

"The Installation", 1978 July

Piping in the ghosts of our nasty past

FOR some artists a sense of place, the place where they live and paint, is so important that their entire creative output is conditioned by it. Richard Crichton is one of those artists. (Retrospective, 1958-1978, Melbourne University Gallery, until August 4.)

For the past 20 years his best work has been inextricably linked to a place. He draws on the need of that environment rather than rifling it for realistic images.

In 1967, Crichton went as a Fulbright Fellow to New York, and he focused on an aspect of American life which was to haunt him for a long time: the parade. Not your dink-di Anzac type either, but raucous and loud parades where the musical instruments become the figures, where tubas walk down the street on a hot pink ground, where the costumes take over.

Crichton's painting on his return to Australia in 1971 showed obvious signs of dislocation which he discusses openly: "I just couldn't quite connect with cowland." Al-

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though he tried. For an entire year he painted cows with looks as vacant as Crichton says he felt: cows as the spirit of the Australian countryside. That was seven years ago, but in his most recent work in this retrospective, Crichton clearly shows that he has re-established his communication with a place. This time it is with a vanished people as well: the Tasmanian Aborigines who were exterminated more than 100 years ago.

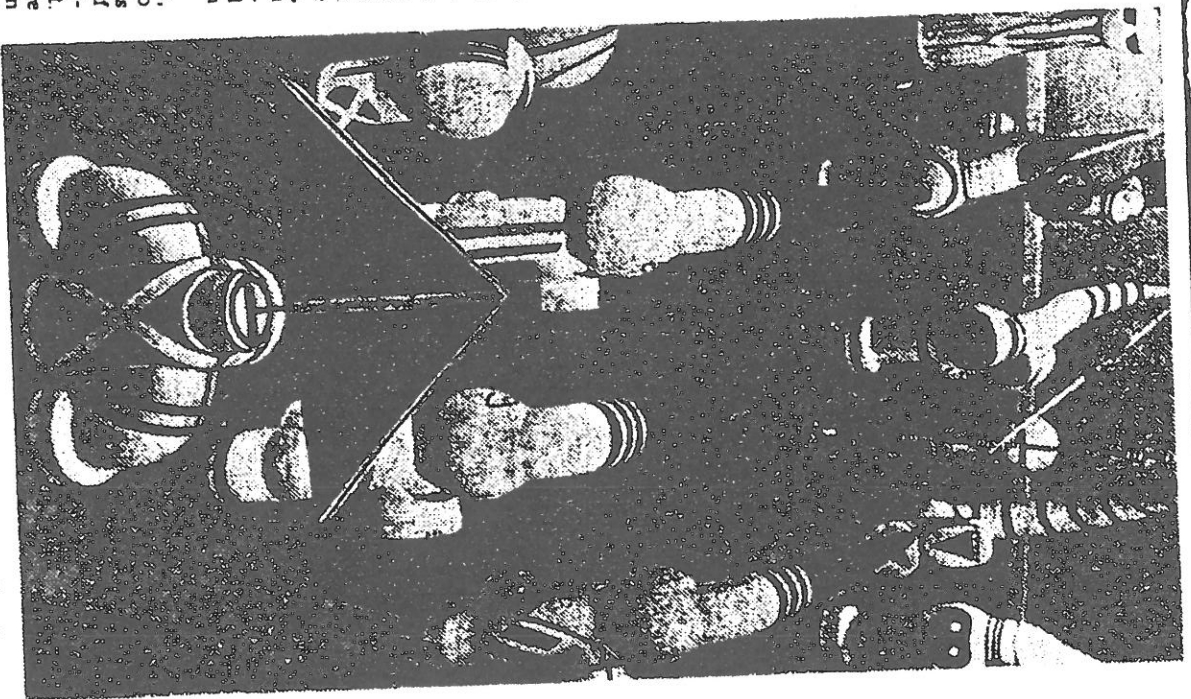
It began when he made a memorial head of Truganini, the last full-blood Tasmanian Aboriginal who died in 1876. As he travelled farther around Tasmania, and as he experienced the Northern Territory, Arnhem Land, the interior and the Kimberleys in Western Australia, an idea began to take shape: a farewell ballet, to be made of painted standard clay plumbing pipes, as a tribute to the vanished Aborigines of Tasmania.

Locating 14 pieces on the floor, he staged a confrontation between the white soldiers, their uniforms distin-

guished by an abbreviated shorthand of signs and colors, and the Aborigines, marked with generalised patterns from Aborigines all over Australia. Like the similarly conceived parade installation of 1976, they are abstracted figures which reflect a surrealist legacy of form. But in the Farewell Ballet, the imagery transcends Crichton's past work. It now intrudes into one's own personal space, borders on theatre in its dramatic configuration of raised spears, and the bodies marked for war.

Directly behind the Farewell Ballet hangs a series of drawings of Truganini, slowly disappearing forever into the paper, until the last image is blank. A chilling reminder of the past. Totemic imagery has always been an integral part of Crichton's work. The five large drawings of kangaroos, 1978, complete his ties with land: they are observed without sentimentality, admitted instead as an animal with special spiritual qualities.

As a retrospective show, the exhibition works on two levels: the late work is impressive for its depth of feeling, and its oblique political judgment on the past. Equally, the show is evidence of an artistic career ridden with self-doubt, but balanced by perseverance.



FAREWELL BALLETT . . . bordering on theatre