

Art

Images that are simple but strong

By SASHA GRISHIN

Dean Bowen: Recent paintings, prints and sculptures, Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison St, Deakin Closes March 1, daily 10 am - 5 pm.

DEAN BOWEN is predominantly an *intaglio* printmaker who also paints and sculpts.

I say this because he thinks like a printmaker, even when breeding his imagery in other mediums. There is the central preoccupation with the flat two-dimensional printing plate and its wonderful potential for the layering of marks and for building up surfaces with traces of consciousness and experience.

The starting point for much of Bowen's work lies in the artistic conventions popularised by Jean Dubuffet with his concept of "art brut" — the art of the cultural boundary riders.

It is the art of children, the insane and of naive and folk artists. Bowen cherishes this direct naive invention which he then embellishes with breathtaking technical sophistication.

If some non-figurative artists say that their desire is to paint an abstract idea as realistically as they can, Bowen sets out to create a very direct, simple and child-like image, in the most sophisticated manner possible. Personally, I find his *The red plane*, the third state of an *intaglio* print, quite a miraculous creation, where the stark brutality of the child-like image, on closer inspection, is totally subverted by a most elaborate labyrinth of technical strategies.

A number of his other prints, like *Spotted cat* and *Moon dog*, both of 1998, have travelled well through their technical metamorphosis. There is of course irony and humour involved in his work, suggesting that the artist does not always take himself totally seriously, but his work is a case of obsessiveness with technical refinements, which to the unschooled eye is designed to appear as a case of spontaneous crudity.

I am less certain of Bowen's sculptures. The migration of images out of the etchings is effective, but the deliberateness in their technical execution is less convincing. Possibly the most effective is his bronze *Lady holding a flower*, which is somehow reminiscent of Andrew Sibley's paintings, but lacks the suppressed tear.

This is a remarkably strong exhibition by a young artist in his early 40s who is developing his own distinctive pictorial language which grows stronger and more idiosyncratic with each exhibition.