

Needlework to sculpture are among today's investment collectables, says

Tim Blue

WITH stock markets in the doldrums and interest rates at their lowest in decades, it is little wonder that investors are beginning to look around at the alternatives. Some will find solace in fine wine and perhaps stamps, but more probably fine art will be more pleasing, even after the vagaries of a volatile market.

Here's a few suggestions from art authority and author, Michael Reid:

Danie Mellor (1971-)

WITH an American-Australian father and an Irish-Aboriginal mother, it is unsurprising that Danie Mellor's works should focus on the interaction of different cultures. To portray the concept of a shared history, Mellor melds elements from indigenous and British traditions.

Waist-high sculptures of kangaroos are covered in a mosaic of blue Spode china, the 19th century darling of the British dining-room, and intricate mezzotints of the tightly furled fronds of *Cyathea cooperi* (Australian tree fern) are reminiscent of Joseph Banks' illustrations, sent back to a British public hungry for a sight of the "exotic" flora and fauna of the colonies.

Mellor admits that his practice is "tongue in cheek and a little bit kitsch" but it achieves his goal of getting his work, "spoken about and shown and discussed and enjoyed".

In 2008, Mellor created a series of shields based on those from the Atherton Tablelands of his mother's people. Being made from steel reclaimed from travelling trunks brings associations of colonial arrivals and departures.

Such incongruities are typical of Mellor's combining of disparate images to reflect a collision of cultures. In an *Unsettled Vision* (above) a mother and baby koala climb up a eucalyptus branch. At first glance the scale and colour of the marsupial duo places them at odds with their very British Spode surroundings, but the background pattern, with its European gothic castle and Chinese blossoms hints at the possibility of a future amalgamated culture.

Mellor's work has been acquired by



Prized: Danie Mellor's *Unsettled Vision* won the 2008 National Works on paper

the National Gallery and major state galleries and was featured in the 2007 National Indigenous Art Triennial: Culture Warriors.

Working in his Canberra kitchen-cum-studio, Mellor finds it hard to keep up with demand — there is a lengthy and ever-increasing waiting list for the kangaroos.

Samuel Tupou (1976-)

WHEN Samuel Tupou was at his father's funeral, his aunt presented him with a tapa, a decorated Tongan cloth made from the fibrous roots of the mulberry tree. This gift, traditionally used to mark significant life events, reconnected him with the part of his heritage he thought he'd just lost with his father's death.

Recognising the tapa's narrative possibilities, Tupou was inspired to rework its geometric patterns and symmetry to tell "new stories within a global context".

Tupou has never been one for a traditional canvas. After studying printmaking in Townsville, his creative skill found an outlet through his T-shirt company, Humbug. Today he creates a three-dimensional effect by using silk-screens and emulsion to layer colours and designs on Perspex — a medium well-suited to the hot and humid conditions of his Far North Queensland home, and for portraying the plasticity of modern culture.

Tupou's dual Tongan and New Zealand heritage enables him to explore ideas

of cultural identity. In his adopted home he has been able to compare the tourist perception of a tropical paradise with the realities of daily life in Cairns.

Primary and secondary colours are used to "overemphasise that brightness and that kind of vividness" unique to living in the tropics, but Tupou's images and patterns are sourced from the magazine pictures, advertisements, computer graphics and wallpaper designs, that visually bombard us everyday. In Tupou's paintings, just like modern life, there are no blank spaces.

Silke Raetze (1975-)

THERE is no danger of Silke Raetze becoming one of those artists who doggedly churns out variations on the same idea for their whole career. Because Raetze postpones choosing her medium until she has fixed on her concept, she ensures that her work is constantly evolving and never repetitive. With a practice spanning drawing, sculpture, painting, even embroidery, and several art prize finals to her name, Raetze's is an exciting career to follow.

After a degree in fine arts at Sydney's National Art School, Raetze took up an artist's residency at Arthur Boyd's Bundanon where she developed the skilful paint-and-paper techniques exemplified by her 2007 investigation of love, lust, hope and disappointment. Sweet Nothings is a series of glass museum display cases housing delicate paper sculptures of flimsy underwear on which Raetze,

using pen, ink, paint and pencil, painstakingly recreates every detail of fabric and design.

This romanticism and eroticism was followed by a contrasting series of works based on the tightly prescribed craft of embroidery. Over the centuries samplers have generally been used to demonstrate needlework with a piece of moral advice thrown in for good measure. *Home Sweet Home* taps into the contradiction between the controlled form of the sampler and the desperation that sometimes lies behind its creation. Raetze highlights this rage by using traditional designs and stylised domestic images accompanied by neatly cross-stitched, brutally direct statements about the pressure on women to conform to social stereotypes.

Sally Gabori (1924-)

IN 2005, some elderly ladies from the Aged Persons' Hostel on Mornington Island were invited to a local arts and crafts centre. Out of this valuable everyday initiative to get older people out and about, a new, vibrant indigenous art movement was born, with Sally Gabori, over 80, painfully shy and with no painting experience, as its leader.

Gabori's success was almost instantaneous.

Gabori was born on Bentinck Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, but was moved to Mornington Island by Methodist missionaries in 1948. She speaks very little English, preferring her native Kaiadilt, a language that is rapidly dying out. With the proceeds from the first sales of her paintings she chartered a plane to visit Bentinck Island.

Gabori's large canvases are filled with bright colours and geometric shapes. In *Dibirdibi Country* (\$7700), a work selected for the 2008 ABN AMRO Emerging Artists Award, Gabori's long brushstrokes map the story places of the rock cod ancestor, traditional lands of her late husband Pat.

As Aunty Sally, a respected Kaiadilt elder, Gabori has successfully encouraged other women to accompany her to the Mornington Arts and Crafts Centre to paint. Despite being a people with no painting tradition other than body painting, members of "The Bentinck Island Gang" (Dawn Naranatjil, Paula Paul, Netta Loogatha, Amy Loogatha and Ethel Thomas) have each developed their own distinct style. Mutually supportive and inspiring, they work at tables alongside each other on vibrant works that will secure the future of the Kaiadilt culture and their Bentinck homeland.