

Artist's bookish humour invaded

Denese Oates' works in copper combine delicate beauty with ponderous puns, in a largely disappointing exhibition, writes **SASHA GRISHIN**.

Denese Oates: *Ratoon*
Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin
Closes November 25, Tues-Fri
10am-5pm, Sat-Sun 9am-5pm

Denese Oates' unswerving dedication to copper, which she has worked in for many years, and her singular preoccupation with organic forms are admirable.

She has been exhibiting with the Beaver Galleries for two decades, and this is her ninth solo exhibition there, which makes this Sydney-based sculptor an honorary Canberra.

In an exhibition a couple of years ago, she was making delicate trees and plants out of twisted copper wire. In this exhibition they have literally taken root in books and in the process created visual puns.

Two books covered with metal paint, to heighten the impression of verisimilitude of musty tomes of learning, have three copper sage leaves growing out of them. The piece is titled *Sage*. A couple of painted books have little plants sprouting out of them and the sculpture is called *Captioned*, while three books with a copper branch growing out of them is called *Branches of Knowledge*. Among the major items in the show is *Flowering Tower*, with a pile of books stacked vertically on a wooden plinth and copper flowers sprouting from the top.

These verbal one-liners are

amusing and entertaining, but as art objects they are somewhat ephemeral in appeal. This is not to say that good art cannot be amusing, and certainly some of the best contemporary art is loaded with irony and wit, but beyond the beautifully crafted visual pun, I was left a little disappointed in the formal nature of the object. Once divorced from its literary content, the stack of books with a copper flower on it was not particularly interesting or rewarding as an artwork.

Unlike other Australian sculptors, including Bronwyn Oliver and Fiona Hall, who weave organic forms out of metal to create most memorable objects with their haunting power, Denese Oates' bookish humour rarely goes beyond the pun. Her two most successful pieces at the exhibition are *Mercury*, a free-flowing form designed as a wall piece with a lovely sense of kinetic energy, and *Chaos Theory*. This second piece is an

open book with copper leaves containing copper plants which, in a burst of fecundity, emerge from the sheets. Possibly the lack of disjunction of materials gives the work a more unified appearance than others in the show.

Denese Oates is certainly a very capable artist, but one hopes that she will be able to push her art a little further and perhaps take a few more risks in the process.

