

CMAG Exhibition

Jan Brown: Sculptures, prints and drawings

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The art of Jan Brown: A tiding of magpies

Jan Brown's marvellous sculptures, prints and drawings describe a singular practice in Australian art that has been sixty years in the making. The earliest work in this survey exhibition of her art dates from 1948, the year before she graduated from the Chelsea Polytechnic School of Art, London, with a National Diploma in Design (sculpture); the latest work, an artist book, is from 2008. The whole is a sustained and thoughtful body of work in which many of the concerns of twentieth-century sculpture are evident, yet Brown's chosen subject has deemed that her work followed its own trajectory, its own flight path, to ends that are frequently very moving.

Within a decade of Brown's return to Australia in 1956 her work began to focus increasingly on the animal world, principally birds. Her birds – and other creatures – are not strictly naturalistic; they are not portraits, nor are they explicitly symbolic or allegorical creatures and her few public animal sculptures are not monuments. The magpies, currawongs, hens, waterbirds, pigeons, owls and ravens that stalk through Brown's enduring practice

evoke both the quotidian struggle for existence and the larger mysteries of the universe. Her animal sculptures convey strength and vitality, humour and pain: the range of their expression encompasses the condition of being in the world.

This direction in Brown's work was due to her family circumstances. She had followed her fiancé Des Brown to London in 1947 where he undertook a doctorate in medical chemistry, and nine years later, after her art training, marriage and the birth of three children, she accompanied her husband to Canberra where he took up an appointment at the fledgling Australian National University (ANU). The contrast between London and Canberra in 1956 could scarcely have been more striking: Brown had lived through the post-war period of deprivation and rationing in Britain in a climate of rebuilding and optimism and in a culture rich with intellectual and visual history; in Canberra there was a population of 30,000, recently planted there to make a national capital. The satirist John Clarke wrote of a fictional Australian poet Kahlihliji Bran that he had migrated to Sydney from Lebanon having 'studied sculpture under Rodin but at that time nobody in Australia had heard of either Rodin or sculpture'.¹ It must have felt like that to Jan Brown in 1956.

Her studies at Chelsea had come after several years in the 1940s as an evening student at East Sydney Technical College (ESTC) where her strongest influences were Lyndon Dadswell and Dorothy Thornhill. Brown learned much about modelling from Dadswell, and art and life from Thornhill, but students at ESTC,

particularly part-timers, were not encouraged to read art history and theory or study the old masters, and at art school in London she was quickly made aware of her lack of education. Sent to the school library for six weeks Brown absorbed as much of the canon as possible, and added to her studies at the great art museum collections of London and Britain. She and Des's travels to continental Europe during their years in England, and subsequently, also enhanced Jan's art education.

At Chelsea Brown was taught sculpture by Henry Moore, Bernard Meadows and Willi Soukop. Soukop was an Austrian émigré in his early forties and Meadows a thirty-year-old rising star who was for some years Moore's studio assistant. Henry Moore was the senior figure and at fifty was then clearly at the centre of the sculpture revival in Britain. His work is essentially humanist, incorporating tribal and pre-Columbian influences into classical modernist figures and forms that express life force and the spiritual energy of existence. The prevailing mood of contemporary British figurative sculpture tended to a kind of anxious vitalism, influenced by post-war schizophrenia: optimism for a brave new world and despair at the immeasurable damage created by the conflict and its aftermath. Artists such as Kenneth Armitage and Lynn Chadwick developed figure styles of very summary character, which evoked the existential angst of Giacometti and a connection with British totemic forms.

Brown absorbed the lessons in life drawing and life modelling at Chelsea, also the art history, in which visual art was studied in the context of literature and music.

Students were required to write papers weekly but Jan Brown's recollection is that none were ever marked: it was the exercise that mattered.

Brown's carved stone *Head* and plaster *Cellist*, both 1949, share the stability and simplicity of Moore's contemporary work, and demonstrate that proficiency in both carving and modelling was a requisite of Chelsea. *Cellist* was Brown's exam work for her diploma and was produced over a few weeks: with it she became the top graduating sculpture student in the United Kingdom that year.

Head was Brown's first foray into carving stone and her second was *Bear* 1950, the plaster maquette of which is in this exhibition. *Bear* was Brown's first public commission, which Bernard Meadows helped secure at Leavesden Green County Primary School, part of a short-lived program of public art administered by Hertford County Council. Despite her lack of experience with the very real medium of two tonnes of quarried Rutlandshire stone the *Bear* is an exuberant and successful playground sculpture. (Brown, however, believes the maquette to be superior.)

In the years between graduation and her return to Australia, Brown's work was included in several group exhibitions in London and Glasgow, but her time was largely absorbed in caring for her three young children. In Canberra, with her husband carving out a career at the John Curtin School of Medical Research, Jan Brown was the at-home parent in a small community of academics, public servants, politicians and their families.

There was no childcare and virtually no art – certainly very limited resources and facilities for the production of sculpture.

The university community in Canberra contributed to a climate in the small bush city amenable to intellectual and cultural leisure pursuits, but it was an uphill battle to establish forums for serious art-making. Brown was employed part-time virtually on arrival in Canberra by Henri Le Grand, a charismatic potter and teacher at Canberra Technical College (later the Canberra School of Art, now the ANU School of Art). The subject was ceramics, of which Brown knew nothing, but she managed to stay ahead of the students long enough to grasp the medium. Brown was to continue teaching for the next forty years and this vital part of her art practice has shaped her understanding of what it means to be an artist, as it shaped the generations of Canberra art students whom she taught.

In the 1950s Canberra boasted the Canberra Artists Society, who would not accept ceramicists as members, thus Margaret Frankel began the Canberra Art Club, which Jan Brown joined. Frankel was an art enthusiast and vibrant organising presence in town, and was married to Otto Frankel, a distinguished plant geneticist who ran a CSIRO division. Brown participated in annual group exhibitions with the Canberra Club and Daramalan College for some years, and showed modest ceramic figurative works such as *Figure 1963/4*. By the mid-1960s Canberra's passionate but largely amateur art community was welcoming increasing numbers of

professional artists and writers and Brown found some true colleagues among them.

She met Rosalie Gascoigne (initially in David Jones Department Store) and they became good friends; both were members of the Art Club and at that time Gascoigne was experimenting with Ikebana. She remained, until her death in 1999, the person Brown most relied on for frank and insightful criticism of her work.

The English sculptor, philosopher and teacher Donald Brook arrived in Canberra in 1962 to undertake a doctorate at the ANU, and had a significant impact on art and art teaching in the nation's capital although he was here for only five years. Brook was extremely well informed about art history and current practice and rapidly became an influential critic, writing regularly for the *Canberra Times* (and elsewhere) in addition to teaching and making art. He left Canberra in 1967 to be on the inaugural staff of the University of Sydney's Power Institute and Department of Fine Arts, led by Bernard Smith.

Brook and Brown were colleagues and friends, and he made a major contribution to sculpture in Canberra with his introduction of ciment fondu, a relatively cheap casting material that is both sensitive and durable. A fast-setting cement mixed with an aggregate (such as sand) and colour, ciment fondu suits small editions and can be made in restricted spaces. For Jan Brown ciment fondu became the means with which she could continue to make sculpture. Most of her work for the last thirty years has been cast in both bronze and ciment fondu; it

is the latter that allows her to produce editions of four, affordable for both artist and collector.

Her subject she found looking out of her kitchen window and in the garden of her O'Connor home. To live in Canberra is to live in an aviary: the variety and number of native birds in the suburbs – and the wetlands, grasslands and bush of the region – is nothing short of wonderful. It is also possible to observe numerous families and colonies of birds over time.

When in 1964 Brown held her first solo exhibition at Nundah Gallery in Canberra, she showed a flock of birds: magpies, waterbirds, roosters and pigeons, largely made from ciment fondu. These creatures and others were to occupy her for the next forty years. Brown's menagerie does not belong to nineteenth-century traditions of animal sculpture, but to twentieth-century classical modernism. The forms of her birds are simple volumes with little detail, charged with dynamic tension. They variously strut, peer, squawk, hunch, swoop and strain; even when still they are somehow not static.

What is striking about this artist's oeuvre is that on her 'two inches of ivory'² she was able to work in – and across – much of the canon of modernist sculpture. Her formal education had been swift but valuable and she had made the most of it. In a sense Brown subsequently educated herself – rigorously – through her work and her teaching.

Works such as *Guardian* 1978 exemplify her economy of form in an essentially realist representation: the shoulders and wings of the watching bird are almost

subsumed into its hunched, enigmatic form. Its surface is not smoothly modelled but is expressive and agitated. With *Death of a magpie* 1992 the surface is riven with chasms and the bird's body seems barely held together, as if it were dissolving back into the earth. There are resonances of sculptures by Matisse and Rosso in the intensity of this simple expressiveness. *Carnage* 1978 and *Oilslick* 1995 have the poignancy of *Death of a Magpie* with the added horror of human agency in the death of the birds. This is one of the themes in Brown's work, that human intervention in the environment is almost always powerfully negative.

The natural course of life and the passage of time in the avian world is observed by Brown with wit and empathy. Her young birds are all legs and open beaks, awkward and demanding yet with the inherent appeal of young creatures of any species. *Young bird* 1985 suggests the ugly-duckling elegance of the beginner in the ballet class, and *Adolescent* 1994 (cover) perfectly conveys that moment between immaturity and maturity: the raised head and upright pose, yet still its adult clothes are slightly too big for it.

Young bird is peeled back to the essentials; its form rendered with a smooth surface and absolute simplicity, and its comical pose quite understated. With this and other sculptures Brown was working with a kind of essentialism. She made works that are refined, closed, organic forms, very much in the spirit of Brancusi and Arp. *Round (cold) pigeon* 1989 and *Bird in hand* 2006-07 are particular examples, as is *Cat* 1984. In 1973 the (then) Australian National Gallery acquired Brancusi's

two *Birds in space* c1931-36, works Brown admires greatly. With *Stylite* 1984 she melded the basic form of *Cat* seamlessly onto a branch-like column the whole soaring upwards. There are several different *Stylites* (the name refers to ascetics in the ancient world who lived on top of pillars) and the work in this exhibition is a blend of species, the stylised cat clasping the column with distinctive bird's feet.

Brown generally makes sculptures in series, and will frequently return to a subject and rework it. In the early 1980s she produced a number of highly abstracted sculptures of birds on pillars and plinths: the Trojan series. Unlike the *Stylites*, these works are imposing, blending the rounded archetypal birds with angular architecture. Extending the notion of guardian, the artist calls these variously sentinels, scouts and Trojans: erect on their plinths they are a mounted guard, and the parrots' crests – see *Scout* 1985 and *Trojan* 1984 – have the appearance of helmets.

The union of animal and machine is a strong theme in modernist art, and in sculpture antecedents include the Italian Futurists and Duchamp-Villon and Epstein. Boccioni's *Unique forms of continuity in space* 1913 is the great sculptural statement of Futurism, the figure striding into the future, and there is something of its military bravado in Brown's Trojans, although they are significantly more reserved. Duchamp-Villon's *Horse* and Epstein's *Rock drill*, both 1914, combined rounded organic forms with rigid mechanical ones in similar vein to the Trojans, but these birds are a long way from Europe on the eve of the First World War. They have a

totemic quality, which relates to certain themes in British art of the 1940s and 1950s; when Moore and others explored archetypal forms with particular reference to ancient Britain and its geoglyphs and stone circles. Although more modest in scale, Brown's sentinels and Trojans are guardians of their ancient domain, which is also the particular Antipodean landscape inhabited by the artist, a more recent arrival. One senses in the quiet strength of these birds that she rates their stewardship of the land more highly than ours.

Brown's *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. The beak on *Icarus 3* has become a beaked nose, very like the earlier *Man 1999*. 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.

The *Icarus* myth is a recurring theme in 1960s British art, where the subject's downfall resonates with post-war anxiety and deep fear of hubris. Related works include

those of Bernard Meadows, who used birds to convey fear in his 1952 Venice Biennale showing, and Elisabeth Frink, a student of his at Chelsea in the early 1950s. Some of her sculptures of falling figures and winged men are quite menacing in character. Her *Harbinger bird* 1960 is a monstrous creation. Donald Brook's *Icarus* of 1965 is a lighter creation, but it is nonetheless pitching head-first towards the ground.

The source for *Völuspá* is a Norse myth from a major thirteenth-century cycle of poetry, *The Poetic Edda*. Spoken by a seer (a *völus*) it tells the story of the past creation of the world and then predicts its destruction through war and subsequent rebirth. Brown's enigmatic sculpture has a lean and hungry raven intently crouched in an arabesque over a human figure, who is seemingly shrouded in a pair of wings. This is the moment in the story between destruction and rebirth, when the gods sleep and the ravens clear the way for a new world. For Brown the haunting cry of the Australian raven embodies the lonely isolation of the country and the tragedy of its degradation at the hands of humans.

In its clean and simple lines and the satisfying block-like character of the figure *Völuspá* is reminiscent of the work of Barlach, while the embedded nature of the figure recalls his contemporary Kollwitz, whose work like Brown's is full of tenderness and compassion. There are also elements of Surrealism in this and works such as *Grieving bird* c1997-98 and *Dies irae* 1989.

Brown's major public commission, the bronze *Kangaroos* 1979-80, seems a far cry from her more ambiguous

works. She was invited by the National Capital Development Commission to make this sculpture for Commonwealth Park, which is a prime public space that runs along the north side of Lake Burley Griffin between the two bridges. The female kangaroo and her joey are poised by Nerang Pool as if to drink, watchful, but in their element. The *Kangaroos* may be Brown's most naturalistic sculpture, but the animals' bodies and limbs are actually exaggerated, emphasising the muscularity and strength of these extraordinary marsupials. This work was the first significant bronze to be cast in Australia by Peter Morley, who came to Australia from a London foundry where he had worked with Barbara Hepworth. It was the beginning of a long collaboration between Brown and Morley, creator of the Meridian Foundry in Melbourne.

Collaboration is an important aspect of Jan Brown's professional life as an artist and teacher. Within the Canberra arts fraternity and broader community she worked with friends and colleagues to foster art and art education, formally and informally.

Brown was an organising force in the establishment of national sculpture festivals in Canberra and active in the development of an arts infrastructure here, holding key positions on the ACT Arts Development Board and the ACT Cultural Council in the 1980s and 1990s. Her impetus and work was crucial to the establishment in the early nineties of Australian National Capital Artists, a cooperative venture between the territory government and the arts community providing low-cost studio space to

early-career artists in purpose-built complexes (in Dickson and Mitchell).

She was an enormously influential teacher in sculpture and (later) foundation studies, after the Canberra Technical College became the Canberra School of Art in 1976. She is remembered as a rigorous and gifted teacher: articulate, frank, witty, generous and supportive. Brown placed a strong emphasis on drawing in the students' foundation year, and her own drawings are evidence of continuous and sustained practice with marks on paper. The series of eighteen pencil and charcoal *Self portraits* 1991-97 in this exhibition are a selection from the artist's routine daily drawings.

Since the 1980s and 1990s Brown has worked a number of times with colleagues from the print and graphic workshops, including Dianne Fogwell, Meg Buchanan and Danie Mellor, in the production of prints and artist books, a number of which are in this exhibition. Perhaps because she regarded printmedia as a medium for play with images and techniques the books and prints have a lightness of touch yet are brimming with life.

Jan Brown's art is unusual in Australia in its focus and its quiet intensity. Standing to one side of post-1960s developments in sculpture, Brown worked with subjects close to hand to create a menagerie of creatures that perfectly evokes the fragility of life and the great central questions of the universe.

Deborah Clark

¹ John Clarke, *The Even More Complete Book of Australian Verse*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003

² Jane Austen, Letter, 1816; describing the narrow range of her subject matter