

Sculpture in the realm of landscape

G.W. Bot is still walking in the poet's garden, and, she tells SALLY PRYOR, there's no place she'd rather be

FOR G.W. Bot, a garden is many things.

It's the space beyond her front door, extending into the Australian landscape, filled with her totemic animal, the wombat.

It is the exhibition space we are sitting in, lit up with her latest works - a landscape mapped with glyphs. Her latest show at Beaver Galleries, *Glyphs - the return of the poet* - features bronze sculptures, paintings and linocuts, relayed through the poetry of texture and words.

A garden is also the physical environment she sees being eroded through human-made development, both in her long-time Canberra suburb of Cook, and the housing that encroaches the tract of land known as Strathnairn, where Bot works alongside other artists, absorbing the landscape and watching the suburbs creep closer.

Gardens are both enclosed - landscapes of mind and memory - and vast. Bodies of water, mountains and grasslands - all appear in her particular visual language.

It was back in the 1980s that she decided to take on a signature name - a nom de guerre, as she puts it. In everyday life, she's Chrissy Grishin, but as an artist, she has a particular totemic relationship to the wombat. She had heard that the earliest written reference to a wombat occurred in a French source, where the animal was called "le grand Wam Bot".

"I do like the idea of the oneness with the landscape that our indigenous brothers and sisters have," she says, of taking on a totem.

"And I love wombats, because, like artists, they're fairly solitary. They live in their burrows - in their studios - and on occasion they come out. Life's little philosophers."

Born in Pakistan to Australian parents - her father was in the Australian army - Bot has known as long as she can remember that she would be an artist.

"You're born with that disease! There's no way out," she says.

Today, her works are held in more than 100 art collections around the world - including the National Gallery of Australia - and she has staged more than 50 solo exhibitions across a 30-year career, of painting, sculpture, prints and linocuts.

It's this last medium that, today at least, she finds the most satisfying.

"It just focuses me - I've always approached linocuts as a form of relief sculpture ... you've got the roundness of the form in on three sides, but you don't on the fourth, like sculpture in the realm," she said.

"But what you get on the fourth dimension are the shadows, and I love the shadows.

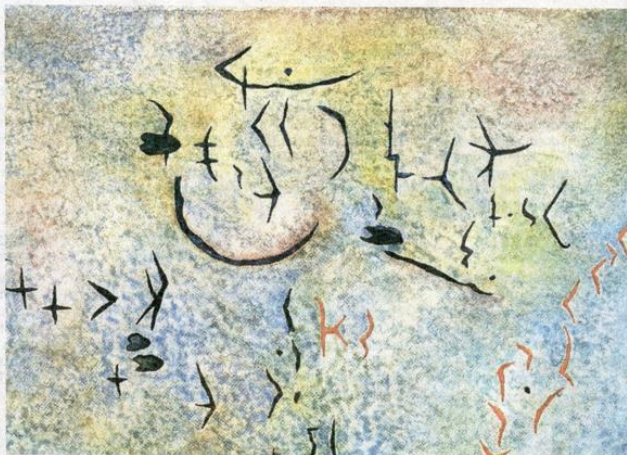
"That's something we get from being in Australia. It's the space - we live in a vast place.

"And again, with development, it worries me, it seems to be this push to fill the space up as fast as possible.

"Why would you be filling this space? Is it because you're frightened of it? Is it because you think it's worthless? Whatever the



Artist G.W. Bot, with some of her works at Beaver Galleries. Picture: Eles Kurtz



reason, spaces are important."

A pair of her prints were included in the NGA's recent *Know My Name* exhibition, which celebrated the works of Australia's women artists across two decades.

Bot has long taken her place in the pantheon of her sisters-artists.

But while she did study art at a young age, in London, Paris and Australia, and later medieval history at the Australian National University, she never went to art school.

Mainly, she says, because she is too stubborn to take direction, to entertain the potential of being told she cannot do something, and must do something else instead.

"It's stubbornness, because maybe one will be introduced to techniques a little bit more easily than finding them oneself," she says.

"It became like a sort of medieval apprenticeship to the master, whoever the master was."

And there have always been plenty of

such people around her. For almost 50 years, Bot has been married to the art historian and critic Sasha Grishin, and inspiration has never been in short supply.

The story of their meeting is the stuff of romance novels; both attended the same lecture on Tudor portraiture at the National Portrait Gallery in London when Bot was still a teenager.

"There were about 20 people attending the lecture in a small room with a slide projector screen, and there was a tap on one of my shoulders," she says.

"And Sasha said, 'I can't marry you now, but when I see you again, I will!'"

That was all, for a time.

It was a few years later, when she was in her second year of medieval history at the ANU in Canberra, that there was another tap, this time on her other shoulder.

"It was Sasha, and he said, 'I remember you,'" she says.

The two have been together ever since.

They had two children close together, when she was relatively young, in her early 20s.

Bot recalls the disapproving atmosphere of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, a movement she found alienating - not the Simone de Beauvoir-style that she had quite enjoyed, but rather the dogma of Germaine Greer.

"It was all about antagonism, and I wanted a kind of inclusiveness," she says.

"Like when I got married, that was a no-no, you've got to follow your career. And now you've got children on the way, oh my god!"

In fact, her life with Grishin - who established the discipline of art history at the ANU in 1977, and has had a long and distinguished career as a writer and critic - was utterly conducive to being an artist.

"Ideas were bigger than the house ... once philosophising happens at home, you're just everywhere in the world, and it's quite fantastic. So we had artists visiting us, we visited artists, and we lived it all," she says.

"It was wonderful, because I was a little bit shy about my work, and he was just over the moon, saying 'Chrissy, just keep working, just keep doing what you're doing!'"

Her children, she says, made it even better, despite what her feminist sisters would have had us all believe.

"The one huge thing I learned from having children was that they are themselves as soon as they hit the ground," she says.

"And the job of, in my case, being the mother was just asking them to tell me what the world was all about, because they knew all about it.

"Little children are fantastic ... they take this responsibility really seriously, because you may not have seen the moon. Have you seen the moon?"

"And you think, no, I haven't seen the moon like that, you've made me see the moon again.

"And that's the job of an artist, is to let you see the moon again. Because there's nothing new under the sun."

■ *Glyphs - the return of the poet*, by G.W. Bot, is showing at Beaver Galleries until May 21.