

# Humorously naive and surreal

**Dean Bowen, Paintings, prints, sculpture**

At Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes September 22. Open Tuesday to Friday 10am-5pm, weekends 9am-5pm.

**Reviewer:** Sasha Grishin

**D**ean Bowen is a peculiar sort of artist printmaker who in his work arrives at certain simplified ideographs which are charged with symbolic meaning.

They are very simple, one could even say simplistic images, where a naive charm and whimsical humour may remind one of Jean Dubuffet's *art brut* from the 1960s, but they lack the latter's toughness and sense of confrontation. There is almost a grotesque charm in Bowen's imagery. Charm in the bright colours of the perching parrot or hawk, a balancing black-bird or a canary yellow canary sitting on a red brick structure.

Yet the whole thing is slightly unsettling, uncanny, even in the context of images created with the innocent eye, the proportions seem all wrong – the tiny canary on a huge brick edifice or a huge canary unconvincingly balancing on a tiny leaf.

The conceptual structures reminds one of Magritte, where all of the pictorial elements have been reduced to just a few variables and these are altered and readjusted to affect our emotional response to the work. There is something deeply disturbing about an image of a giant butterfly which seems to totally dwarf the house on which it has landed or of an even a larger ibis, whose claws seem to rest gently on a diminutive farm house.

Bowen's large canvases, such as *Delays expected*, where streams of traffic are forced into a suburban bottleneck, certainly have an obvious and almost slapstick humour,



but there is also something of a dark side to this image which can equally be read as a suburban monster swallowing up the streams of cars, buses trucks and ambulances.

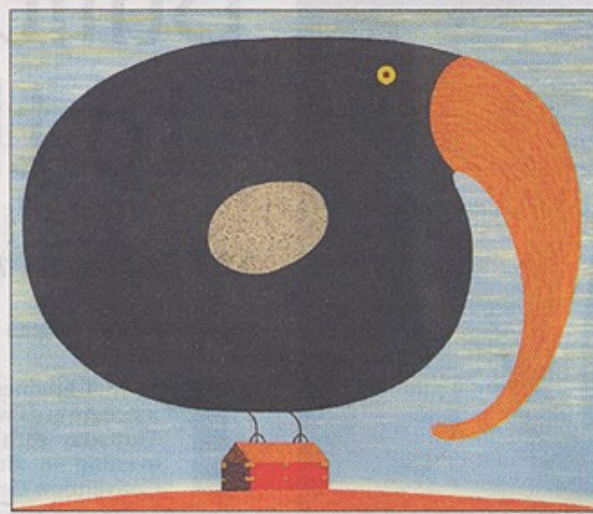
The awkward solitary bronze standing figures have just a touch of existentialist angst, not to be accepted at face value as humorous illustrations of a rural reality, but as hints at a reality beyond the one presented on the surface. The distilled images have that precious quality of "otherness" which distinguishes them from the illustrative and the mundane.

Bowen is an artist who manages to create an alternative, almost tangible reality, populated by

completely recognisable but fantastic creatures which in their simple and overstated manner comment on our world, the environment and on man's uncertain place in this world.

Technically the most pleasing works are the etchings and lithographs, although, unlike at previous exhibitions, I am warming to his oils with their very richly textured surfaces.

Over the quarter of a century that Bowen has been exhibiting his art, he has shown himself to be an artist of enormous consistency who has created a pictorial idiom which combines the humorous naïve with the surreal.



Dean Bowen's bronze sculpture *Driving farmer*, above, and, left, *Giant ibis* (oil on linen).