

A celebration of rugged beauty

Visual arts

Sasha Grishin

Alex Asch: Climacteric: assemblages. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes February 25, Tuesday to Saturday, 10am-5pm.

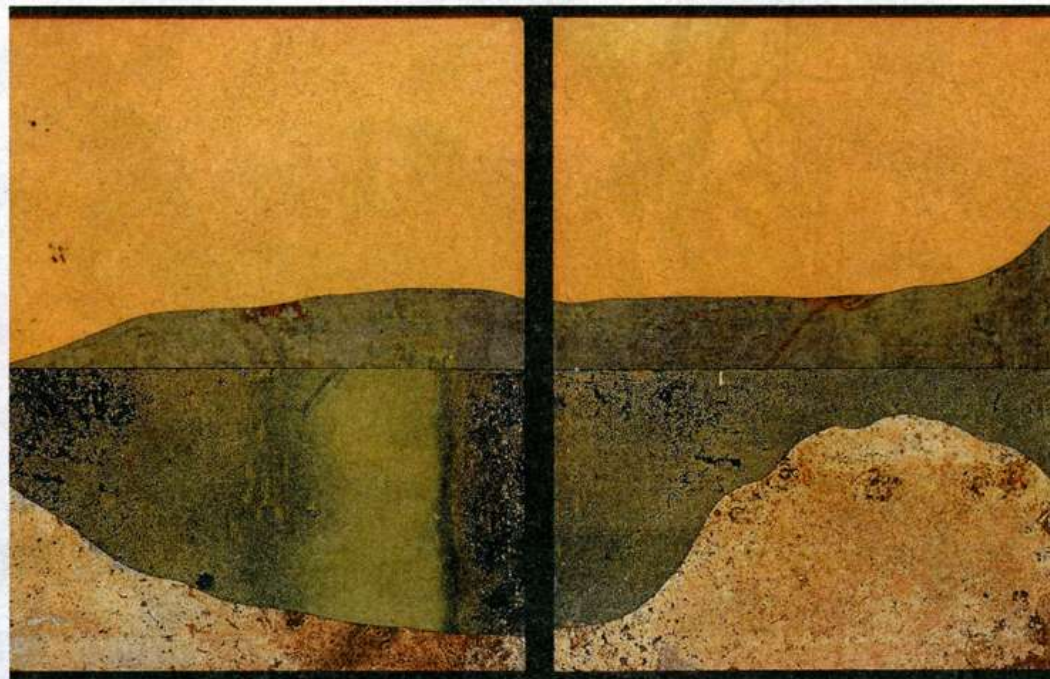
Alex Asch has been establishing himself over the past decade as the preeminent Australian artist who has been interpreting the landscape in sculptural form.

Of critical importance for his art practice is the idea of collaboration. He is not the sort of artist who stands at his easel and depicts what he sees before him, nor even the environmental artist who sees himself as part of the landscape that surrounds him. Instead, he actively seeks out elements in the landscape that surround him on which nature has already left its traces and these, with great skill, he assembles into landscape tableaux.

The process, in some ways, can be interpreted as the landscape creating a self-portrait and the artist appears in the role of a midwife who helps all the elements to come together to give birth to a finished and resolved artwork. The finished pieces are quite startling, memorable and command a considerable presence.

The key ingredient in the 26 artworks in this exhibition is bits of rusted well-weathered metal that has absorbed the Australian outback conditions for many decades. Asch is not unique amongst Australian artists in his interest in rusty outback sheets of iron. The First Nations artist Lorraine Connelly-Northey has used these materials to great effect for some time as has Canberra's Rosalie Gascoigne, however Asch's actual use of them is unique. He introduces a different skillset and a different aesthetic.

His landscapes come complete with their marked horizons, moody skies and topographical details, however, the unconventional materials are also left with their own voice. *Storm front* is a striking square tableau, measuring 60 centimetres by 60 centimetres, where the artist has employed



Alex Asch, *Midday at the living desert* (detail).

recycled painted and burnt galvanised steel, formply and enamel enhanced by concrete residue. In one sense, the work is in the tradition of the Romantic landscape with a sweeping panorama and the foreboding storm front that appears to be sweeping in from the distance. The scars left on the materials, especially the concrete residue, the corroded surfaces and the overlapping layers of texture provide a sense of "authenticity" to the scene and even the small nicks in the sky section resemble distressed birds flying against the wind.

Asch has always been a superb craftsman; one only needs to think back to the improbable but beautifully constructed wooden

churches on wheels or his various building facades that he has exhibited over the years. He brings the same sense of finesse to these landscapes with the elements seamlessly blended together to create these new realities.

Having exhausted the rubbish tips in his native Queanbeyan, Asch this time sourced his materials on a road trip to Broken Hill, Cobar and Silverton. There is something quite satisfying that the iron ore that was once extracted in outback Australia was transformed into sheets of metal that in turn have been transformed into outback debris that has now been metamorphosed through the artist's skill and imagination

back into landscapes that once gave birth to the raw materials.

In this sense, it is a cyclical process that invites us to meditate on our changing environment, climate change and the human impact on the process.

Larger pieces, including *Midday at the living desert* and *Nine-mile road* seem to more literally refer to the process of change in the materials.

Asch is an artist whose social conscience has always been central to his art making and it is no different in this series of work. However, there is also a great lyricism in this series, a celebration of the rugged beauty of our damaged landscape.