

# When humans and animals combine

**A**t 85, Jan Brown is one of Canberra's veteran artists, having spent the past half century working and exhibiting in Canberra.

Intimacy, domesticity and animals are all integral to her art.

Although primary observation has always been central to her practice, and she is an incessant sketcher, the allegorical dimension has never been far from the surface in much of her art.

Her magpies, currawongs and ravens – characterful creatures in their own right – generally in her art also lend themselves to play other roles.

In some of 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



**SASHA GRISHIN**

## Jan Brown: Prints and sculpture

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes March 10. Open daily, 10am-5pm.

self-confidence of the bureaucratic apparatchiks which, in her experience, she found to grace the art schools, universities and government departments.

She frequently finds models for her birds and animals in her immediate neighbourhood together with the models for the human characters into which they are morphed.

Although on occasion Brown ventures further afield into zoos to enlarge her cast of characters, they are all carefully and precisely delineated, sympathetically



*Walking bird*, bronze, edition 1 of 6, 22x26x9cm.

recorded and then frequently given a twist of irony to which some viewers will remain oblivious.

There is a famous story that when Goya painted the Spanish monarchy, his friends feared that they would take out their revenge

on him for making them appear as ugly imbeciles. Goya reassured them that they should not worry as his sitters were too stupid to see beyond the wizardry of the painted surface. As with all good stories, this one is probably apocryphal, but it hints at a tradition into which Brown taps.

In her best work in this exhibition, including the bronzes *Icarus II* and *Icarus III*, the human and animal features combine so intimately that the newly-created characters have a freshness of invention reminiscent of Daumier.

This is a very rich exhibition of drawings, lovely elegant drypoint prints and bronze sculptures.

While over the decades Brown has contributed enormously to the Canberra arts scene as a teacher, administrator and motivator, undoubtedly her greatest legacy lies in her wonderful evocative sculptures of animals who, if you look at them hard enough, will bite back.