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THE ARTS

Taking a stab

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ELLIE RENNIE reviews Marcus Westbury's ABC TV series, Not Quite Art

“THIS Is Not Art” is held every spring in Australia’s largest regional city, Newcastle. TINA, as it affectionately referred to, is a number of different festivals thrown into the one program. Electronic music, emerging writers and youth media are interspersed with semi-intellectual discussions, soap box speakers and the fluttering of hundreds of zines.

I attended TINA for the first time last month. As with everything that calls itself “new” or “emerging,” TINA felt somehow familiar and unexpected at the same time. One surprising-yet-tedious moment occurred during a serious panel discussion on generationalism. Just when things were getting interesting, two strangely dressed men took over the stage and conducted a urine-drinking performance (yes, it was freshly squeezed). Meanwhile, a young woman in the audience continued to eloquently ask a question to the panel, completely unfazed by the impromptu performance. For regulars at TINA, this kind of interruption was just “same old.”

On Tuesday, the ABC will be screening the final of a three part series made by one of the founders of TINA, Marcus Westbury. Not Quite Art examines underground, experimental and DIY culture in the cities of Newcastle, Glasgow and Melbourne. Westbury, a 33 year-old Novocastrian who now lives in Melbourne, premiered the first two episodes of his series (available for download on the program’s website) for the TINA audience. Nervously gulping down his home-town ginger beer, Westbury told us to expect “a typical ABC arts program format.”

The series, however, is intentionally disrespectful of the arts scene. By taking a stab at cultural funding, Westbury challenges (but also reinforces) familiar notions of high and low culture. A symphony orchestra is not much more than a covers band; the Opera House is a blank canvas for an anti-war protest. Whether you agree or not, the primary subject-matter of this series is intensely interesting and often amusing – from graffiti art to political computer games and botanical weed tours. Fancy galleries and expensive concert halls are a long way from Westbury’s creative scene which lives in laneways, run-down bowling clubs and

dilapidated factories. In fact, some of it could almost be art – if only it would comply to health and safety rules. Westbury is surprisingly good in the stuffy TV presenter role. With short hair and dark rimmed glasses, he looks decidedly more Melbournian than Novocastrian these days, but he does achieve some funny lines and smooth interviews amongst his artsy to-camera schtick.

The really annoying thing about this TV series is that it hasn't been done before – at least not in Australia, reminding us that ABC is a decade behind creative industries policy. During question-time at the premier screening, the kids from Newcastle expressed sincere thanks to Westbury for finally managing to show their city and culture as they experience it. I expect the Mayor of Newcastle will be equally proud. As demonstrated by the second episode, set in Glasgow and Melbourne, city councils have been embracing underground art scenes for some time. Melbourne's laneways are now a top tourist destination, not to mention a great backdrop for a wedding photo.

The final episode faces up to the fact that DIY is now also R&D for commercial culture. We discover that Melbourne's laneways are just as famous for their bars as their artwork, and that "the new" inevitably gets coopted into mainstream fashion, design and music. In the end it is "not quite" art, but it is definitely the creative industries. •

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