

CHALLENGING ARTWORKS FLAUNT THE 'MATERIALITY' AND 'LOWLINESS' OF THEIR MEDIA

# Exhibition stimulates in an odd way

Exhibition: **SOCIAL PATTERN**, at the AVA Gallery until April 30. MELVYN MINNAAR reviews.

THE FRUSTRATING thing about this clever, tip-top exhibition is that you can't quite get your head around why it's so smart.

Yet you realise that the 14 artists in this tight show are messing with your head, each in her or his curiously original way, and the curator has smartly spun out those puzzles in an interlocking, wide-ranging web.

It evokes all kinds of response. One of them might be "Gee, why didn't I think of that?" or "What obsession drives that endeavour?"

Forced to ponder answers to these, the gallery visitor is stimulated in an oddly satisfying way. That secret seems to lie somewhere in the power of visual language that stands outside of words and literature.

What is there to say about a stepladder – an ordinary aluminium one, readily available from your DIY shop – that has been turned into a magnificent totem, lit up by a car light kit, installed under the steps, and boasting the title of the piece in kooky lettering, *East Coast Customs*.

Artist Vaughn Sadie (from Durban, a newish name here) has made from an obvious, useful garage-stored, domestic device a little sculpture that cheerfully invades the space and ring up all kinds of off-beat and amusing associations. Ever thought of your ladder as cute, sexy?



AT THE AVA: Lynette Bester's violin and horsehair work, *Untitled (Medusa)*, 2005-2009.

Kim Lieberman posted airmail letters to herself, poste restante, to every place she'd overnighted in the world. She did this regularly over a year. In an upbeat demonstration of international postal tenacity, they

were returned to her and can now proudly proclaim her travelling life as true. But they also displayed, row-by-row, a tightly constructed social pattern.

There's something about the obsession underlying *Pushing the Envelope* that also feels comforting in a curious kind of way. Being your own global pen pal is fine.

These configurations, rituals, systems, repeats are matters that concern human behaviour (sometimes oddly) in particular environments.

Artists, sensitive to the things around us, point them out, utilise them. While such social patterns chart daily life, in a manner of speaking, it can also take on metaphorical meaning (the *East Coast Customs* ladder yields plenty, for example).

Curator Kirsty Cockerill, who takes a bow for the show, gives us only some clues.

The exhibition title's implied questions are extended by merely a few sentences of arty blurb. She refers to "decorative design and a thing considered worthy of imitation" when speaking about patterns in visual practice.

She demonstrates by careful selection and placement, how powerfully those patterns and processes can communicate in a time and space.

Words or texts, so often regarded as absolute, but often an irritating intrusion when it comes to art, make way for the purity of the

objects and their cross-gallery dialogue. It sets your pulse racing, your head spinning.

Lynette Bester's *Untitled (Medusa)*, a mad melange of horse hair and a smashed violin, might as well be a complete short story: delicious, funny and perplexing.

Greg Streak's delicately beautiful print, *A Rush of Blood*, seems exactly, logically that, even if you don't know why. His exquisite *Envelopes for Tears*, too, is also so-obvious, so original, so palpable.

The two piles of five throw-away foam cups that Kevin Brand had cast in bronze and painted to present as *Landscape* and *Portrait* call up the same paradox of the unusual and the familiar. And throws out remarks about monuments and art.

Justin Fiske's hypnotic *Taught*, with its madly precise structure, not to mention time spent, is pure wow in the web-like manner it takes the viewer into the nothingness of space.

The artworks flaunt their "materiality", the "lowliness" of the media used, or take an ironic cut with it (Paul Edmund's *Knurl*, carved from styrofoam containers; Fabain Saptou's *Breathe in, Breathe out*, hand-printed in letterpress on tissue paper).

They serve also to remind us of the things that shape our daily social patterns.

*Social Pattern* is a zippy, challenging must-see exhibition.

● The AVA Gallery is at 35 Church Street. Call 021 424 7436.