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Dean Bowen's *Bird Lover*, in bronze, above; and *Swarm*, oil on linen, below right.

Art Sasha Grishin

Birds and bees part of simple message

Dean Bowen: *Cluster* – sculpture and small paintings. Closes June 11. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Tuesday to Friday, 10am-5pm; Saturday and Sunday, 9am-5pm.

Since Dean Bowen started to exhibit his work about 35 years ago, he has become something of an institution in the Australian arts scene.

He has also been quite successful abroad, especially in France, where the French seem to identify with his brand of humour with parallels in Jean Dubuffet and “art brut”.

He has been exhibiting with the Beaver Galleries for about 15 years, so he is well-known to Canberra audiences, but with more than 70 solo shows to his credit, he has built up a widespread following over the years throughout much of Australia.

Bowen's particular brand of art can be described as “quirky naïf”, with its peculiar blend of vibrant colour, simplified child-like drawing and slightly ironic and enigmatic imagery. It frequently serves as a comment on both the urban human condition and on escapist dreams of country tranquillity. The nursery rhyme-like simplicity and lucidity of his pictorial expression gives his art a memorable starkness and paintings, including *Blue Wren*, *Swarm* and *Red Flower*, possess poetic and iconic properties. His art has the power to delight, surprise and amuse.

In reference to popular culture, the general ambience of his work reminds me of the French short video animations, *Minuscule: the private life of insects*, where the mixture of computer 3D modelling, natural rural settings and a humorous narrative create a ridiculous but completely believable reality.

In Bowen's paintings and small bronze sculptures, his anthropomorphic birds and insects seem to be involved in

private rituals, whose enigmatic purpose is concealed from the beholder.

For quite a number of years he has been involved in translating his amusing narratives into decorative bronzes, frequently cast in editions of nine.

Some of the more monumental bronzes, including the two-metre high *The Big Little Man* (1999) in Petrie Plaza in Civic, are in an edition of three, and there is also a large *Lady with Flowers*, recently installed in Gungahlin.

The most effective bronze in this exhibition is *Bird Lover* (2012), where a figure (bearing a resemblance to Bowen) with outstretched arms becomes a human scarecrow on which three birds are perched on each arm. “The birds are free to fly away but choose to rest,” Bowen says of the work. It's this touch of the absurd and slightly wacky that provides a peculiar charm to his art.

Dean Bowen is also a very fine printmaker, arguably his strongest medium, and it is a pity that in this exhibition we have only his paintings and sculptures.

