

reproductions to diminish as they reproduce. By **Mark Amery.**

THINK of the contemporary artist, if you will, as mad scientist: beavering away in a studio inventing the new, its shape in some way reflecting his or her own image.

Frankenstein-like — assembled from the body parts of various artistic corpses — the artist's work evolves and multiplies. Each work is individual but shares the genes of and belongs to a body of work, which is exhibited in batches in showrooms (we call them galleries) run by patrons sympathetic to the creator's newfangled ideas.

Questions of cloning, identity and reproduction are exhaustively examined in contemporary art, a reflection of their currency for the individual in the world at large. However, only some art has that ability, like that of sculptor Gregor Kregar, whose geodesic-like globes keep revealing different sides to themselves. Like Kregar's latest work, *I disappear*, at the newly refitted Bowen Galleries — this work uncannily cuts across cultures, practices and traditions for the viewer in its exploration of the self-portrait.

To walk past Bowen Galleries' show window in Ghuznee St is to be met by 80 pairs of Kregar's eyes — 80 freestanding ceramic figures of the artist facing toward the onlooker. They are identical but for being in eight sizes — from bottle to child-sized — and coming in 10 variously coloured work overalls. These permutations are artfully jumbled in a grid as an abstract formation, or could it be phalanx-like battle formation, ready to march out like good proletariat into central Wellington spreading the Kregar word?

Stand before them and the artist becomes audience, out-staring you. Stand behind them, and you feel like you're missing out on something.

Yet these figures are of Ompah Lumpah and Munchkin height and colour. They ask to be played with. They pitch the artist as garden gnome — laughable but fragile and

just a little freakish and mysterious. Get too close and you become aware of how easy it would be to knock one over. You are aware this is a gallery and their value is more than just ornamental. Indeed, having made the gnome analogy I discover Kregar has a concurrent exhibition in Auckland (Between Ridiculous and Sublime, Bath Street Gallery, till October 29), which features brightly coloured casts of garden gnomes and geometric constructions.

THE handpainted bright colours, repetition and simplicity of the modelling remind me of freestanding figurative sculpture in Asia. Kregar's figures stand hands in overall pockets, gazing seriously into the distance. Here is the traditional, noble stance of artist as honest worker, with echoes perhaps of both communist and Buddhist imagery. Yet as reproductions of the ego, perhaps more telling is their evocation of the 8000 or so Qin Terracotta Warriors from third-century China, uncovered last century as part of an emperor's mausoleum, standing ready in battle formation to conquer death on their master's behalf.

Which brings us back to the artist as cloner of himself or herself through the self-portrait. While an artist like Ronnie Van Hout's doppelgangers explore the construction of identity through the use of alter egos, masks and recreations, Kregar seems more intent on exploring how identity is reduced the more it is reproduced.

In a previous work, Kregar created a flock of ceramic sheep in brightly coloured outfits. He again asks what sets us out as individuals from the masses, interested in how a change of colour affects our judgment of the subject. These works are being sold in their 10 sets of eight variously sized figures, the buyer selecting his or her favourite colour.

There's also comment on the dilemma of the exhibiting artist, creating bodies of work to fill galleries.



How much does an artist allow himself or herself to clone popular work to meet market demand? At what point does that work start to reduce?

This exhibition is based on the idea that Kregar as artist is disappearing as much as he is growing. Clay shrinks when fired, making each model for the next smaller. The ultimate result if this process were to be continued would be that the figure of the artist would grow increasingly indistinctive and disappear. This taps into the dilemma of all serious artists as their legacy grows behind them — how to avoid new work becoming ornamental embellishments within a now larger body of work. The fear that your work will become increasingly poorer copies of itself: "The more of me there are," Kregar says, "the tinier my stand-ins become."

■ *I disappear*, Gregor Kregar, till October 29, Bowen Galleries, Wellington.



Eyes this way: Gregor Kregar prepares his latest work, *I disappear*, for exhibition at Bowen Galleries. Says Kregar of fear that the artist's work will become increasingly poorer copies of itself: "The more of me there are, the tinier my stand-ins become."