

Bronze series inspired by legendary fall of Icarus

By Diana Streak
Arts Editor

A cluster of four imposing bronze bird figures will be the largest and most expensive public art work in the centre of Canberra when they are installed in Petrie Plaza in December.

Chief Minister and Minister for the Arts and Heritage, Jon Stanhope, said yesterday the \$388,357 works by renowned Canberra artist Jan Brown were funded from the 2008-09 Percent-for-Art budget.

"Jan Brown has reinterpreted the Icarus legend for these sculptures using the prolific local bird life of Canberra for inspiration," Mr Stanhope said.

The models of the figures, which range from 1.8 to 2.6m in height, were made in Canberra at the ANU Sculpture Workshop before being cast in Melbourne. "This has provided a unique learning opportunity for the students about the processes involved in the production of a major art work," Mr Stanhope said.

Brown is a distinguished Canberra artist who studied under Henry Moore and has been exhibiting in group and solo shows both nationally and internationally since 1949. Mr Stanhope said Brown had been an inspirational teacher and mentor to countless professional and amateur artists over the years and had worked as an activist for the arts while serving on numerous arts advisory councils and boards in Canberra.

"Given that Jan Brown is now 87 years old this is an important major commission," he said.

Last year Canberra Museum and Gallery held a survey exhibition of Brown's sculpture and works on paper, selected from her substantial 2008 gift to the institution, spanning her 50-year career.

Brown, who has worked on the sculptures "on and off for four or five years", said, "They were just four birds that I made. I've been working on the Icarus theme for ages, and they've come out one after the other."

Her fascination with the Icarus legend was part of her life-long interest in birds. "Because I've been working with birds all my life and



CREATIVE: Canberra artist Jan Brown works in the ANU's sculpture workshop.

Icarus is a bird story and you could say it's also the story of Canberra," she said.

In her essay for the CMAG exhibition, curator Deborah Clark said Brown's original Icarus series of four works, made between 2004 and 2006, "merges bird and human in her treatment of the Greek myth of Daedalus and his son Icarus who flew over Crete with home-made wings". The boy flew too near the sun, which melted the wax that attached his wings and he fell into the sea. "The story is a clear-cut case of human folly, and Brown's attenuated human figures with bird heads are both tragic and gormless.

The most robust is *Icarus 1*; posed as if stretching and poised for flight. *Icarus 2* is more fragile and *Icarus 3* is positively gaunt, and both have shrivelled or damaged wings... In contrast *Icarus 4* is almost all bird, cloaked and mysterious, like a slender enigmatic Balzac with strong claws. It is the most serene of the four, as if complete metamorphosis into a bird might provide a happy ending for Icarus," Clark wrote.

Brown said she was surprised



HYBRIDS: The sculptures combine bird-like heads and human forms as a comment on the Icarus themes of flight and fallibility.

more than anything else about the commission, her largest ever, which required getting on to a forklift to work on it. "I'm a bit nervous at the moment about it. I am sort of pleased about the position, it's a very good position and all I hope is that they will live up to it, it's a pretty daunting

place to put something isn't it?"

The production of large bronze sculptures involves many people in the making of the models and moulds, casting the figures, transportation and installation of the works. Mr Stanhope said the commission had provided three full-time

jobs for five months, significant work for three small businesses and supported a world class university, the ANU. "The bonus with this sort of contract is that the Canberra community will have a fabulous new artwork that can be enjoyed for years to come," he said.