A Jar of Stars
Dean Bowen
Dean Bowen’s bewitching characters twinkle with charm and personality. Whether sourced from memories of growing up in country Victoria, or informed by the experiences of living in the hustle and bustle of an urban city, his canvases, works on paper and sculptures are imbued with whimsy and an enduring appeal.

Many of Bowen’s canvases and prints align with traditions of portraiture where ‘by the face ye shall know the heart.’ For instance Mr Wonderful’s beaming smile communicates a joyous soul, while Night face, 2003, a self portrait, is affable but also introspective.

Like most virtuosos, Bowen’s portraits are deceptively simple. The paintings are pared back to their essential elements: form is abstracted, perspective is flattened and the palette is often restricted to amplified hues of jewel-like colours. Character is conveyed in the simplest of gestures: the placement of an eye, the curve of a form, the angle of a line.

Many portraits feature animals from Bowen’s past and present. By making these humble creatures the subject of a portrait, he elevates them to an equal plane. However rather than depict a bird or a dog, Bowen creates a portrait of an individual. Each has a personality as varied as their human counterparts. Birds populate many of his canvases. He turned his attention to them following their habit of disturbing him by scampering on the tin roof of his studio. The tic-tac noise of their scuttling broke the artist’s concentration. However rather than convey his annoyance at their intrusion, Bowen’s birds...

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At night looking up at the stars, sprinkles of light here and there, I remember my country dog, running fast, jet black. The great adventures through the bush, discovering echidnas, ants, rabbits and birds. Lizards under a log. Angry magpies swooping country kids, maybe a peck on the head. Fat dog wanting to chase a ball... Even way back then, I remember, covered in freckles, thinking about all the characters. Red hair, curly, odd-shaped teeth, the lucky ones and others not so lucky. Pets near by: Faces shaped, telling stories about the sort of person anyone might be.

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Above: The rough nuts, 2007, oil on linen, 92 x 122 cm

Below: Mr Wonderful, 2007, aquatint, 76 x 114 cm
are winsome, cheeky, even flirtatious and radiate an exuberance for life. In one canvas, Perched bird with twig, 2002, a bulbous bird perches on a stick thin branch threatening to break it with his impossible weight. He grins with pleasure at his defiance of physics.

Bowen’s compositions are typically tightly framed around the torso or face. This brings his animal friends close to the picture plane, insisting on a face to face encounter with the viewer. Birds, bats, cats and dogs stare back at us inviting us into an intimate relationship, entreating us to become their friends. Bowen’s work is informed by an understanding of the fragility of nature and this plays out in his work in the range of beguiling expressions that appeal to our better instincts. For instance Pensive penguin, 2011, depicts a somewhat bewildered fellow who captivates the viewer with his perplexed gaze. Twenty-three bird species have become extinct in Australia since European settlement and four species of Australian penguins are listed as vulnerable on the Australian government threatened species website. Pensive penguin is aptly named. His beseeching expression encourages us to think more considerately of the creatures we share the planet with.

An environmental message can be seen beneath many of Bowen’s works. While drivers happily ensconced in bubble cars hum up and down the bitumen arteries of suburban streets, the whirling vortex of roads and traffic humorously suggest the madness of it all. For instance the painting Bouchon, 2008, French for bottleneck, depicts the thrum of urban life. In this painting pockets of congested houses nestle together while clipped trees stand to attention on handkerchiefs of land. The road cuts and divides creating both order and its own form of chaos ferrying cars, trucks and buses on their journey. The voracious appetite of urban car culture is wittily expressed in Urbanology, 1995, an early etching inspired by the artist’s daily commute in the stop-start traffic along Punt Road in Richmond. Depicted with snapping bonnets, reminiscent of crocodiles, irritably biting at the bumper of the car infront, the work encapsulates the impatience at the heart of urban life.

In contrast there is a peaceful spaciousness in Bowen’s rural scenes. A vast expanse of land sits beneath a canopy of streaky white clouds in paintings such as, Northbound, 2006. Instead of the loneliness of country roads, the solitary car captures the freedom that driving on the open road can bring. A number of works turn a spotlight on the drivers themselves as they shuttle from place to place: a distracted mother and children, the local hoons, a resolute chap focused intently on the road ahead. According to the artist travelling in cars is a form of journey that provides a chance to observe the passing parade of landscape and humanity: ‘The journey acts as a symbol, both physically and psychologically, taking us beyond ourselves, enhancing and reminding us of the preciousness of life.’

It is Bowen’s nocturnal scenes however, that best capture a sense of wonder at the world. For instance in the large canvas, Metempirical, 2011, a shooting star on its arched trajectory streaks across a night sky. Flickering stars dot the sky and the beginnings of dawn wake the horizon. The magic of life is poetically conveyed in such fleeting moments. By directing our attention to such ephemeral joys, Bowen alerts us to the marvels of life all around, thereby soliciting our protection of the earth upon which we live.

Dr Wendy Garden
Gallery Curator
Maroondah Art Gallery

1 Dean Bowen, Personnage et animaux, artist book, 1996.
2 Dean Bowen, Journey, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Miyawaki, Kyoto, 2005.

Pensive penguin, 2011, oil on linen, 45 x 53 cm
The sculpture depicts a standing figure balancing a native owl on its head. At its feet are small echidnas. A symbol of wisdom, the bird also represents the unique wildlife of the Dandenong Ranges. The sculpture has longevity in its appeal ensuring a visit to Glen Park is a memorable experience.

Dean Bowen with sculpture at Glen Park Playspace. Photo: Danielle Butcher.

Boy with an Owl and Playful Echidnas

Dean Bowen has recently completed an exciting public art commission for Maroondah City Council. A large bronze sculpture entitled Boy with an Owl and Playful Echidnas was installed at Glen Park Community Playspace in February 2012. This commission reflects Maroondah’s commitment to enhance public space and offer the community access to significant works of art as part of daily life. The sculpture depicts a standing figure balancing a native owl on its head. At its feet are small echidnas. A symbol of wisdom, the bird also represents the unique wildlife of the Dandenong Ranges. The sculpture, while playful in nature, reminds us of our relationship and appreciation for Maroondah City Council. A large bronze sculpture entitled Community Play Space in February 2012. This commission reflects the sculpture has longevity in its appeal ensuring a visit to Glen Park is a memorable experience.

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Acknowledgments

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Thanks also to Bill Perrin, Peter Lancaster, Viki Petherbridge, Greg Von Menge, Cam Freedon, Jan Murphy Gallery, Greg Wallis, Jennifer Castles, Clinton Greenwood, Leanne Wilkinson, Laylee Greenwood, Pat Adair Black, Jennifer Russell and Carol Bryan.

Dean Bowen
b. 1957 Maryborough, Victoria www.deanbowen.com.au

Dean Bowen is a highly acclaimed artist who works across the mediums of painting, sculpture and printmaking. He holds a Masters of Art and a PhD from Monash University.

Bowen has an extensive exhibiting career spanning over twenty-five years. He has held solo exhibitions in Australia, France, Japan, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. He has won many national and international awards including prizes in the Osaka Print Triennial, 1994 and 1997, and the Sapporo International Print Biennial, 1998, in Japan. He was a finalist in the Helen Lemperiere National Sculpture Award in 2003 and 2008 and his paintings have been shortlisted for both the Sulman Prize, 2005, (Art Gallery of New South Wales) and the Wynne Prize, 2010, (Art Gallery of New South Wales). Bowen has received a number of major commissions, including bronze sculpture commissions for the City of Greater Shepparton in 2006 and Hobsons Bay City Council in 2010. In 2012 he completed an important commission for Maroondah City Council of an outdoor sculpture at Glen Park Community Play Space.

Dean Bowen’s work is represented in over 70 national and international collections including the National Gallery of Australia; Heide Museum of Modern Art, Fukuoka Museum of Art, Japan; National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts; Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Dean Bowen’s first monograph Argyle Bargy by Sheridan Palmer was launched in 2009. Published by Macmillan Art Publishing, this richly illustrated book is a comprehensive overview of Bowen’s artistic career and includes many images of paintings, sculpture and prints.

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