

dean bowen

Menagerie November 26 to December 10 2022

Describing the imagery that populates his current solo show with Anthea Polson Art, Dean Bowen imparts, "The feathered characters in my avian theatre have players who engage and interact with them. Ladybird armies seem to make regular appearances - are they friends or perhaps dinner for their feathered companions? Echidnas (another of my favorite totems) inhabit this exhibition alongside wombats, owls, kookaburras and other creatures. They are all performers in a wondrous menagerie."



As in early cultures where imagination and reality intertwined, Bowen's art expresses a sense of kinship between the animal, human and natural worlds. Deceptively simple in rendition, the works have subtle underlying implications.

Although referencing ecological concerns, a quiet optimism pervades. A prime example of this is the oil on linen painting, *Echidna Path*. Here, attempting to find the pathway leading to a sustainable future, a multitude of usually solitary echidnas are on the march. "It's an environmental comment in a way," says Bowen. "Their home is now a barren landscape, perhaps caused by mankind and habitat degradation. None the less, there are many echidnas, which is a good sign! I am hoping that one day the countryside will become full of non-endangered echidnas. Despite the conservational message, there is also a humour that will hopefully provide amusement for the viewer."

Recollections from a happy childhood growing up in country Maryborough inform much of Bowen's subject matter. He tells that the antics of birds have always been a source of inspiration. "Birds started appearing in my work long ago. I have vague memories of my first attempts that were elongated flying 'm' shapes drawn in red crayon. As an adult, birds frequently materialised on the periphery of my pictures but gradually they increased in size and prominence until they became the central and dominant theme. These plumed creatures are often outsiders, quirky individuals in some way or another. Their migration to the canvas continues to surprise me. They can land as flightless birds, obese birds, extinct species or completely imagined, anthropomorphised forms that display various aspects of the human condition." Bowen's positive outlook is again evidenced in paintings where the oval shape midst a bird's wing represents an egg, a symbol for him of motherhood and regeneration. The *Perching Green Bird (Cumulus)* and *Perching Blackbird (West)* works depict such creatures sitting atop towering stacks of red bricks. They are seemingly triumphant in their adaptation to mankind's propensity for disrupting the natural environment.

Stemming from personal experience of domestic animals, several paintings encapsulate the demeanour of cats and dogs. Bowen's felines directly face the viewer in a supercilious, or maybe querulous attitude. The pictures featuring a dog are quirky indeed. For instance, contrary to its title, the painting *Sunny* has one standing in a grassy field overarched by a sky of twinkling stars. "The dog's tail is curved like an umbrella handle which gave me a lot of amusement, but he looked like a sunny character," reveals Bowen. "I enjoy painting the hacksaw-like teeth projecting from a dog's open mouth. Each tooth is unique and can look a bit threatening but I see my canines as gentle animals."

A most curious scenario is being enacted in *Skyscraper With Giant Bee (skytree)*. Bowen elaborates, "From time to time I have played around with scale in my work, usually in humorous ways. Bees in our reality are small but in this case the bee is gigantic – a science fiction honeybee that has something in common with King Kong climbing up a building perhaps? The work also relates to a giant skyscraper in Tokyo, called The Skytree. I thought any 'sky tree' should have some bees with it."

Bowen's painted animals and birds are essentially flat renditions that eschew chiaroscuro and perspective considerations, somewhat redolent of the comics he enjoyed as a teenager. His creativity however extends to three-dimensional visualisations cast in bronze at the Perrin Sculpture Foundry, Melbourne. The exhibition features two pieces that he considers as "small studies of the Australian landscape". "I very much enjoy doing unique, one-off bronze casts such as these," he enthuses. "The sculptures were made using a direct burnout technique, similar to the lost wax process, except real wood is used along with hand-modelled wax forms. I have some favourite trees that often drop branches and I'm always on the lookout for the 'right' shaped branch. To these I add my wax creatures and some leaves prior to the bronze casting. It is an elaborate process in a cacophonous working environment – a direct contrast to the isolation of my painting and print-making studio practice."

Bowen's works are in the Collections of Artbank, the Art Gallery of NSW, the Australian War Memorial, the National Gallery of Australia, the National Library of Australia, Parliament House, the Heide Museum of Modern Art and many Regional Galleries. Internationally, Bowen's art is represented in Paris's Bibliotheque Nationale and Atelier Franck Bordas, the National Taiwan Museum of Art and the Fukuoka Museum of Art.

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