

# 60 years of art high distinctions

## Jan Brown: sculptures, prints and drawings

Canberra Museum and Gallery,  
Corner of London Circuit and Civic Square,  
Closes September 21, Tuesday-Friday, 10am-5pm; Saturday-Sunday, noon-5pm



SASHA GRISHIN

Jan Brown at 86 is a veteran artist and this exhibition, which covers 60 years of her art, makes a claim for her significance as an artist. However, as an artist she is not widely known outside the ACT and, as fond as we may be of her, to make claims for her as an artist of national reputation and standing would be wide of the mark. Having said this, the evidence of the exhibition is that much of her work is of a very high order – she is a classically trained artist, a fine technical draughtsman and a very sensitive modeller of form. Her training, first at the East Sydney Technical College under Lyndon Dadswell and Dorothy Thornhill, and later in London at the Chelsea Polytechnic School of Art under Henry Moore and Bernard Meadows, certainly made her not only into the first professionally trained non-indigenous sculptor to work in the Canberra region, but also into one of the best trained sculptors to have worked in the region. Her teaching is legendary and she has been the saviour of and benefactor to several generations of Canberra artists.

Also her dedication to the art community and to the development of public-access art facilities has been outstanding and for this she was made a member of the Order of Australia in 1992.

Looking at this exhibition of her work, and I must confess that it is difficult to be objective about a person whom you admire as a publicly spirited role model, there is a feeling that she has not achieved her full potential. She has been hampered in the fulfilment of her career by being a woman, a wife and a mother. Although she taught for many decades, for a very long time she was overlooked for promotion and tenure in favour of her less gifted male counterparts. Of the 44 years that she taught at the School of Art, she attained tenure for only seven of them. She was seen too often as simply being married to Canberra and therefore could be taken for granted. No major campaign needed to be waged to retain her services.

A compounding issue was her choice of art form and medium. Sculpture in

general, until recently, has been the Cinderella of the arts in Australia and animal sculpture, in particular, has been definitely seen as a lowly feminine occupation. Even after the feminist emancipation of the art hierarchies, the art world has remained a little shy of animal sculptures, yet, as an animal sculptor, Brown is outstanding and has devised her own peculiar and distinctive artistic language.

I have always felt that her sculptures work best on a small and intimate scale which permits a direct engagement with the viewer. The sense of intimacy and domesticity has a greater profundity within an intimate encounter. Her magpies, currawongs and ravens betray an acute sense of natural observation and lend themselves to an allegorical reading. I have often felt that in her birds we can see the thinly veiled reference to the puffed-up self-importance of the establishment artists (most of them males) with chests blown out and stomachs held in, while their eyes appear vacuous and empty. Then there is the strutting arrogance of the academics and the self-confidence of the bureaucratic art apparatchiks which in her experience she found to grace the art schools, universities and government departments. An increase in scale would only detract from this impact and would play into the hands of the old modernist myth that if something is important it has to be loud and big.

Quiet, intimate and beautifully crafted are some of the characteristics of her art. There is a modesty and a quality of understatement which plays a significant role in her artistic language. Her art has a potency and beauty, a lyricism which is frequently blended with a barbed wit.

Jan Brown has made a huge and multifaceted contribution to the Canberra art scene.



Kangaroos (1970).