

# A sophisticated primitivism

*New Morning.* By Dean Bowen.  
Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street,  
Deakin. Until June 12.  
**Reviewer:** Sasha Grishin.

**D**ean Bowen presents himself as a country lad, who was brought up with a love of animals running through his veins. In his stylistic morphology he adopts a number of the conventions of "naïf art", or the art of an innocent eye, one that is untroubled by the academic discipline of art making.

Bowen was born in Maryborough, in rural Victoria, north of Ballarat. Contact with nature was immersive and he made frequent visits to his grandmother who owned a menagerie, which included innumerable birds. By the age of 17 he had entered one of Melbourne's most prestigious art schools, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, graduating in 1976 with a Diploma of Fine Art, majoring in printmaking. He then travelled

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extensively abroad, subsequently completing a Masters degree and a PhD in Visual Arts at Monash University, where he also taught for a number of years.

I mention all of this to simply make the point that if Bowen adopts a stance resembling primitivism, this is done from a position of exceptional sophistication. He has held scores of exhibitions, nationally and internationally, and is widely represented in public collections. He has been exhibiting with the Beavers since the 1990s, so he is well known to Canberra audiences.

Bowen may not work to a formula, but he does work within a tightly circumscribed conceptual framework. Animals, particularly birds, are his main visual metaphor, which he employs to make a humorous comment on human society and the broader environment. Magpies, yellow budgies, smiling parrots, black canaries and the red spotted canary form part of his cast of characters in this exhibition, commenting on human society, while perched atop a skyscraper, pecking at a television antenna or simply watching the daily parade of ladybirds.

The forms are highly simplified, somewhat reminiscent of Jean Dubuffet and Diego Giacometti, and are provided with anthropomorphic characteristics. In some of his large oil paintings, including *Red Parrot Watching Ladybirds*, the colours are richly worked with a strong surface texture, while the forms have a geometric simplicity. There is something improbable and even farcical about the compositions that should bring a smile to anyone's face.

There is a constant game involved in Bowen's work in increasing the sugar content, so that his paintings, prints and small bronze sculptures amuse without becoming senseless eye candy. The artist speaks of his new work as being imbued with a new optimism and the new light of the new morning, which has arisen from his shift to a studio bathed in light. In imagery, this exhibition does not substantially differ from what was shown in exhibitions at this gallery in 2013 or 2009, but where there is a difference is that in a number of his works Bowen introduces a luminous glow on the horizon. These include the paintings, *Red Spotted Canary and Parrot Hawk With Ladybird family*, and the impressive lithograph, *Smiling parrot*.

Dean Bowen is not an artist in whose work there are abrupt changes, only gradual modifications and a deepening of vision.



Dean Bowen's *Red parrot watching ladybirds (Red Galaxy)*, left, and *Black dog*, above.

