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Works connect with historic site

VISUAL ARTS

Paper, Cotton, Leather, Flowers, Wood

Midland Atelier

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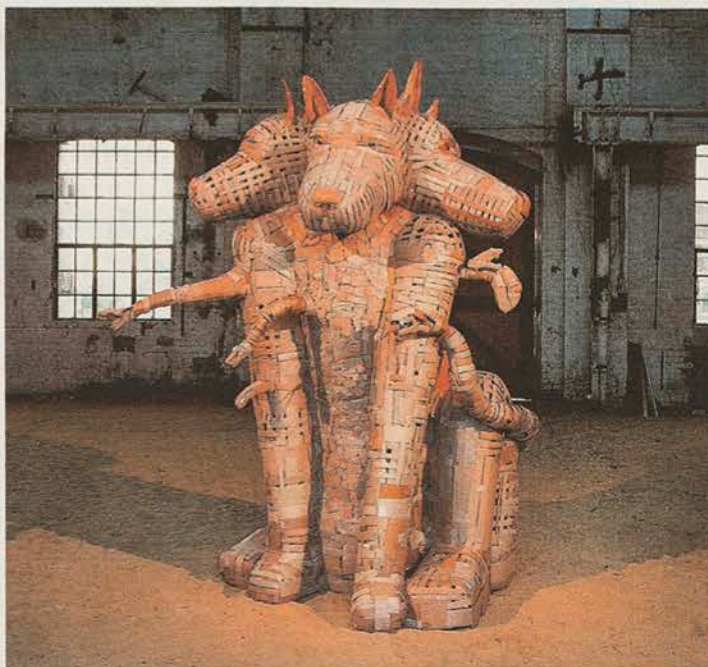
The Midland Atelier, which sprawls across the old Midland Railway Workshops, is a natural magnet for artists seeking to engage the possibilities of space beyond the now traditional confines of the "white cube" gallery.

The derelict yet powerful ambience, the rickety stairs, broken windows, old machinery and curious artefacts open a wealth of potential creative pathways.

For the viewer, art there is about being reminded of the historical presence of the place, being willing to traverse vast distances on foot and battling with climatic elements, which always seem unusually heightened amid the harsh architecture and sprawling dusty corridors.

This year's major FORM exhibition, Paper, Cotton, Leather, Flowers, Wood, is no exception. The event spans warehouses and at this time of year is a bitterly cold experience.

The focus on the materials in the exhibition's title is a reference to the first five traditional wedding anniversary gifts, and the artists imbue these with significance pertinent to the site.



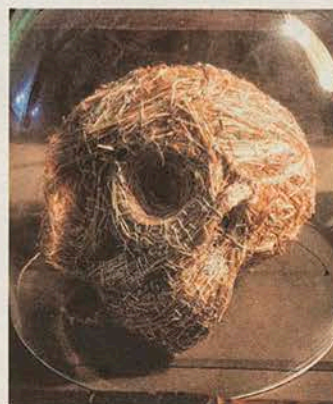
On guard: Susan Flavell's three-headed cardboard canine.

At the starting point, Nalda Searles presents an intricately crafted grass skull and a new work of cotton and mixed media snakes, positioned writhing on a bed. Themes of sickness, healing and the inevitability of death arise. These works, which are in the Nurses' Post, tie into Searles' heritage as a nurse and highlight the idea of healing in a workplace that is inevitably hazardous.

Industrial machinery combined with human error is often the

source of such hazards. Tanija and Graham Carr have created site-specific works which harmonise astoundingly well with their surroundings. These sculptural leather pieces appear almost indistinguishable from the imposing pieces of machinery looming around them, which appear to gleam with a still-functional prowess.

For this duo, leather morphs into other materials to create puzzling artefacts in the guise of



Hello: Visitors are met with Nalda Searles' intricate grass skull.

assorted bowls and implements. They sit in a slippery post-apocalyptic and medieval realm, both ancient and futuristic as a result of fastidious attention to crafting the leather to shape-shift from cast metal to bone and then stone.

Adeptness with materials is also seen in the work of Susan Flavell, who is well known for her large cardboard entities. To access her work visitors must follow a pathway to encounter a creature guarding a doorway to a dusty warehouse. Seemingly drawn from a fiery inferno, this three-headed canine is located in the Foundry, a site reportedly haunted by the casualties of an industrial accident resulting from the spill of a cupola of molten metal.

In a building that once

demanded the greatest skill of its labourers, the work of Eva Fernandez sits alongside an open studio and the wares of a number of wood designers. Fernandez explores the theme of flowers with a video piece using stills of specimens native to the site.

Other works by Fernandez take a different route through the theme of wood, via a series of photographic prints of curious workshop ephemera, geometric and circular forms, both painted and raw. They are arranged like puzzles and are reminiscent of some of the works of surrealist artist Joseph Cornell. There is also something cartoony about them, like set props for a 3-D Shaun Tan animation. It is worth noting that the actual objects line the opposite wall, which makes literal the connection between the real and its representation and enables closer observation of their rustic character.

It is satisfying to wander through this show, glean hints of working practices of the day and experience striking age-old architecture appropriated for purposes that enable lively public visibility. Such exhibitions form a dialogue with place that enables it to be seen and understood in a whole new light.

■ Paper, Cotton, Leather, Flowers, Wood runs until July 21.