

An overview of Leger's entertaining art

'THE AGE' DEC, 16th 1992

ART

Fernand Leger, 'La Ville' (Stuart Gerstman Gallery, Southgate, until 23 December); **Ian Armstrong** (Eastgate Galleries, until 19 December); **Rachel Royav** (MCA Gallery, until 19 December); **Group Show** (Drummond Street Gallery, cnr Queensberry and Drummond Streets, Carlton, until 19 December).

CHRISTOPHER HEATHCOTE

IN HIS first art review to appear in print, Clement Greenberg, the foremost American critic of the mid-20th Century, queried the value of contemporary abstraction. He was responding to concurrent exhibitions of the artists Joan Miro, Wassily Kandinsky and Fernand Leger, who were yet to be accepted as irreproachable masters of the Modern movement in 1941.

Leger, in particular, came in for a good deal of critical stick. "For a long time," Greenberg wrote, "he seems to have done nothing but repeat himself in various disguises." The reviewer was worried that Leger's works were "facile and empty, a matter almost of formula", and he nominated the ingredients by which viewers could identify a characteristic recent work by the painter: a mannered flatness and solidity, a poster prettiness, a mechanisation of organic motifs, and so on. The art seemed just too frothy and predictable. "When the abstract artist grows tired, he becomes an interior decorator..." the critic concluded.

Fifty years later, I cannot help feeling such thoughts could be applied to the lithographs on exhibition at Stuart Gerstman Gallery. As we can see, the artist's 'La Ville' series is not plugged into stylistic transgression or existential angst. But to raise this argument would be to do a profound disservice, for Leger's intention was precisely to be cheery and entertaining.

Executed in 1954-5 during the last months of the artist's life, 'La Ville' gives an encapsulated overview of Leger's art. The works constitute light-hearted graphic pastiches after his stylistically abrasive Cubist phase, his sober statements in 1920s Purism, and the popular semi-abstractions of the 1930s and '40s. All are assembled from black contour drawings of schematised, slightly geometric scenes, which have been laid over circles, curves and oblongs of bright color.

When they are good, Leger's pictures

have an endearing Jacques Tati-like mirth. We are meant to look at them, enjoy, and leave their company with a smile. This is the whole point of 'La Pompe a Essence', with its bouncing jalopies, 'Les Amoureux dans la Rue', with its cheeky floating eye sneaking a glimpse at the lovers, and the unashamedly decorative 'L'Homme dans la Ville'. They are reassuring, tame and somewhat reactionary images if placed against the avant-garde idioms of the day; but, in the long run, such arguments are petty. Leger's work seems to insist that some painters should be allowed to supply viewers with no more than simple, gratuitous pleasure.

IAN ARMSTRONG'S latest paintings also aim to appeal to the eye. There may be little semantic depth to works like 'Evening', a loosely rendered landscape in cool hues, but it has an ease that should not be dismissed. The artist uses his brush like a pencil, swerving across a paddock here, blocking in a tree trunk there, always endeavoring to keep his marks fluid and fresh, while carefully delineating his subject.

If Armstrong's pictures appear spontaneous, the absence of unsightly revisions or cumbersome overpainting (both of which mar too many contemporary exhibitions) testifies to sound planning. This is most apparent in 'Road Crew', a well proportioned figure group that has evidently been based on the golden section. With their attrac-

tive colors and economical brushwork, such pleasant pictures would enliven most domestic walls.

THERE is an arresting sexual edge about Rachel Royav's symbolic paintings. Most depict bloated seed pods, spectral figures, luminous mists and gothic fires observed amid barren mountains and temple interiors. The constant allusions within such strange scenes are to mystical ceremonies and fertility rites. To this end, the artist emphasises the rendering of folds, crannies and creases that break across draperies, smoke, vegetation and hills — details that are unmistakable metaphors for genitalia.

And yet the strongest piece, 'Purple Robe', is less easy to interpret. An ambiguous (almost surreal) landscape that seems to throb and swell with life, it neatly avoids the problem of acting as the illustration for a literary idea. Such primarily visual motifs cannot be simply read off. As with several of her other works, Royav's technique needs attention, but the artist is onto something with this quirky image.

THE six emerging artists in Drummond Street Gallery's opening show share a commitment to painterliness. For the viewer, the emphasis is placed on savoring the aesthetic resonances of flicked and dribbled paint, of alternating smooth and encrusted surfaces, of gloss and matt finishes.

Yurek Pajak and Leigh Stewart handle their colors with agreeable restraint, although the making of this show for me is Andrew Trahair's excursions into still life. There is a rare creative maturity to 'Skull', 'Pig's Head' and 'Hamburger', small paintings executed mainly in grey and umber. The artist's manipulation of tone, texture and finish has a jarring fluency: he seems to possess the gift of transmuting oily pigment into an activated plasma. Trahair is a painter to his fingertips.