

Arts



Premonitions urge us to act now

ART REVIEW

ALEX ASCH: ON THE HORIZON - ASSEMBLAGES Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin, Until April 7.
REVIEWED BY Sasha Grishin

Alex Asch over the past few decades has grown to be a nationally significant artist. He has possibly been somewhat held back from national acclaim through being located in Canberra and receiving relatively limited exposure in Melbourne or Sydney, places where national reputations are forged.

Asch's art is also difficult to categorise – most of the pieces in this exhibition are titled landscapes and at first glance appear like paintings, but are constructed out of recycled found materials. Sheets of rusty metal, galvanised steel, old discarded road signs, bits of timber and cast concrete are all introduced into the mix and through acts of alchemy are given a new life and a new identity, although carrying the scars and memories of their former existence.

Unlike Rosalie Gascoigne, whose gift lay in rearranging old found materials into new configurations yet clearly retaining their former identity as road signs, old pots or feathers, Asch transforms his materials.

His art is a fine balancing act, where we are encouraged to explore and engage with these contemplative gems, almost like bits of litmus paper or canaries in the mine,

reporting on climate change and the rupture in the physical and social fabric of our world.

I would describe Asch as an environmental artist, an artist with a social conscience and whose art belongs to the long tradition of protest art, which actively engages with society.

In this exhibition Asch tackles a number of interrelated themes, such as climate change in his 18 landscapes, the four postcolonial skulls and a series of houses and figurine compositions commenting on life in a surveillance state.

Asch's landscapes, such as *Landscape 14* and *Landscape 5*, have become more literal than in some of his earlier pieces. They are contemplative,

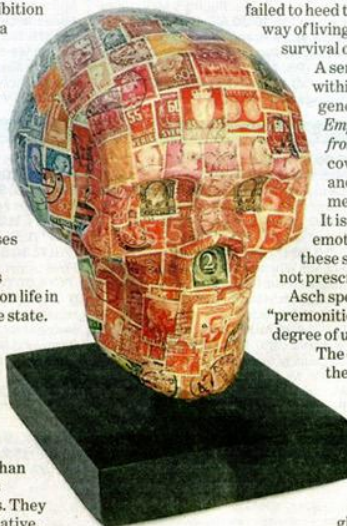
rather than illustrative, and invite one to consider European settlement in Australia and the materials that have been introduced that appear so alien in the context of this continent and its First Peoples. It is a sombre meditation on our threatened environment and how we have still largely failed to heed the message that our present way of living is incompatible with the survival of our planet.

A series of cast skulls, some shown within steel cages, carry the generic title *Souvenirs from the Empire*. One of these, *Postcards from the Empire*, has the skull covered in old postage stamps and quite literally heralding messages from bygone empires. It is a very effective play on our emotions, where the message of these sculptures is disturbing, but not prescriptive.

Asch speaks of works in this show as "premonitions or warnings" that have a degree of urgency.

The discomfort evoked by many of these beautifully crafted pieces is very deliberate, but the response for the viewer is suggested but not prescribed. Disaster is appearing on the horizon and it is up to each of us to act individually to avert a global catastrophe.

Two works by Alex Asch. *Landscape 5* (above) and *Postcards From The Empire*, below. Part of the exhibition at Beaver Galleries.



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