

The politically charged inventor

Alex Asch: Under construction

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin
Closes June 16, Tues-Sat 10am- 5pm, Sat-Sun 9am-5pm.

Reviewer: Sasha Grishin

Alex Asch is one of Canberra's most remarkable artists. Although he has been working in Canberra for more than quarter a century, for most of this time he has been operating under the radar.

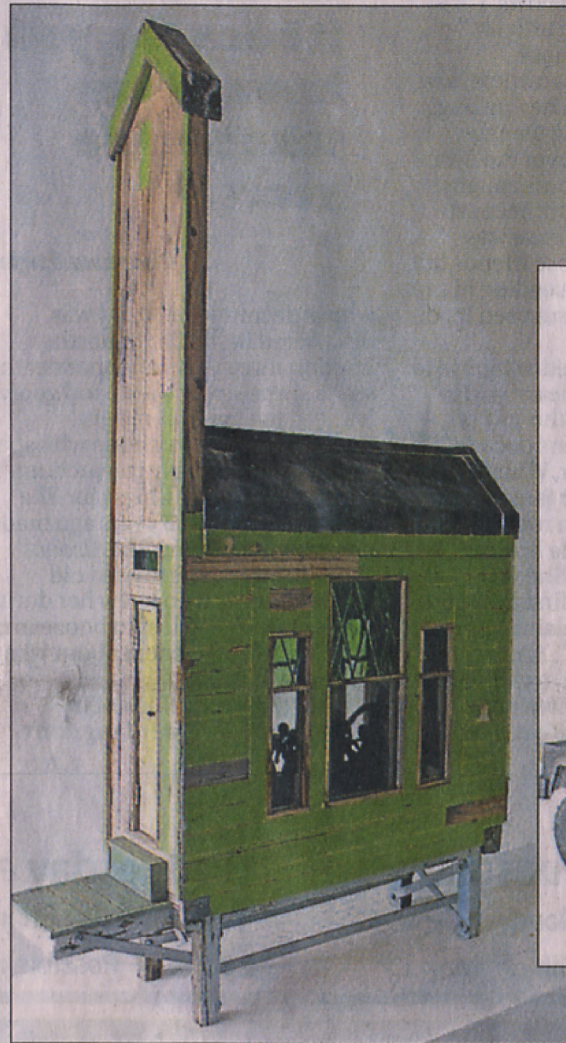
For an outside observer, his emergence as a significant artist over the past few years has been sudden, spectacular and came out of nowhere.

In reality, ever since he started to exhibit in Canberra in 1989, he has been a very consistent and deliberate artist, whose oeuvre has gradually unfolded, like a diary of creativity with each work building on its predecessor.

There are two constant features in his art practice, the first is his preference for well-seasoned materials and the second, his conviction that art needs to engage with society and take an ethical and political stance.

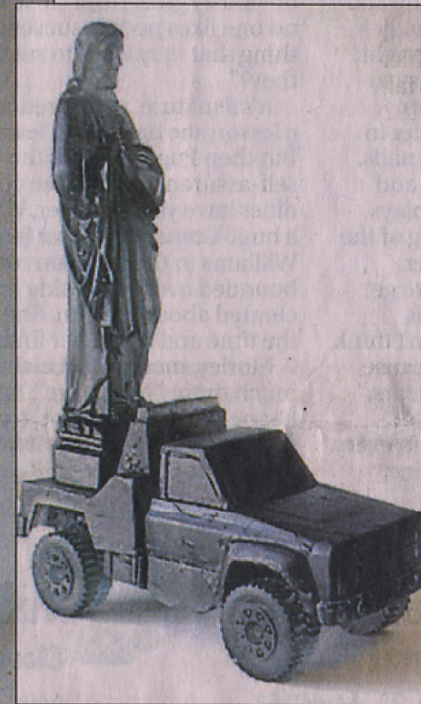
His materials are frequently scavenged from old building demolition sites, tips and op shops. He taps into a philosophy of art making where by using something "of the place", this renders the thing which is made with a greater sense of authenticity. The materials include weathered pieces of wood, old road signs, old nails, discarded toys and photographs, all of which carry the signs and scars of an earlier existence. Unlike Rosalie Gascoigne, with whom Asch could be most readily compared, Gascoigne in the final analysis is an arranger of elements to suggest a new reality, Asch is an inventor of new creations. His houses, shrines and constructed landscapes are all exquisitely crafted as he seamlessly combines wood with glass, metal, collaged images and found objects.

Gascoigne's art is highly evocative and operates most effectively on an associative level as we experience the sensation of a particular landscape.



Alex Asch's *Leap of faith*.

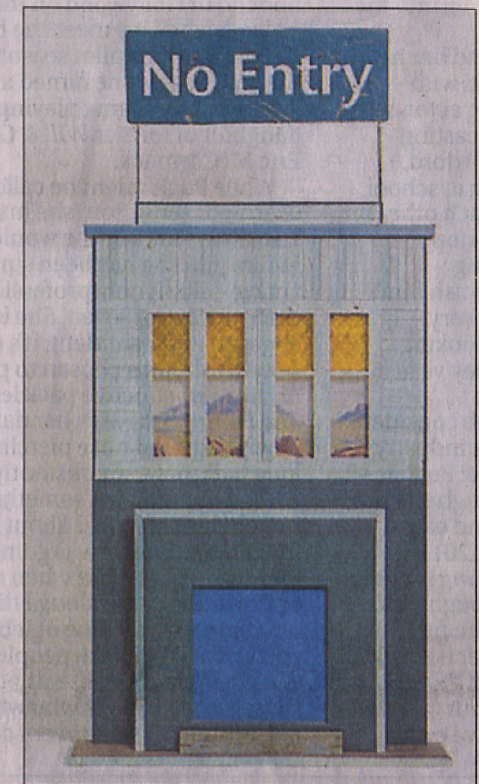
Asch's objects are politically charged and frequently have a didactic agenda. His pieces specifically address political issues of our day, the continuing genocide inflicted on our Indigenous peoples, the xenophobic policies of the Abbott government directed towards refugees, hypocrisy of institutionalised religions and the corrupt practices of the capitalist system.



Holy roller.

A wall piece shrine, proclaims "No entry" to both the boat people and to the first Australians.

A lowered blue roller door announces that Australia is closed for business, Namatjira's landscapes appear behind windowpanes and as Asch observes, we should not concern ourselves "with indefinite detention of innocent people or the building of gulags in foreign lands



No Entry.

with taxpayer's funds". Inside his churches on wheels, the "holy rollers", figures gather to worship false gods, while in one of his most intriguing pieces, a giant Christ figure appears standing on the back of a military jeep with the whole piece cast out of a recycled television screen.

An American by birth, Asch never forgot the tall timber houses of native New England and these have been grafted on to the Australian political reality to make for these enigmatic creations. They are quite beautiful objects, tantalising and frequently with a bit of humour tucked into their construction.

This is a challenging, timely and formidable exhibition by an artist of national significance.