

# Step into valley of the dolls

Simon Mee's work can be kind of disturbing and weird but all in a good way, writes Rosemary Sorensen

**T**HE weatherboards in Simon Mee's eerie tableaux signal Brisbane. But this is a Brisbane you've already sublimated, tucking it into a back room of your unconscious where the creepy things lurk.

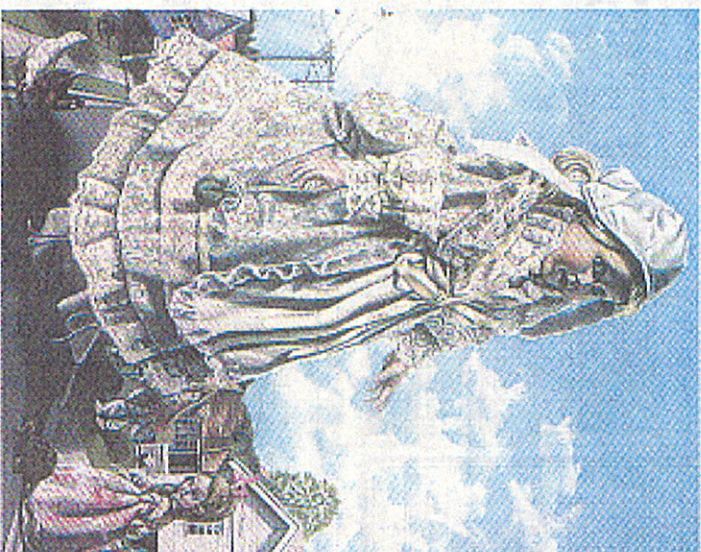
The Suburban Sweet, a show of, maybe significantly, 13 works, is pretty weird stuff. Doll children, doll women, even a doll footballer: they loom with sharp focused glossiness out of large canvases, and almost more unnervingly, in a couple of sinister-looking pencil drawings.

The pun on sweet/smile is unnecessary, and Mee tends to be drawn into underlining his intentions, but he's a young artist, just 36 years old, so he'll probably begin to slough off the need for the obvious as his confidence in his imagination increases.

And what an imagination it is. If syrupy sentiment falls short of your idea of Brisbane, check out a painting such as *The Collaborators*, which the artist, now Toowoomba-based with a young family, draws from his memory of living in Carina on the southside.

Don't ask me what it means, but you can't deny the set of emotions on show: a trinity of 1950s-style women, pacing down a flat, smooth suburban road, towards a bald doll-woman who holds before her an Asian-looking doll child. Behind her, bare-footed like so many of Mee's doll-figures, a blimp-child, before a bland weatherboard whose windows are dressed in the kind of curtains you just know are going to twitch with secrets.

It's the faces that get you in. Mee works hard on imbuing the glassy eyes of his dolls with almost human emotions and the effect is unnerving.



UNNERVING... left, *The Attack of the 60ft Vernier Inspired Woman and Despondent Chicken* and, right, *Maids of Danocles*, both by Simon Mee.



Dolls are his signature, and while he knows they tend to pop up in many a new artist's work, he's not likely to give up on them any time soon.

"And they do keep on changing in my work," he says. "In many cases, I stop seeing them as dolls, they start moving."

For the well-schooled, Mee's paintings are crammed with references to art history. Curator Gordon Craig from the QUT Art Museum, tells us that the elaborately pretty but slightly battered enormous doll-people are

inspired by, for example, the allegorical works of painters such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Nicolas Poussin. One painting in this show refers directly to Dutch master Vermeer, with its absurd title, *The Attack of the 60ft Vernier Inspired Woman and Despondent Chicken*.

Gigantism has always been a Queensland thing, but not quite like this. Sometimes the references to famous art are direct, as in *Not a Congo Line*, that replaces the tragically

comic disabled peasants of Bruegel's *The Parable of the Blind* with — you guessed it — more of those scarily animated dolls. Sometimes, the references are oblique: who could have guessed, unless Craig tells us in the catalogue, that the very odd little fellow climbing on the back of another doll figure is inspired by the bald and entertainingly unfashionable Martin Pike, who played in the mighty Brisbane Lions three premiership wins. Something tells me it would be better not to inquire of the artist what

else he was inspired by in this singular painting of stocking dolls on field, a couple of grunting pigs and a pair of Bavarian sweeties behind the goals. Mee insists the viewer of his entertaining paintings shouldn't be too fussed about unpacking all the meanings: "I hate being bored and the worst thing for me would be if people walked out of my show being bored," he says.

Check it out, if you're game.

Simon Mee, *The Suburban Sweet*, QUT Art Museum, until August 13.