

Art review Sasha Grishin

## Asch creates a unique artistic language

### STRANGE COUPLINGS

By Alex Asch. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until March 26

**A**lex Asch is one of Canberra's most interesting, engaging and provocative artists and one who possesses a strong social conscience.

I have followed Asch's art for about 25 years, ever since he settled in Canberra and started to exhibit his work and I have never failed to be amazed by his unique vision and his approach to art making. He is a scavenger, hunter and gatherer who reuses found materials in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell to give them a new meaning and purpose. His preference is for weathered materials, which carry the scars of the elements and decades of use and contain within their fabric many stories. These materials he refashions into amazing new creations, such as house facades, hoardings and inhabited edifices, where he meticulously crafts his shapes and surfaces so that they appear professionally fabricated.

There are no rough edges in Asch's art and all the parts fit together as a single coherent whole as new and tantalisingly "real" creations that seem to operate under their own laws of logic. They may be functionless creations, but they are carriers of meaning and sometimes quite specific political content.



In this exhibition there are two main series - *Totems for an atheist* and *Docklands*. Both series find precedents in his earlier practice, as well as points of departure and further development. Many of the totems reuse abandoned musical instruments - banjos, guitars, cellos and violins - that Asch has reclaimed from their former existence to create a new and arresting reality. As the son of anthropologists, Asch from early childhood was surrounded by objects from other cultures, which carried considerable mystical, religious and spiritual significance that was veiled and inaccessible to him.

His new totems appear equally enigmatic and mysterious, but their origins and beginnings are known to the artist and are transparently clear to the viewer. These objects seem to be created to deliberately mystify

The Totems for an Atheist series in *Strange Couplings* featuring banjos, guitars, cellos and violins.

the audience, like fake ritual objects. For this series, Asch adopts a restricted palette of black and red that creates for these totems a sense of coherence, like a cult or a religion.

The other main series at this exhibition is the *Docklands* series, where a recent visit to Dunedin in New Zealand reminded him of his early childhood years spent in Boston and off the coast in New England. If you listen carefully to the rusted corrugated metal, peeling timbers and galvanised tin you can hear the voice of the sea and witness the hands of generations of people who have toiled on the docks. Some of the strongest pieces in the exhibition, including *Docklands 39*, *Docklands 33* and *Docklands 43*, are enormously powerful and evocative mysterious creations that bear testimony to years of struggle with salt sea air.

Asch is a rare artist who, over several decades, has created an artistic language that is uniquely his own in which outstanding craftsmanship is combined with an inventive wit and a penetrating intellect. He grows in stature with each exhibition.