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CIRCLES WITHIN CIRCLES

by Brad Buckley

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DEAN BOWEN

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DEAN BOWEN'S ECCENTRIC ART BRUT WORKS ARE DRIVEN BY CURIOSITY AND DESIRE FOR THE STRANGE AS A MEANS OF UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD. THE RESULTS ARE TOUCHING AND SOMETIMES HILARIOUS. HIS TWO UPCOMING SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND BOOK ARE RARE INSIGHTS INTO BOWEN'S LIFE AND WORKS.

Melbourne artist Dean Bowen knows exactly when and why he decided to become a sculptor as well as a printmaker and painter. It was 1993, in Paris, when Bowen was creating lithographs with master technicians at Atelier Franck Bordas. One day, while a lithographic stone was being grained in preparation for his next work, Bowen retreated to the atelier library to wait. There he found books on the French artist Jean Dubuffet.

Dubuffet brought the art world's attention to *art brut*, a term he coined for the compulsive, instinctive art of the untutored. He was also an advocate of children's art. Franck Bordas had worked with Dubuffet on his final print project in the 1980s, and Bordas's grandfather Fernand Mourlot had assisted the younger Dubuffet to produce prints (to say nothing of Mourlot's collaborations with Vlaminck, Utrillo, Braque, Chagall, Matisse, Miro and Picasso).

Bowen had long been interested in Dubuffet. But finding the books in the Bordas library catalysed two other events he witnessed in Paris around the same time. On the Champs Élysée in 1993, Fernando Botero's sculpted nudes were on temporary outdoor display. And in 1991-92, the attenuated sculptures of Alberto

Giacometti were showcased in an exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris.

Swept up by the combined forces of Dubuffet, Botero, and Giacometti, Bowen was suddenly restless. "I started to think I needed to be a more creative artist," he says. "The following year I started to play around with found objects and just tinkered a bit, and in 1995 started to make the first bronzes."

The first bronze was a spiky-haired man driving a small car. "I had no idea it was a self-portrait," Bowen laughs. "The guys at the foundry said they saw me driving up the Punt Road one day with a serious expression on my face, and that's how the title [*Serious Driver*] came about."

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- 01 Bowen with *Smiling Kookaburra (Small)*, 2021, bronze, 58 × 62 × 23 cm, and *Smiling Kookaburra (Large)*, 2021, bronze, 109 × 118 × 43 cm, City of Wodonga, photographed by Viki Petherbridge
 - 02 *Lady with Flowers*, 2017, bronze (edition of 3), 211 × 180 × 131 cm, Pt. Leo Estate Sculpture Park, Merricks, Victoria, photographed by David Hannah
 - 03 *Ladder to the Stars*, 2020, bronze, 46.5 × 47 × 10.5 cm
 - 04 *Bird on a Wire*, 2007, watercolour on paper, 24 × 35 cm
 - 05 *Blue Bird with Ladybird Army*, 2020, oil on linen, 137 × 153 cm
 - 06 *The House of Love*, 2016, oil on linen, 122 × 183 cm
 - 07 *Jar of Stars*, 2020, bronze (edition of 9), 21.5 × 22 × 18 cm



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Bowen has made about 200 bronzes since *Serious Driver*, including larger ones starting in 1999. His numerous commissions for public spaces include *Lady with Flowers*, 2017, sited near a vineyard at Pt. Leo Estate on the Mornington Peninsula.

Today, all three strands of Bowen's practice – printmaking, painting, and sculpture (including assemblages) – have a loyal following among collectors who respond to the innocent wisdom and playful sincerity that pervades his work. Sydney, however, will see its first major showing of Bowen's sculptures when his exhibition, *Nitty-Gritty*, opens at Ali Yeldham's Arthouse Gallery in Rushcutters Bay in March 2022.

"We've always shown his sculpture together with his paintings and assemblages, but this is the first time we have really featured the

sculpture," Yeldham says. "We want to exhibit a range of works that show the various characters and animals that he's developed over his career. It's somewhat of a survey show."

New sculptures to debut at the Arthouse exhibition include *Boy with Kookaburras*, 2021, *House of Love (Nitty Gritty)*, 2021, *Jar of Stars*, 2020, *Owl on My Head*, 2007, *Ladder to the Stars*, 2020, *Echidna*, 2013, *Small Pleasures*, 2019, and *Great Southern Whale*, 2018, Yeldham says. Paintings will include *Bird on a Wire*, 2007, *The House of Love*, 2016, and *Blue Bird with Ladybird Army*, 2020.

"The two most important sculptures in the exhibition are the *Smiling Kookaburras*, [both 2021]" Bowen says. "Both works convey a sense of family, motherhood and the child."



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“Collectively and individually, these works speak to a shared humanity and a kinship between all sentient beings in the natural world”

One of the kookaburras is depicted on the cover of a new book to be launched at the Arthouse exhibition and focusing exclusively on Bowen's sculpture.

“Dean Bowen's three-dimensional works – animals, people, houses, vehicles – share [a] calm poise, and are invested with an integrity and meaningfulness that deepens with a viewer's prolonged or repeated observation,” the book's author Andrew Stephens writes. “Collectively and individually, these works speak to a shared humanity and a kinship between all sentient beings in the natural world.”

Emotional angst has rarely been an element of Bowen's work. “The grief of the world is not something I have sought to express,” he says in the 2020 film, *Argy Bargy: Dean Bowen – A Contemplative Journey*. “Hope and joy and happiness are just as big a part of life as depression and misery.” Curator and writer Ken Scarlett, interviewed on the film, described Bowen's work as having “naive optimism.”

The concept of childhood is something Bowen has carried with him since his birth in the Victorian bush town of Maryborough. It was incredibly fortunate for Bowen that his local high school had a rich art program run by brilliant teachers including Neil Leveson, who later became director of the Australian Print Workshop. Inspired by Leveson, with whom he would work professionally as an adult, Bowen became besotted with printmaking at school.

While Bowen was drifting more and more towards an art life, his father and grandfather were in the haulage business, often shifting old houses out of the path of looming development, “When the Tullamarine Freeway was being built in Melbourne, it was possible to buy a house quite cheaply or even get a house for free if it could be moved straight away. So my dad got lots of work from shifting those houses,” Bowen says.

Holiday jobs working in the family business convinced Bowen that a tough physical life was not for him. When he was sixteen he moved



to Melbourne and enrolled in art school. He worked in commercial printing for many years, making his art in his own time. But in 1989 Bowen left his job to become a full-time artist.

Bowen's studio has been in Cheltenham for some years, and is organised spatially to allow him easy movement between painting, printmaking and sculpture. Literally just down the road from the studio is Perrin Sculpture Foundry which has cast Bowen's bronzes for many years. "I think my sculpture has really developed since working with Bill [Perrin]," Bowen says. As well as casting his sculptures, the foundry makes armatures to Bowen's sketched specifications.

Animals, farmers, aeroplanes and homely cottages under the stars are just some of Bowen's recurring motifs. But the man with an echidna on his head is one of the most intriguing in Bowen's cast of characters. For him, we can thank Bowen's grandmother, Linda Bowen, who was a big influence on the artist during his Maryborough childhood. Linda was a creative soul. The artist estimates he was in his early thirties when Linda, possibly at a family Christmas party, drew him in caricature on a balloon. Emphasising Bowen's spiky hair, Linda showed him wearing an echidna like a wig. "That was a good laugh," Bowen says. "I didn't

really think about it much at the time, but it sparked a whole series of etchings and, later, bronzes."

Next year, Maryborough's Central Goldfields Art Gallery will host an exhibition of Bowen's sculptures. Given their origins in Maryborough all those years ago, any echidnas in the show are going to feel right at home. ■

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EXHIBITIONS & BOOK

Nitty-Gritty
5-26 March 2022
Arthouse Gallery, Sydney

Nitty-Gritty: the Sculpture of Dean Bowen, by Andrew Stephens
Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2021, RRP \$110 AUD

Dean Bowen
July 2022
Central Goldfields Art Gallery, Maryborough, Victoria

08 *Echidna on my Head (3rd Version)*, 2019, bronze (edition of 9), 38 x 12.5 x 10 cm
09 *The House of Love (Nitty Gritty)*, 2021, bronze (edition of 9), 14 x 19 x 5 cm
10 *Great Southern Whale*, 2018, unique bronze, 60 x 145 x 30 cm
11 Bowen in his Cheltenham studio, 2017, photographed by Viki Petherbridge
Courtesy the artist and Arthouse Gallery, Sydney