



# Living art

By SUZANNE BROWN

**W**ALKING into 200 Gertrude Street, a rabbit warren of artists' studios in Fitzroy, is like journeying back to childhood.

Everywhere you look there are oddly shaped objects, brightly colored artist materials and, well, mess. As you peer around the corners of studios you can see artists bent over their work.

Narinda Cook carves funky sculptures from colored blocks of plasticine. A few rooms down, Anthony Hunt is putting the finishing touches on his large, Venice-inspired silver sculpture made from something akin to chipboard.

Jennie Lang, overalls covered in white powder, takes a break from constructing a near-life-size footbridge.

Further down the hall, Louisa Bufardecì is meticulously weaving tiny colored pieces of paper together. Behind her is another of her artworks from a previous exhibition — three

rows of music stands, which hold a rectangular piece of mirror, clock secondhands ticking against their metal frames.

These contemporary young artists are considered among the luckiest in Australia. Selected to rent these spacious inner-city studios for only \$170 a month, they are preparing to repay that faith with a "make it yourself" exhibition at the studios. As part of the exhibition the artists stage an open day, a rare opportunity for the public to see contemporary art in progress.

For those who struggle to interpret such works, there is the additional benefit of being able to discuss each piece with the artist (not that it will necessarily become clearer but it can be a lot of fun).

Incorporating Gertrude Street Artists' Spaces, 200 Gertrude Street was established nearly 15 years ago to provide assistance to emerging contemporary artists making the transition from art school to professional life. It offers its 16 resident artists advice on the business side of making art (such as funding appli-

cations), a dedicated exhibition space for works in progress and an annual group show. Bufardecì, who supplements her income by relief teaching, says the opportunity to rent a Gertrude Street studio has encouraged her to produce a lot more work.

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MAX DELANY

part-time artist and full-time teacher, instead making the art full-time," she says.

Hunt, who works as an art technician at RMIT four days a week, agrees. He says the large studios enable more ambitious works to be created.

Director of 200 Gertrude Street Max Delany says a range of important Australian artists have had studios and exhibitions at Gertrude Street over its history, including Louise Forthun, the late Howard Arkley and Robert Hunter.

Current studio resident Ricky Swallow, winner of this year's \$100,000 Contemporas prize, is a more recent success story.

The artists find the interaction with each other and the centre's staff a welcome relief from what is usually an isolated occupation. Because of the complex and eclectic nature of their work, contemporary artists can often feel they are working in a vacuum. Delany says the centre gives value and meaning to their work.

One of the biggest problems for contemporary artists, says Delany, is the public's lack of familiarity with contemporary art.

While Melbourne audiences can see the contemporary art at the Melbourne International Biennial, and the National Gallery of Victoria is increasing its quota of contemporary art, Melbourne does not have a

dedicated museum for contemporary art. Delany, however, continues to have faith in contemporary art audiences.

"I think audiences are very literate and very capable of grasping ideas. It is certainly the case that art is a specialist discourse and discipline. Nevertheless, it seems to me that people today are very capable of reading signs and understanding popular culture and the visual arts in quite various and complex forms."

Besides, says Delany, immediate understanding is not a prerequisite for enjoying art.

"If we seek that which we already know or already understand, we don't learn. For me what is exciting and challenging about working with younger artists is their threshold of experimentation where new forms are developing. A curator has to clumsily grapple with these forms and the excitement and challenge is in trying to make sense of it."

● 200 Gertrude Street's open studio day on Saturday from 1pm to 5.30pm. The exhibition "make it yourself" runs until 30 October. ■