

Great Nolans and some terrible Nolans

IN the past week, we've seen Sir Sidney Nolan cutting his 70th birthday cake on television, being snapped, filmed and videoed, releasing the most apt anecdotes, standing properly at ease in front of his Kellys, his desert camels, his Luna Park and his Wimmera wheat country.

In his 200-picture Retrospective, which does not include works on paper, we are given a warts-and-all view of the eminent painter.

The selection includes great Nolans and terrible Nolans, the peaks and troughs alike.

A curator has reserved one corner of the show for an actual mock-up of Nolan's early studio, complete with old clothes and rumpled bed and primitive toaster.

There's even a time-chart that solemnly puts Nolan's life and painting in context with this century's great moments.

Such celebrity, the kind seldom given to artists, means there is no excuse for anyone to be unaware of who, and what, Nolan is.

He is a genuine, often inspired visionary; a self-made, astute, prolific and above all successful artist who still likes to undermine the artistic conventions (did he really put spit on a Streeton?), a man who can paint wonderful pictures, every so often.

He has a go at anything, never agonises over failures; he performs on the world's stage, even while remaining perhaps the most overtly Australian of our painters.

Like Picasso's work, Nolan's photographs well.

His seemingly simple and startling images attack you disconcertingly, like a sharp contradiction from a friend whom you had expected to agree with you.

Nolan cares for the instant eye-ful, the impact, the immediate re-creation of a time, a place, an incident, a feeling. Looking especially at the Kelly pictures, which I've seen at various times since the late 1940s, I still think they have a compelling intensity.

Other series, the Goldfields

Art

Ronald Millar

are made from repetitions of small panels. And he is one of the few painters who works better on a hard panel than on a canvas, perhaps because of the way his image skids into life at speed.

At their best Nolan's pictures are like hallucinations; haunting, with an eerie ability to evoke the spirit of the past and make it live.

His techniques are often laconic, but they serve well enough the leaps of a Celtic imagination.

This is a vast and arresting show, too respectfully over-curated, as if the artist were already dead; but Nolan is far from finished with his life or his painting, and could have an even vaster Retrospective in 10 years.

Other shows, in brief:

- Hertha Kluge-Pott (Powell St). Sensitive, convoluted dry-points about journeys and discoveries in a dark vortex of landscape. Steps and tracks undulate among the Bridgewater dunes. High-class work with plenty to say.

- Directors' Choice (RMIT Storey Hall). Janet Dawson returns to classic drawing, Tim Ralph looks like a junior Senbergs, but promising; Throsby and Taylor show powerful work, Whisson some fine drawings, Ted May a good rough landscape.

- Realities Group show has surprises from Liz Bodey's gloomy cocoons and enclosures, odd drapes and crumpled forms.
- Rachel Rovay's slug-like organic shapes sprout nipples in strange places, but have diverting presence. Simon McIntyre does dashing, muscular geometry.

- Realities smaller space shows Sarah de Teliga's affectionate, illustrative pastels about European interiors: plush, gilded, lacquered. Each room is given an identity and a nostalgic past.

- Richard Havyatt at United Artists makes elegant lyrical pic-



ABOVE:
Nolan's
Bathers,
1943 ...

