

Bruce Armstrong

When the National Gallery of Victoria proposed a major exhibition of Bruce Armstrong's sculptures, he rejected the idea of staging a retrospective, and he also wanted to include some drawings, in addition to his wild menagerie of creatures cleaved and carved from blocks of redgum and cypress. The result is a collection of works divided into three themes, staged over three floors, and the result is a beguiling anthology of strange beings.

Strange beasts haunt the lair of Bruce Armstrong's studio. Looming out from the shadows are bears and birds and other denizens of the sculptor's iconic deities, poised and powerful. At times creatures not of this world emerge as though from the ancient maritime maps that warn where monsters dwell. Pagan gods revelling in their redgum and oregon flesh, impervious to the elements. At times members of his menagerie have guarded the Docklands precinct ('Eagle, aka Bunjil', the spirit creator of the Kulin nations), at others they have guarded the portal of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in St Kilda Road. Now they are about to gain entrée to that institution en masse.

When approached by the NGV for a major exhibition, Armstrong rejected both the notion of a survey or a retrospective. He elected to call the show *An Anthology of Strange Creatures*, in other words an omnibus or collection, which has then been broken down into separate themes for the three floors his creatures will inhabit. The Anthology reveals a remarkable consistency in Armstrong's oeuvre, but it also reveals a creative fluency in his approach, from brutally chainsaw-hewn textures to delicate and intimate sketches.

Armstrong's fascination with the animal form hails back to art school. Born in 1957, he trained in fine art at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and graduated in 1981. Art school was tough on him. His lecturers favoured abstraction and the prevalent theories of postmodern conceptualism, but one particular lecturer, Jenny Zimmer, opened his eyes to both Egyptian art and notions of animism – attributing a living soul to plants and inanimate objects. "The Egyptians held animals as sacred entities," Armstrong says. "My own twisted animals really stood in for humans and I suppose that came about via certain personal revelations that occurred which involved animals: watching a brown snake crawl across my bare feet, or perhaps having too much to drink and watching a rock sprout wings and fly away. Animals became metaphors for different states of mind.

"In a way, for me, birds represent all things," he says. "They are all sorts of different things to different people. You can have a predatory bird, a nurturing bird – it's a pet

or a threat. I find they say more about people than people, in that their allegory is unrestricted. If it were a person doing what the owl is doing in these pictures, it would just be less interesting, it would be more literal.” They’re in another world, he says of his menagerie, “where ears and eyes are perceiving reality differently than we are”.

Armstrong’s key passions seem clear: animal imagery, mythology and a sense of materiality. What is more obscure are his motives. His work doesn’t seem to belong in an age of computers and mobile phones, but rather to an age of a kind of imagined melange of the past five millennia. He has remained loyal to his preferred medium of wood, having briefly flirted with stone and steel, and he has mostly used cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) which he says, “likes to be painted”. Applying pigment to sculpted surfaces led to painting onto flat surfaces, so Armstrong has played with that, and to some degree returned to his “roots” as a painter.

Armstrong also enjoys the environmental aspect of his medium. Nothing goes to waste, he says with barely concealed pride. Shavings go into the garden as mulch, and discarded hunks to the fireplace for heating. The core goes into a gallery, a garden or a home for aesthetic pleasure.

However, there is a negative to his passion, one of pure physicality. His 30-plus years of wielding a chainsaw and lifting and manoeuvring massive hunks of timber have taken their toll on his back, restricting his output. This has resulted in spending more time on “flat” works than heavy sculptures. “The last five years has been an interesting period,” he says. “Everyone begins to break down physically when they hit 60 and the type of work, I do doesn’t help that.”

Undertaking a major showing at the NGV has lifted Armstrong’s spirits, and he has taken to the project with enthusiasm. Working with curators has helped him see his own work in new ways and led to a renewed sense of confidence. The exhibition’s layout has even coaxed out a curatorial tendency that Armstrong has historically eschewed. “Essentially it has become three different shows, one on each floor,” Armstrong says, listing the themes as though reciting chapters from a book. “The first floor is titled Genesis and it will contain a number of earlier works hopefully illustrating where the work has come from.” The second “chapter”, Intimacy, will cluster smaller sculptures, maquettes and drawings, and the third is Reconciliation, in which Armstrong hopes the various themes will come together as a whole.

The inclusion of drawings was another element not on the NGV’s agenda. Wisely, Armstrong stuck to his guns. His drawings, with their softened shapes and muted colours, allow a portal into Armstrong’s more contemplative and dream-like world,

clearly akin to his sculptural output but with details and oddities that would be difficult to sculpt.

One may recall the creatures in Maurice Sendak's 1963 classic children's book *Where the Wild Things Are* melded with the Egyptian Book of the Dead, with a garnish of Norse mythology. In all, *An Anthology of Strange Creatures* will carry viewers into a strange world of semi-Pagan gods both brutal and beguiling.

By Ashley Crawford

EXHIBITION

Bruce Armstrong: An Anthology of Strange Creatures

National Gallery of Victoria

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www.ngv.vic.gov.au

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