

Insights into human zoo give cause to smile

Jan Brown: *Observations* Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until April 14.

Reviewed by: Sasha Grishin

Jan Brown is an artist with an intimate vision, who on several occasions has been able to realise it on a monumental scale. These have included the kangaroos at the pool in the Commonwealth Gardens (1981) and more recently the Icarus group in Petrie Plaza in Civic (2009).

In 1991, when I was researching my catalogue essay for her retrospective exhibition at the ANU room of the Drill Hall Gallery, I had the privilege of going through her drawers of sketches, prints and drawings in her studio to obtain a fuller impression

of the scope of her artistic vision. It is a random selection of materials from these drawers from the past 40 years, accompanied by table sculptures, which makes up this exhibition.

At 92, Brown is Canberra's pre-eminent veteran artist. She was Canberra's first professional sculptor and she was a long-serving teacher at the Canberra School of Art, where she shepherded through several generations of artists, and was a mentor to a number of them.

For many years, she has also been an arts administrator and activist, championing many developments in Canberra's art infrastructure, including the establishment of Australian National Capital Artists studios and gallery.

In view of all of these commitments, from time to time, her own creative work took a back seat and, rather than engage with the grandiose projects of some of her male peers, Brown's artistic vision became increasingly intimate, observations of things close at hand, frequently in the front yard of her suburban garden.

She increasingly became an astute observer of the local birdlife and made moving and highly detailed observations in terms of sketches, drawings and small sculptures.

However, from these exacting observations, she took some of her drawings to the next stage to create little allegorical social vignettes.

Some of her proud ravens puff out

their chests, like some of her male colleagues in the art school, full of their own self-importance.

There are the gossiping magpies, the self-conscious chooks, the cocky roosters, the aloof owls and the cats who keep their own counsel.

All of these form part of her cast of characters drawn from an intimate glance, from a woman's perspective, at the petty behaviour by some academics, all-powerful bureaucrats and conceited politicians. I am reminded of Aesop's Fables and his penetrating commentaries on the social structures of his day, which have changed little in the past 2500 years.

As I moved around the exhibition, I could not but pause every now and

then for a little chuckle at the little parodies the artist has presented for our contemplation. Some works seem to have a self-referential dimension, such as the anguished images of trapped birds, which she drew several decades ago, which I have always felt could serve as a metaphor for the trapped artist.

Other works, with exotic animals, are quite tender observations of creatures she encountered in zoos.

At a time when many artists are lost for ideas about what to do with their art, Brown presents us with her personal insights into the human zoo of Canberra, as observed by a woman with a sharp eye and seen from the perspective of someone living in an inner suburb of the capital.



Bird #14 in bronze by Jan Brown.



Bird shows the artist's astute appreciation of local bird life.