

ART

IN THE COMPANY OF WOMEN

Perth Institute of Contemporary Art

By TED SNELL

THIS year's Festival of Perth provides the opportunity to examine two distinct forms of visual arts patronage. At the Art Gallery of Western Australia corporate collectors, led by Bankwest, have employed Daniel Thomas to present works from their collections to enable West Australians to "rediscover themselves and their special places".

It is an odd collection of works which indicates the desire of the buyers to adopt the role of benign custodian of our visual culture by annexing aspects of our history as a sales pitch for their services. However, this comes at a price and the door charge seems to indicate a rather muddled notion of corporate largesse.

At the other extreme we have *In the Company of Women* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, a private collection of works by Australian women artists put together with passion and commitment by the Cruthers family.

While the show at the Art Gallery is pretentious, misleading and manipulative, the Cruthers collection is discursive, informative and, because of its committed focus, intellectually engaging and critically challenging.

Begun in the early 70s, the collection has a core of self-portraits by women artists that Sheila Cruthers began purchasing almost immediately. As Catriona Moore points out in the accompanying catalogue, "The Cruthers family has, wittingly or unwittingly, compiled a collective cultural portrait of what art historian Pamela Niehoff calls 'the thinking women'."

The portraits depict professional women presented with what Moore calls the "psychological glamour" of 19th-century liberalism that enables them to depict themselves and their friends as self-sufficient, accomplished and mature women, asserting their identity as creative artists.

From the analytical gaze of Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington Smith to the extraordinary nude self-portrait by Freda Robertshaw and on to the alert portrait of Ann Newmarch, her camera at the ready, the collection provides a remarkable insight into the ambitions and achievements of a group of artists previously written out of history.

One of the most striking images in the collection is the Robertshaw self-portrait, a rare unclothed image in the exhibition. The artist stands confident in her nakedness, her eyes directed at us in a confrontational challenge. As Melissa Harpley asserts in another of the catalogue essays, "It is a most extraordinary image of the artist/woman as both subject and object of a work, and emblematic of the complexity, of the impossibility of categorisation to be found in the work of the artists in this exhibition."

The Cruthers' commitment to a number of women artists has not only provided financial support but it has also created a safe repository for their work and placed it within the context of contemporary practice in this country.

The seven works by Susan Norrie span the past decade and are sited next to those of her contemporaries, Narelle Jubalin, Margaret Morgan and Elizabeth Kruger. There are also four works each by Miriam Stannage and Mary Moore, two artists based in Western Australia whose work provides a wider focus than we sometimes find in institutional collections.

It is this depth of field that makes the viewing so fascinating and which provides the audience for *In the Company of Women* with such a rich and rewarding experience.

Another reason for the diversity and range of the collection is the fact that it is a family venture with three individuals all adding their identifiable stamp. This ensures that the works cover a wide spectrum of interests, such as those of the poster artists of the 70s astutely collected by John Cruthers.

In this exhibition the works of Anne Newmarch, Toni Robertson and Pamela Harris with their social, political and personal commentary on contemporary women's lives provide a brilliant counterpoint to the earlier portraits.

A striking example is Judith Lodwick and Eliza Campbell's tea towel revision of McCubbin's *The Pioneers* updated to the 90s. In their version the main characters are lost within a welter of devastation, just discernible amid the felling of trees, the over-grazing flocks of sheep and the pit mining.

Eveline Syme's abstracted *Kitchen Sink* from the 30s, the Robertshaw self-portrait, Rosalie Gascoigne's *Parrot Lady*, the Joy Hester drawings and the early portrait of Elise Blumann are works that must be written back into our history. Fortunately, this exhibition is one of the series of co-ordinated events across Australia that will ensure this happens.

The Australian
24/2/95