

Devils in the detail



Detail of "The filming of 'The girl's got to have it' was cancelled in 1945 because of the horizontal collaborators. It was later made in 1957 in a sound studio in Hollywood with Jayne Mansfield", by Cameron Hayes.

Visual arts

Cameron Hayes, Paintings
Australian Galleries, Collingwood,
until December 22

Review **Peter Timms**

CAMERON HAYES is a real anachronism — a history painter, a genre painter and a narrative painter, at a time when those forms couldn't be more unfashionable. He is also something of a mad painter. Just listen to this. It's his description of one of his own works: "In this painting, the musical actors try to convince the jeering mob that you can't control bodily functions like love, while the mob try to rebuild their bombed city with wallpaper and paint. In the background the big French perfume companies are trying to teach rabbits courtship and the waltz, and pigs table manners . . . The mob cruelly throw carrots at blind beggars and taunt old women who go naked while washing the only dress they have, their wedding dress. In an apartment block, a girl is beaten by her father in the kitchen while he entertains her black boyfriend in the living room . . ." And so on and on.

What is striking about this, apart from its dizzying multiplicity (and the startling proposition that love is a bodily function), is that it is entirely about subject matter. Most discussion about works of art these days is about style, technique and theoretical underpinnings: in other words, about art history. Hayes appears unconcerned about art history. His mind is on social history, which he satirises with a vengeance. Hayes is a Hogarth or a Daumier for the 21st century.

As the above description suggests, these paintings have lots and lots of subject matter. Too much, sometimes, for their own good. Hayes does occasionally lose the struggle to keep his fantasmagorical imagination under control.

Yet, at the level of style and technique, his painting is all control. Every crowded incident is depicted with painstaking attention to detail. The results, which can be incomprehensible when seen as a whole, demand intense scrutiny from the viewer. Hayes' paintings are vast fields of tiny details. The eye scans the surface, taking in each bizarre anecdote, and taking delight in their bitter humor.

But it's tiring. There is so much going on. And there is a frustrating sense that you're being given endless cryptic clues that are never going to gell into any satisfactory

resolution (which considerably weakens their power as satire). We see a distraught mother, for example, being comforted by a policeman on a rooftop. In the foreground is an overturned pram, with no sign of baby. All around, policemen are dusting for fingerprints and taking photographs. Inexplicably, a large rubbish bin nearby is stuffed with discarded placards, all of which read: "I'm good thanks". This whole shemozzle of a painting is bouyed along by surreal black humor, corny one-liners, and frankly cartoonish visual exuberance, even if its specific meaning is elusive.

The best paintings are those with a strong, centralised composition and a well-defined theme that we can latch on to, such as his acid-head parody of Gericault's *Raft of Medusa* (or is it Brueghel's *Ship of Fools?*) and his manic *Tower of Babel*. When he has a solid narrative idea to work with, he can pull all the individual elements together and tell a great story. Trouble is, he never seems to stop talking.

Hayes is a genuinely eccentric artist, if sometimes just a wee bit self-consciously so. This is an impressive first solo show, but given that he appears to have said it all, you wonder where on earth he is going to go from here. His images can't get any more frenetic than they already are. ■