

Altered images carry powerful message

HERE, as overseas, there has been a surge of interest in art photography. This is reflected in the way, at this quiet time of the year, most exhibition activity around town is centred on photographic images.

It is useful to think of photographic images rather than straight "photographs." This is because many works on show have been manipulated in processing or worked over in some way to take them away from the realm of the direct documentary photograph.

The process gives them more of the resonance and metaphorical quality expected from painting.

The process is evident in two intriguing exhibitions at the Fisher Gallery in Pakuranga.

In the main gallery is *Canterbury Belles*, an exhibition organised by the Robert McDougal Art Gallery in Christchurch. It is toured by the Art Gallery Director's Council with the assistance of the QE II Arts Council.

The three artists represented all have something to say about how women are perceived by the world.

Margaret Dawson makes large staged colour photographs that show herself in various roles, something in the manner Cindy Sherman has used to enormous acclaim in America and Europe.

This exhibition shows Dawson now has the confidence to work on a large scale in thematic groups of works. All her photographs have titles which refer to powers.

The titles add a language play to the work and evoke all sorts of oblique ironies.

In this way a board used as a knife-thrower's target and the outline of the woman assistant, formed by the joints of the throwing knives — twenty of which still remain in the board. The work is titled *Pin Cushion Lower: Scabiousa*.



Perspective on Art

by T. J. McNamara

Death Cap: Amanita Pallioides shows man as slayer with light on him and on the bosom of his admiring female companion in an appropriated photograph of a fishing trophy winner with two clean fish.

The ideas behind those images are powerfully loaded but the photographs themselves are not fully realised.

There is an element of casualness that lessens the impact they might have.

In *Torch Lily* neither the fire from the mouth nor the fire screen at the bottom of the picture are properly related. In *Pin Cushion* — the weatherboards showing at the slides make no particular point. Only in *Burning Bush* is everything related.

More tightly organised and concentrated is the work of Mary Kay who also plays language games.

She appropriates quaint old cookbook illustrations of desserts and cakes that housewives once spent hours making and gives each dish one of the abusive labels that men put on women. This makes a neat, sharp telling point that relies on the interplay of the visual with the verbal image.

But the point once made, the images do not have depth enough to carry the interest deeper.

More complex and more consistently interesting are the pictures where the artist adds watercolour images done with great skill to her appropriated images.

The tensions set up between the work and the hand

and the mechanical reproduction add to the depth of the ironies of *XY* which features cows and condoms, beef and muscles or \$\$ with its interplay between sentiment and assertion.

The imagery in *Quiddities*, a set of ten cibachrome transparencies in light boxes by Julia Morison, last year's Moet and Chandon Award winner, is equally tightly controlled though it is more narrowly focused on the self.

The artist shows her head marked off in quadrants, surrounded by symbols, natural, medical and alchemical, that affect her psyche.

The outstanding pictures come when the colour reinforces the imagery as in the piece that features red roses and a surgical incision with a flow of blood.

The imagery is reinforced by a Zurbaran painting of St Agatha who suffered a particularly bloody martyrdom.

Throughout the works gloves, and gloved hands, are constant symbols of manipulation and intervention and their human shape interacts well with the more esoteric imagery.

The pictures gain little by being transparencies rather than more conventional prints but in any format would have considerable presence.

Deborah Smith is an Auckland artist whose work has gone from strength to strength. Her four pieces about art as religion in the smaller room at the Fisher Gallery yield nothing in force to the work of her more established counterparts from the south.

Benediction is a large photograph where the back of a kneeling figure counterpoints the beads of large rosaries.

Singe is an installation that surrounds the Venus de Milo with barriers and votive candles.

Details taken from other works in the Louvre give spice to *Burnt and Wick* as the artist builds experiences from her trip overseas into a personal imagery with admirable assurance.

The work of the three photographers at the Society of Arts Gallery in Blake St do not match this in complexity — yet they are highly competent and interesting in their own way.