

A wondrous feast for the eyes

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By SASHA GRISHIN

Dean Bowen: *Recent Etchings, Paintings and Small Sculptures*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes 28 April, daily 10am-5pm.

TO JEAN DUBUFFET is attributed the famous aphorism, "What interests me in art is not cake, but bread."

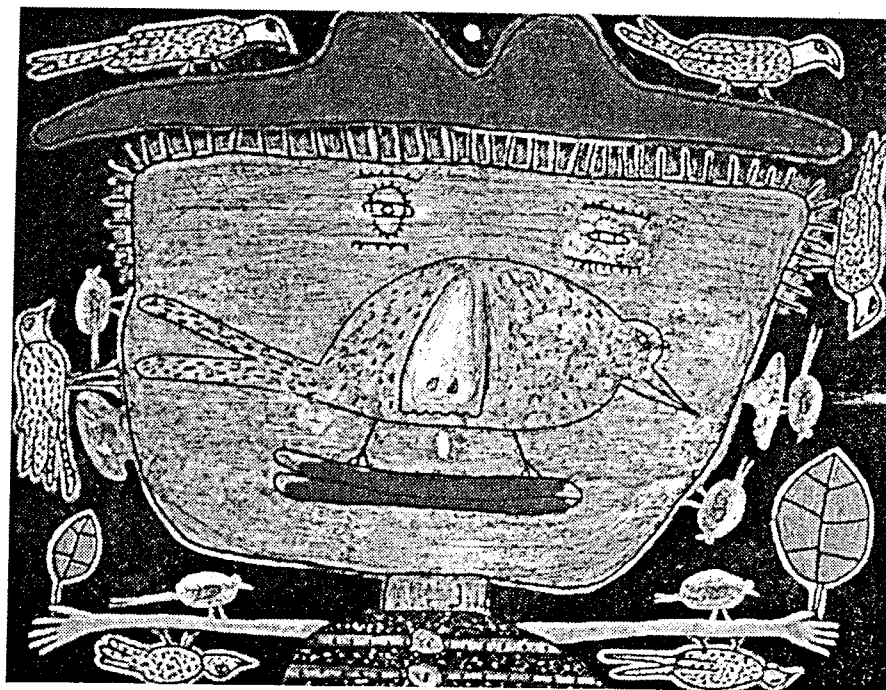
The Melbourne-based printmaker, Dean Bowen, works within the conscious heritage of Dubuffet and his concept of "Art Brut", or raw art which promotes an art which is pure and crude, compelling and direct. Like Dubuffet himself, Bowen is

not to be confused with a "naive" artist, one with an unschooled eye and untrained hand, but is rather an artist in search of directness and immediacy.

Although Bowen's self-consciously awkward figures are expressed with child-like simplicity, in their technical realisation, they are stunningly complex and sophisticated. In them he exploits the full repertoire of intaglio techniques with complete ease and mastery. In part, here lies the secret to the conceit and magic of Bowen's art, it is the expression of innocence, achieved through a sophisticated technical experience.

Bowen's imagery is quirky, whimsical and with a touch of the absurd. Although the images may to some extent be self-referential, they grow with the embroidered intricacy of a folk tale, where nothing is impossible and where each narrative episode hints at the next until a wonderful tapestry spreads out and creates its own tangible reality.

While Dean Bowen is best known as one of Australia's internationally ac-



Dean Bowen's *The Offering*, in etching, aquatint and drypoint.

claimed printmakers, this exhibition also includes several small oil paintings and a number of small bronze sculptures. It seems odd how some painters primarily turn to printmaking as a technique through which to breed their images, while printmakers generally turn to other mediums to explore formal concerns. Bowen's images with ease weave in and out of mediums and each stage contributes to their formal resolution.

Dean Bowen has the rare gift to create an image, such as his monumental *Echidna*, which may refer to the artist's own spiky hair or to the inner most thoughts

of an echidna dreaming, or may be a comment on the small bronze of *Echidna on My Head*. Once all of these possibilities have been canvassed, this fantastic creature in your mind seems to take on a life of its own.

This is a memorable and refreshing exhibition, full of visual puns and surprises, where the images gently and gradually seduce you. The sensuous beauty of *Girl Waving* or the narrative intricacy of *Envy and Innocence* are only two of the wondrous impressions that you take with you from this exhibition.