

Grows in meaning

VISUAL ARTS
RICHARD GIBLETT

Plant/room, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Fitzroy, until February 28

Robert Nelson Reviewer

If you came from Mars, you wouldn't think of the cities of our planet as anything but nature. The towers of Melbourne or Tokyo would not seem like artificial, sterile engineering with inorganic materials. To a Martian, the sprouting of tall buildings would seem one and the same thing as the competitive, upward striving of tall trees or the incursions of one kind of bug upon the air, light and nutrient of another.

In a curious installation by Richard Giblett, two black-and-white drawings create this very parallel. A city of packed modernist buildings — all rehearsing in their monotonous form the grid that co-ordinates them — is compared to a dense field of mushrooms. In neither drawing can you see the ground. The growth of dense fungus is quite creepy, using a kind of backdrop of black to articulate the curving stalks and floppy flanges.

The centrepiece of Giblett's exhibition, *Plant/room*, is a life-size escalator. It greets you in the large room, making the normally awkward column in the gallery seem integral to the department-store imagery. However, this escalator cannot take you

anywhere. First, it is made of pine plywood and has no moving parts. And secondly, it goes nowhere. It ends high up, true, but there's no platform up there, just a void.

With very unfussy joinery, the simulacrum of the escalator is credible enough to resemble the key forms and proportions of a working escalator (including the green light that shines between the steps). It evokes the grinding rhythms and slow mechanical procession so familiar in stores and underground railways. In the presence of the piece, with its lo-tech construction and cheap materials, you automatically feel the invitation to ascend, to join an imaginary crowd that has a purpose in going up.

Unlike the drawing of the mushrooms, which evokes no chthonic smells, and unlike the cityscape which communicates no noise or throng, the three-dimensional escalator exercises a remarkable pull on your senses. It controls the atmosphere of the space: you have to imagine

the journey to the next level, even if you can't contemplate a ride on the rickety panels (which, incidentally, you aren't allowed to walk on).

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But you are allowed to go behind the escalator and peer inside its feigned mechanical gizzards. And there the green light that shines between the steps acquires an altogether

different meaning. The underbelly of the escalator is a narrow but dense

garden, with plants and sounds of the forest. Nature is evidently a substrate, an underlying structure, to the growth of technical systems and the large populations that use them.

Suddenly, you don't know what to think of the twittering of birds or croaking of frogs. Is it something wholly remote from the realm of human ambition, as if nature and civilisation were mutually alienated? Or is it somehow analogous to the hum and pace of our industrialised environment? Giblett's work arrests your readiness to make an assumption, almost in the same way that an escalator spontaneously stops, without anyone turning a key.

Bizarrely, you wonder if the little garden in the escalator is to be experienced as a haven, an asylum in sentimental withdrawal from the overbearing encroachments of progress, or just another part of life, another expression of the teaming, crawling, spawning rush of cells and hormones for ever-greater privileges of reproduction.

Although perhaps conceived as a single installation, Giblett's work falls into two parts and seems more successful in the escalator than in the drawings. The juxtaposed drawings appear to be straightforward allegory. The point of the comparison is to say: the angular progress of cities has a common root in the vegetal or fungal realm, in which one form of growth is overtaken by another. Hence, perhaps, the title of the exhibition.

But while the escalator accommodates this interpretation, it presents more doubts and lets you ascend, as it were, to a more psychological plane. You think of the mobile stair afresh, sensing its compelling upward energy, as if the promise of climbing deserves automatic mechanical fulfilment. Escalators don't normally carry the air of ceremony of stairs in old, ornamental architecture; but Giblett returns this sense of awe to the mounting succession of platforms in his wooden hymn to modernity, a stair that celebrates the presence of going up but never arriving and never promising a return.

Though made of pine plywood, Richard Giblett's *Escalator*, left, invites the viewer to ascend.

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