

# Undulations of Vegas

Melbourne artist Kate Shaw saw potential in the fantasy world of Las Vegas. She peered through the city to see America, writes **Christopher Bantick**.

**I**N KATE Shaw's Abbotsford studio the only signs of painting are fluorescent spray marks on the walls. There are stencil and template shapes cut from paper on a bench and a large photocopy of a work in progress on the floor. The studio is bare, as Shaw has an exhibition, *Earthly Delights*, at the Spacemart gallery.

Shaw's tone in *Earthly Delights* is awash with irony and ambiguities. Works on display combine the resonances of gambling in Las Vegas with geometric shapes, teasing the imagination to find order and balance in what appears to be a fluid, if not discordant, world.

The airbrushed subjects in the exhibition hark back to the '60s psychedelic colours of Howard Arkley's suburban reaming. Like Arkley, Shaw uses airbrushing to give her work a translucent multi-strata effect. These are paintings made of collages from such disparate sources as Photoshop computer software, downloaded tapes from the internet, stencils and acrylic paint.

But her life is not exclusively studio-centred. Shaw mixes her life as an artist with a part-time involvement at RMIT in Koori services. She teaches art and design to Koori students and paints the rest of the week.

"I studied painting at RMIT and finished in 1994. After that I did a diploma of curatorial studies," she says, rocking on a chair in her white-walled studio. "I have worked as a practising artist up until now. Sometimes I have had years on and off, as I have concentrated on curating and working in gal-

leries around Melbourne. I lived in Los Angeles from 1999 to 2002. After teaching screen writing for a while there I then moved into interactive television."

The *Earthly Delights* exhibition explores the influences of America and the way technology can harmonise with paint. Shaw says her time in America opened her to new visual opportunities.

"Towards the end of my period at RMIT I was more interested in the possibilities the new technologies like Photoshop and computer programs gave me. I developed an interest in digital-based work, video, photography and installations for a few years. When I came back from America I started to paint again.

"Last year, I went to Las Vegas for a month. I travelled from Los Angeles to Las Vegas and that is where a lot of the imagery in the body of work in the exhibition comes from."

Shaw's use of colour is often



Kate Shaw in her Abbotsford studio, left.

PICTURE: CATHY TREW

Museum of perceived corruption, below; and Bellagio, right.

understated and yet the images in *Earthly Delights* are both playful and blithely worked. So why has she focused on gambling and the fantasy world of Las Vegas? "I think what has influenced me over the last few years has been looking at a lot of contemporary painting in America, particularly artists working on the west coast. Another influence came from living in Los Angeles for two years. It was an artificial environment. The fascination

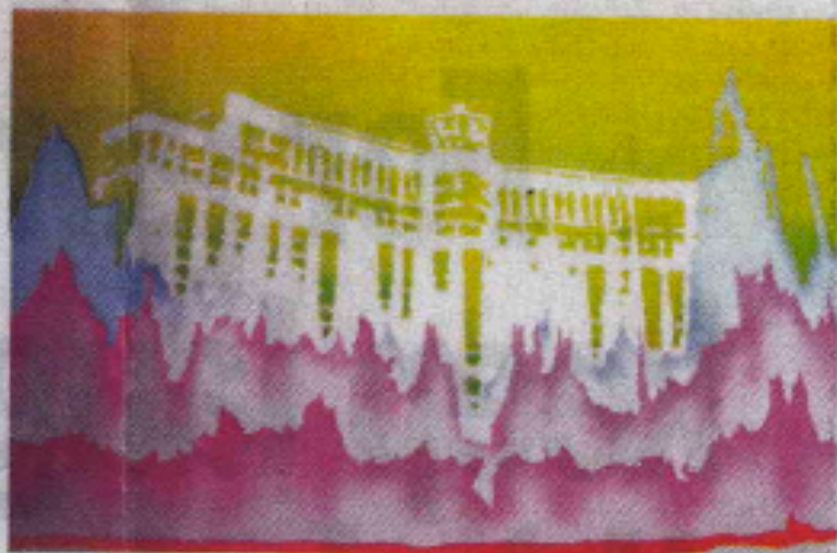
with something like Las Vegas is that it's just ancient and futuristic all at once. It exists in a place which is a desert. It has everything shipped in. The new casinos, compared to the ones in the 1960s, are mammoth theme parks. There's white tigers and albino dolphins. It's completely nuts."

It is the importing of the sensory experiences, and in particular the visual impressions, Shaw had in Las Vegas, that comment on the earthly delights people look for and want in casinos. She believes that as a visiting Australian she was acutely attuned to observing the undulations of the Las Vegas life. "I was the outsider looking in. American culture is one of those things that you don't completely participate in when you're there," she says. "There is something that holds you back and this, I think, enters my work."

"People say in Vegas, why would I want to go to Venice, when I can go to the Venetian? Why would you want to go to Paris, when I can go to the Parisian? These are casinos. In the times I had been there pre-



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viously I wanted to do something about Las Vegas, but I didn't know how it would all work. But last year I saw how I could incorporate elements of it into my paintings.

"How has it shaped what I do? The American writer, Dave Hickey, sums it up for me this way: 'America is not a very good window to view Vegas from but Vegas is a great window to view America from.' Vegas is a bizarre place to view America from in that way."

**S**HAW creates her work by shooting short videos, taking photographs or using graphs, which she will import into Photoshop. She will then enlarge the images, mask out the shapes and plan which colours she will use.

"I guess the work is surrealist in so far as different elements appear which are not necessarily there," she says. "In the paintings you can see things which just happen."

"I think if there is any kind of concept in the art that reflects contemporary life, it is that we live with a barrage of information. The accessibility of information — graphs, for example — we have is often

undigested, uncriticised or unfiltered. What I do with Photoshop is that I take the image and then paint from it."

Shaw's approach to shaping a confluence of forms came in the transition from one form of painting to another.

"I was always an oil painter but I developed an allergy to oils. I use acrylics now. When I began to derive my imagery from Photoshop I found an airbrush tool in it. On reflection, it's interesting that I had to use the fake, digital tool before I went back to the original tool to get what I wanted. In a way, I was trying to mimic the computer. That's how I came to use the airbrush in my work. Now, it is like painting. It is much more intuitive."

Shaw says that beyond communicating with an audience, what matters to her as an artist is the shock of the new.

"I like seeing something I have never seen before. This can be any type of painting which is of the time. These are the things which I connect with and what I do like is well-crafted work . . . I'm not interested in the human figure. I like abstract forms."

Kate Shaw's *Earthly Delights* is at Spacement Gallery until February 26.