

JOURNEY

DRAMA AND RESOLUTION

Ernest Hemingway once said that when he had finished writing a short story he would read through it carefully to find the key paragraph on which the whole plot revolved. He would then remove that paragraph before submitting the story for publication. This process, he claimed, gave his work greater strength.

Michael Cartwright told me this anecdote in relation to his own work and, whether it's true or not, it does, I think, point to at least one way of appreciating this exhibition. In both Cartwright's sculpture and Tony Scott's paintings, we sense that something is being alluded to, hinted at or circled around without being directly stated. Despite its apparent formal simplicity, the work of both artists is suggestive, elusive and abstracted. It has what used to be called *a sense of mystery* (before mystification somehow came to have a bad name).

In this respect it seems to run counter to the dry, bloodless intellectualism of much contemporary art. What we have here is, above all, an art of the senses, an art which resists facile interpretation. These works evoke a response, but one that is more likely to be grasped intuitively. The viewer must be especially alert and, at least to some extent, in sympathy with its aims.

Journey came about at the suggestion of Meridian's Director, Robert Sinclair who, seeing certain parallels in the sculptures of Michael Cartwright and the paintings of Tony Scott, proposed a joint exhibition. 'I wanted to bring these two artists together,' he says, 'to see what developed'. It is probably fair to say that at first both artists were sceptical and inclined to work independently, but the realities of the collaborative process and the need for consultation and understanding of each other's approach inevitably led to compromises, accommodations and the creative development of mutual enthusiasms. For example, when Tony Scott first saw the texture of Michael Cartwright's granite, his response was to go back to the studio to

rework the surfaces of the paintings he had already completed, to make them richer and harder. So a fertile dialogue was created between two distinct yet highly complementary voices.

The first thing that strikes us on entering the main gallery is the commanding way the exhibition has been planned for what is, at the best of times, a difficult space. These works were made not only in response to one another but also to the architecture of the gallery itself.

We are able to approach the exhibition only from one direction — from the front, as it were — and we immediately gain the impression of a stage setting. (Only the asymmetrical placement of the stairway leading into the gallery offsets the formal equilibrium of the room). So our initial view is of an imposing, classically organised structure rather like a shrine.

Then, as we move forward to examine the works more closely, we discover that their placement forces us to take a certain narrowly-defined path. Two long aisles have been created which oblige us to walk down the length of the gallery and back again twice. As we do so, we encounter a shift of scale from the close focus of Tony Scott's paintings, with their subtle surface markings, to the monumentality of Michael Cartwright's sculpture, which demands a broad view. The paintings, lyrical and soft, create an intimate, personal space, while the sculpture group has a grand rhetorical sweep which is truly public in nature.

Curiously, however (and this is perhaps the subtlest and most interesting way in which the works interact), the close tonal changes and textural ambiguities of the paintings make us alive to the minutiae of the sculpture's granite, water and steel surfaces, while the very size of Michael Cartwright's assemblage invites a reading of the paintings as a whole narrative structure. And, in both paintings and sculpture, the staccato organisation of interval, the way spaces are divided up and orchestrated, creates a dynamic and unifying architecture of its own.

There are many analogies one might draw in order

to describe these works. Each is useful to some extent but each fails at some crucial point. The stage setting, already cited, is one, for the installation as a whole does have the scale and artificiality of theatre. But that does not account for the intimacy of the works themselves, the tiny calligraphic marks which give them meaning, the subtlety of their surfaces. Equally, one could construe the exhibition in terms of musical structure — counterpoint, rhythm, interval and variation — but then it might just as well be characterised by its stillness and silence.

Perhaps the most pertinent analogy would be that of the Japanese *dry landscape* garden, which, within a formal, symmetrical architectural plan, celebrates light, texture and pattern, harmony, resolution and wholeness. The classic Zen garden is an abstracted model of an ideal natural world which relies for its power on the combination of a few carefully selected elements in a state of simultaneous tension and harmony.

Michael Cartwright's sculpture assemblage plays with a theme which recurs in his sculpture and which he is still working to resolve: his fascination for spaces which are in some way transitional, connecting one kind of environment with another. A concrete illustration of this is his repeated images of the shoreline, especially the reef: the point at which the land becomes the sea, the familiar turns into the unknown, the solid becomes the void. The boat form suspended in space above a stone monolith in the foyer is a concise and poetic elucidation of this idea. Less specifically, the theme of transition is illustrated by the motif of the gateway or door which, in the case of this work, is depicted as somewhat Gothic in character (memories of a middle-class Catholic upbringing). The Freudian and Jungian symbolism (and, indeed, the symbolism of the very materials Cartwright uses) is readily apparent, but it would, I think, be a mistake to see this work purely in terms of personal psychology, for is not the notion of transition and change a central idea of our times? Indeed, the artist himself has said that the work fails when it becomes too confessional, too personal. A certain distance has to be consciously observed.

In social and political terms we might think of Michael Cartwright's sculpture as being highly Mannerist.

Tony Scott's paintings are not symbolic so much as they are direct responses to natural colours and textures. Having grown up in the country, just outside Melbourne, Scott is highly sensitised to his natural surroundings, which he perceives with unusual intensity and clarity. And he is a natural abstractor, seeing colours and textures and exciting juxtapositions where other people just see things. There is a great deal of poetic skill in being able to wrest the visible world away from its accretions of mundane association and to see it 'innocently'. The visible, when that which is ordinary and plain, is made elegiac and vision itself is refreshed and made whole again.

The works here were painted during a six-month stay in Sydney last year and were inspired by walks around the rocks at Clovelly and Bondi. Their sombreness is not something we would normally associate with Sydney's harsh light, and it is interesting to note that earlier works he painted in Melbourne (shown at Sydney's Crawford Gallery recently) were much brighter and harder. Perhaps the works spring as much from memory as from direct observation: perhaps the natural world is not the only inspiration. Superimposed over the three ostensible groupings here of Earth, Water and Sky, we might be able to detect something of concrete, oil and smoke. If so, it is bound to be a benign view because these paintings and, indeed, the exhibition as a whole, strive not towards deconstruction or critical analysis but toward the resolution of conflict and the balancing of dualities, both at a personal and a universal level.

However abstractly or enigmatically that drama may be played out, and however unfashionable at present, it is a worthy one for art to concern itself with. Perhaps, in the end, it is art's most difficult and potentially its most rewarding concern.

PETER TIMMS
(January 1994)

ARTS

Artist's journey along a temporary road to ruin

A sculptor's work is now safe in a gallery after a mishap left part of it in pieces, writes **Raymond Gill**.

Picture: GEOFF AMPT

A funny thing happened on the way to the art gallery. The sculptor Michael Cartwright was taking part of his massive granite work, 'Pool', to the Meridian Gallery in Fitzroy when it fell off the back of the truck and broke in half. Someday Cartwright might find this a hilarious anecdote, but in the meantime he has managed to put a philosophical slant on the experience.

His joint show with the painter Tony Scott is called 'Journey', and Cartwright says that truck trip was another step in his work's journey.

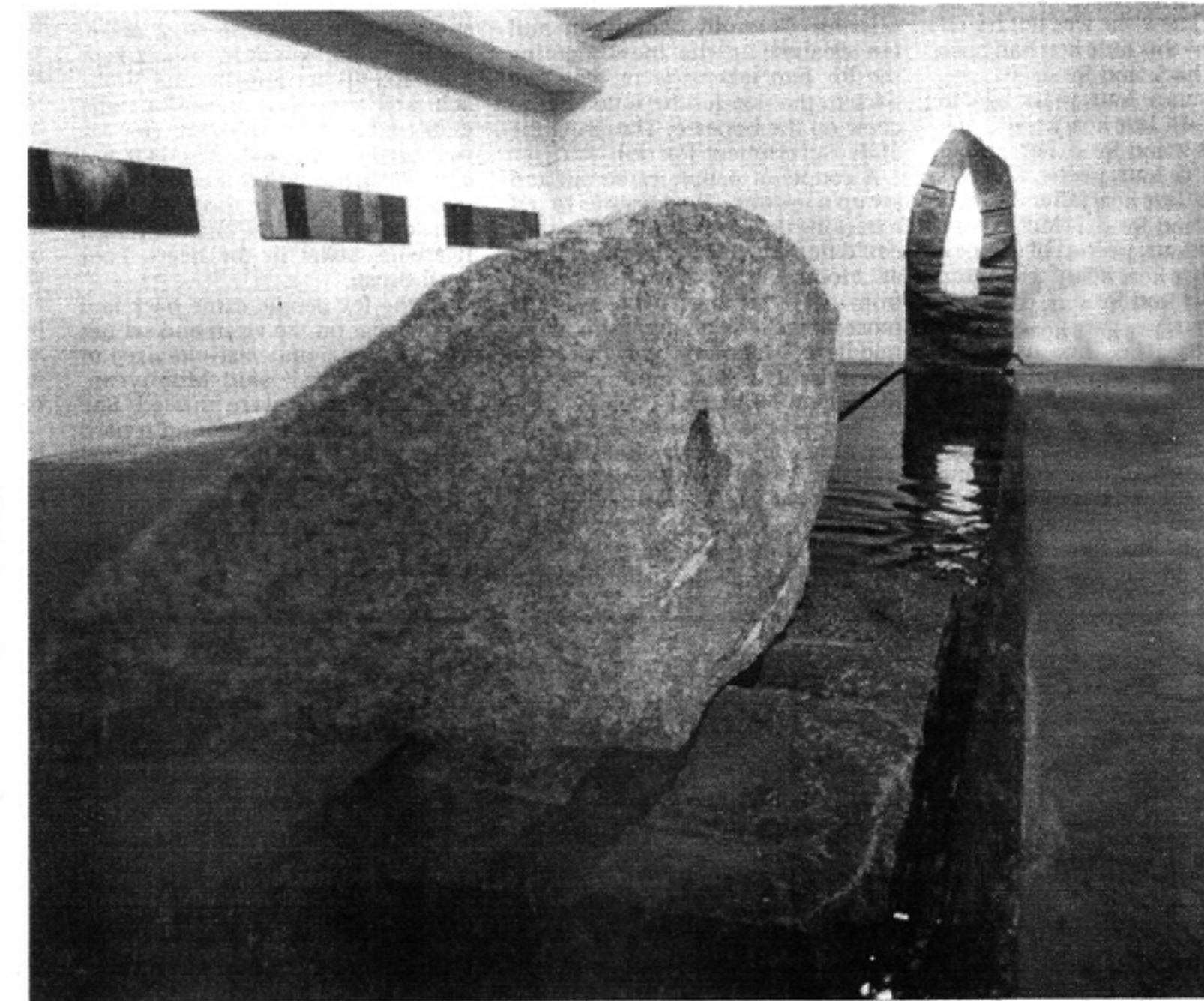
"When I saw what happened I just walked around for a while. Robert Sinclair (the director of Meridian) said, 'Michael, this is a challenge to your whole philosophy that each hammer swing is equal to another. Think of it as one big hit'.

"The piece of 'Pool' that broke is what I call the 'Tower'. I was thinking about what was happening in Sarajevo when churches are built, destroyed, then rebuilt. Do you copy the old or do you do something new? I left it for a while and then rebuilt the top. I made it larger, stronger and of metal."

'Pool' now sits safely in the centre of the gallery. The reconstructed tower is at the end of a shallow, six-metre long trough filled with water. Towards the other end sits a large fish-shaped piece of granite set on a piece of stone that cuts the pond in two. The fish looks as if it wants to travel the length of the pond and pass through the narrow hole, or gate, of the tower.

For the artist it is the other way round. "For me it's a journey. But it's the transition through the gate along the pond. It's like a river," he says.

Cartwright, 34, graduated from RMIT with a Diploma of Creative Arts in 1980, but has spent much of his time abroad. He studied and taught in New York and New Guinea and learnt marble carving in



Michael Cartwright with his granite work, 'Pool', at the Meridian Gallery in Fitzroy.

Carrara, Italy. He says he also learnt not to get caught up in craft at the expense of art. "If you get too involved in the craft then you lose the essence of what you are doing."

Cartwright says that when he returned from Italy in 1985 he "stagnated" until he began mixing with musicians while living in Castlemaine. "I had been so super-serious about art I forgot you could have fun. When I lightened up I felt confident to start doing bigger work. (And) when you work large, more people relate to it."

Another of his large sculptures is 'Air', hanging in Meridian's foyer. A huge hewn piece of a peppercorn tree is suspended over a granite altar. Depending on how you look

at it, it resembles a bull being lowered on to the altar, or lifted from it. Cartwright says: "For me it's rising. It's got a heavy lightness, a male/female, a yin/yang thing."

The collaboration with Tony Scott was orchestrated by Meridian's director when both artists had expressed interest in the other's work.

"I loved the surface work, the nicks and gouges on Michael's work," says Scott. "And he loved the surface work of mine. We talked about our travelling and how an artist's work is a journey."

Scott moved to Sydney but kept in touch with his collaborator by phone. "I would talk about my walks round Bronte in Sydney and

he would talk about walking around Daylesford."

Scott's green/blue oils are arranged as panels, suggesting a seascape that links with Cartwright's rocks and pool. "I got excited about his rough surfaces and I decided I had to make mine tougher and echo his."

Scott says despite the sheer size of Cartwright's work, his paintings are not overwhelmed. "When people come in, the monumentality of his work attracts their focus, but I hope when they look around they will see how they work together in a spiritual way."

'Journey' is at Meridian Gallery, 10 Spring Street, Fitzroy, until 4 March.

An artful collaboration

By **SUSAN McCULLOCH**

ACCORDING to gallery director Robert Sinclair, sculptor Michael Cartwright and painter Tony Scott initially hated the idea of collaborating on an exhibition.

But after initial scepticism the two found they did respond to each other's work and a fruitful combination ensued.

Not that the resulting work in *Journey*, now on at Meridian Gallery, Fitzroy, was collaborative in the sense of the two artists creating the works alongside each other.

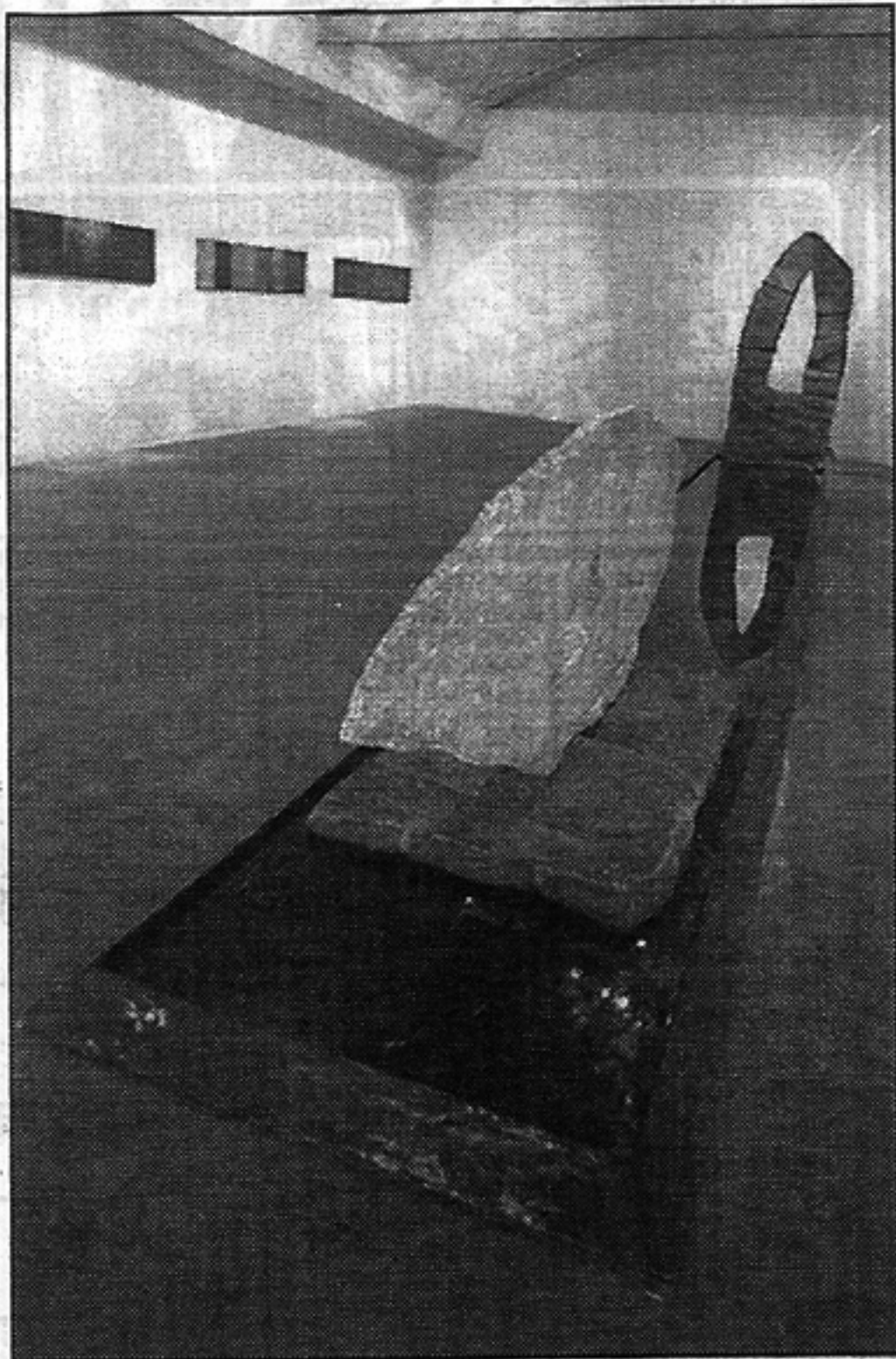
Rather they found themselves responding to each other's medium, for example, Scott's reaction to the texture of the granite Cartwright used was to rework some of the surfaces of his painting.

Explanatory notes to the show have been provided in the form of an essay by critic and curator Peter Timms.

Such background is a welcome addition to a show like this. It provides a context for the work and contradicts the stance taken by many galleries and artists who maintain that art should always speak for itself.

Cartwright's huge *Pool* cannot fail to dominate. It is a quite remarkable piece of sculpture.

A long, shallow, water-filled copper trough is placed directly on the floor. At one



Pool art: Sculptor Michael Cartwright's *Pool*.

end of a huge lump of granite is balanced, echoed by a "gateway" of bronze rising from the other.

Scott's abstract paintings are dwarfed by this but, with their subtle gradations of sombre colors, display a similar concern for spatial and textural qualities.

Sculpture is also the theme of a special annual event at the Ashcombe Maze — really a living sculpture in

itself — on the Mornington Peninsula.

Owners John and Sally Daly wanted to demonstrate how contemporary sculpture fits into an outdoor environment and three years ago started an invitational sculpture exhibition.

While their garden with its intricacy and variety of elements (hedges, streams, rose maze) may be on a far grander scale than your average back yard, this

show does demonstrate how widely different types of sculpture can fit different settings.

Peter Corlett's *Etta*, one of the most powerful of his life-size "people", has a direct gaze over a fountain-centred pond; Paul Juraszek's shining copper *Winged Bull* is in a small park-like "paddock" of its own; John Davis' brown and black installation of twigs, calico and steel looks like a strange growth on the trunk of a huge eucalypt; and Brian Paulusz bluestone abstract shapes have a strong sense of balance and simple effect.

One exhibition which could benefit from explanatory notes such as those at the Meridian show is the Gordon Bennett/Eugene Carchesio Show at Sutton Galleries, Fitzroy.

Without notes it is unclear as to whether it is random or deliberate that Bennett's prints should echo similar objects to Carchesio's cardboard constructions (or vice versa).

Bennett's prints done mainly in 1992-93 called *Across the Void* are reminiscent of a sketch book with the artist's notations to himself.

Several relate to the deaths in custody which, like other black issues, have been the basis of Bennett's art for many years.

Most of his works on display are concerned with more prosaic objects such as suitcases, furniture and other personal everyday objects.