

Scavenger gives voice to materials

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Alex Asch: Axis. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until February 28, 2020.

It is difficult not to become seduced by the art of Alex Asch - immaculately crafted, beautifully resolved and gently understated while packing a considerable conceptual punch.

Asch's art is about our environment, climate change, social and economic inequalities in this world; it challenges the aggressive imperialist foreign policies and the weak-kneed responses by subservient states, including Australia. Whereas many artists who adopt an ethical stance also adopt a matching ego and see themselves as storming the barricades while posing for selfies with an unfurled revolutionary flag in the background, Asch almost completely hides behind the facade of his creations.

This is more than simply allowing his creations to do the talking for him; it is also giving voice to his materials - to nature herself - to make a powerful and unambiguous pronouncement. Asch, since his earliest works, has been a scavenger, an artist who works on the bricolage principle and employs the materials at hand and found in country rubbish tips or rusting in the bush. He must be a rare visitor in the expensive shops specialising in art supplies.

In early works, the artist with considerable skill elegantly crafted his scavenged materials into their new life as walls in some unlikely church on wheels, houses or citadels to create the facades of our crumbling world. He has always been happy to leave on his materials traces of paint or bits of rust that paid homage to their earlier existence - their rites of passage.

The new body of work in this exhibition has taken this process a step further so that the patina on the found scrap materials becomes an integral part of the work and a fundamental aspect of the concept. Most of the works at this exhibition are about landscapes, about gradual shifts in sea levels and



Alex Asch, *Hard sky, Lake George in Axis*. Picture: Supplied

Asch always manages to surprise, delight and challenge his audiences.

the effects of climate change where the artist has cleverly pressed the elements of nature into the role of his artistic collaborators.

A parallel immediately springs to mind with another Canberra artist who fabricated her landscapes out of found materials, the late Rosalie Gascoigne. Conceptually, Asch

may be a fellow traveller, but his objects are ideologically charged rather than being simply evocative of a location or type of landscape. If one can bring to mind the memorable images of Lake George by Gascoigne (one of which is on display in the *Know my name* exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia), Asch's *Hard sky- Lake George* makes for an interesting parallel. By assembling sheets of metal we have a convincing rendition of the lake, with its own feather, the hills in the background with the dominant apocalyptic sky above.

The sheets of metal carry not only the rust from the decades of exposure to the elements, but also the traces of paint as well

as chalk and concrete residue from their previous life. All of these elements combine in this deeply moving portrait of a distressed ancient lake. Other landscapes in the show also bear witness to the bushfires and widespread devastation.

Together with the landscapes, the exhibition contains a number building facades, including *Rural abstraction 2*. Again, the exposed metals and timbers are allowed to tell their own story through the scars that they carry from their passage through time.

In his numerous exhibitions at this gallery, Asch always manages to surprise, delight and challenge his audiences. This exhibition is no different.