's beauty, they seem to say, cannot be enjoyed with quite the same innocence when the bills are due.

It is a promising theme, but the rather Freudian symbolism of these little works is too simplistic to do it justice.

Ironically, Pelchen's abstract works are far richer in meaning than his figurative ones.

Peter Timms is Editor of *Art Monthly Australia*.