

Works of steel a surrender to nature

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DENESE Oates: *Landscape in sculpture.* Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes October - online or by appointment. beavergalleries.com.au

Denese Oates is a sculptor who weaves with metal to create work that is in homage to nature. I have followed her work for several decades and have observed both changes and consistency in her art practice. Her method of weaving with strands of copper has remained largely consistent, although there have been certain refinements with a more imaginative use of patina of the surfaces.

She has also been consistently interested in the forms of nature as a source of inspiration and a point of departure for many of her sculptures. Her work is lyrical and by temperament she is a romantic who is endlessly fascinated with her response and discoveries in nature.

Where I feel there has been a shift, at least in some of the work, is that she is increasingly guided by nature itself and is intrigued by its mysterious spirit. Increasingly in her art in pieces, such as "Sugarloaf Tree", "Truncated" and "Stickbag Tree", there is triumph of the forms of nature over the artist's intellect. In many of her earlier exhibitions, the artist appeared to work from a concept and, in the process, she embraced nature. In this exhibition, one frequently has the feeling that Oates has surrendered to nature and this has guided her in the final resolution of the piece.

When the painter Fred Williams looked at the bush after a fire had passed through and had denuded the undergrowth, he saw it as somewhat of a "surreal experience" - the naked damaged trees no longer seemed to grow out of the ground, but stood unconvincingly on top of it. The forms appeared more minimal, stripped to the core and elemental.

It is interesting how Oates responded to similar circumstances. She writes, "This work has its roots in the landscape. Results



Denese Oates, Phoenix Tree (detail).

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of bushfires are visually fascinating despite the devastation. Textures and colours, peeling bark and weeping wounds not usually seen in the landscape, spark ideas to be explored in different mediums."

She continues, "Constructing trees from metal, a material far from nature, is my way of honouring the environment. Using copper, silver solder and patina, I seek to create both a feeling of organic strength in the work, or a contrasting fragility, guided by the shapes of the copper and the colour of the surface...Each patina applied is a mystery and the result is always unexpected. Making decisions when the sculpture moves towards a path different to the artist's imagination is vital to the process."

In some of the strongest pieces in this exhibition, including "From the ashes" and "Phoenix tree", there is this palpable feeling for struggle, despair, hope and revival. In

adopting a reasonable scale for her trees and anchoring them into a block of corten steel with its natural rust red soil colour, her trees command a considerable presence.

Over a number of decades, Oates has been evolving her own artistic morphology in her slow and painstaking technique. The forces in nature are increasingly allowed to dominate her work as she explores both the forms and spirit of nature. It is a huge challenge for a sculptor to move away from observing nature and examining its forms, to surrendering to it, entering it, and to allowing its spirit to guide them. In some of her most successful pieces at this exhibition, Oates succeeds in achieving this.