

Arts

Helen Jones Bowral

A sketch of the evolving artist... Bronwyn Berman

BRONWYN BERMAN emerges for our meeting from her white station wagon which is covered by a light film of red dust and dings that could only have come from endless driving on unsealed country roads. She presents as a natural beauty, with hair neatly pulled back and her face virtually free of make-up, wearing layers to create a look of understated style and the air of a woman who is increasingly comfortable within herself. One senses that there are many layers to Bronwyn Berman. One also senses that she is entering another phase and that she is on the brink of achieving further recognition in the world of fine Australian art.

As Bronwyn speaks of her life and art it quickly becomes apparent that her journey of self-discovery and her art are intertwined; her muse the Australian bush. "I grew up as a creative, earthy little kid in the bush by the creek". Raised in a leafy northern suburb of Sydney in a house backing onto Lane Cove National Park and visiting grandparents who lived in peaceful isolation accessible only by boat, she rapidly developed an appreciation of the natural Australian environment and landscape. Bronwyn's favourite past-time was to draw. Her grandmother always painted, her father expressed his creativity through landscaping with stone, while her mother provided further inspiration – that she could have another life as she raised her children.

Married at age 20, Bronwyn "put off going to art school" and over the next ten years ran an importing and wholesale business specialising in jewellery and watches. During this time she developed an appreciation of minerals and the geometric processes associated with their formation. "The beauty of gems and crystals is something quite wonderful". Leaving the business for motherhood, Bronwyn felt "so bereft I had not pursued my creative life. Recovery started at about thirty-one, when I started a ceramics course and over the next few years began drawing and painting to build up a portfolio and was accepted into a four year Fine Arts degree. (University) was fantastic! I found my creative self. I became immersed, the people were so different and I opened up. I adored art theory and history and writing and loved the people and the studios. It was so much fun after a dark period of my life".

In 1998, the family moved to the Southern Highlands to build a house on the rugged parcel of land they had owned for years at Joadja. Supervising the building was time consuming, particularly as "the house" is no ordinary one. Designed by Harry Seidler, it is an artwork in itself - perched on rock overlooking a steep gorge; of elegant space and lines to both absorb and complement the bush.

It was in this setting that Bronwyn's sculpture work began, initially from necessity. "There was no studio space and we needed the grounds fixed". She looked to the landscape for materials and created huge sculptures in her outdoor studio using the rocks and wood she had moved. When the marriage

of twenty years ended, Bronwyn and the children moved back to Sydney for six months and a new phase of her work began. She scoured the urban landscape via second-hand shops and junkyards for materials representative of modern living to incorporate in her sculptures.

"One day I found some copper wire which I began to weave, and I created works with re-used glassware. I finally realised the archetypal forms I saw recurring in my work were to be found in the bush – that was pods, egg sacs and the things little creatures such as grubs and spiders would build. Because the Australian bush doesn't provide you with forms of that kind, the glassworks started to talk about the rhythms of nature and I thought of time frames as pulses or beat. Because glass is a vessel, it refers to holding something; meeting glass across shelter perhaps represents isolation/separation, the fact that the glasses weren't new, they were re-used adds layers".

Returning to the Highlands, and in conjunction with the glass and wire works, Bronwyn continued her journey of discovery through her art, exhibiting along the way.

Searching for inspiration, she began to create drawings with her favourite object at that time – a gold pen which she used to create a sepia effect. She started to experiment by drawing elements on printmaker paper. "I drew circles like a kid's spirographs. I started with singular elements, making singular marks which I repeated – bigger, smaller, lighter, softer, travelling – working to music to develop a rhythm like a pulse, which I see as a continuum quality of things being held in a certain state while moving through time. Meditating, inwards looking outwards at the chaos of life". She took a year off.

Early this year Bronwyn rented a studio in Bowral and began working toward something abstract for her current 'Works on Paper' exhibition. Tucked behind a row of shops and backing onto the railway track in downtown Bowral, this studio is in

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seemingly sharp contrast to her outdoor one. A small rectangular space filled with drawings, beautiful inks and favoured objects and completely closed to the outside, its cocoon-like qualities resemble her beloved pods of the bush. "Once again having a full time studio I'm working every day. It will take me where it takes me and letting it do that is a very freeing experience".

With her latest body of work, Bronwyn feels she is coming into a new phase. "I appreciate lovely things. I love the mechanism of the hand made – I love the notion of having a finely crafted, highly honed skill level. My feeling has been over recent years that art was quick, easy,

stuff to impress but now we are coming into a nice marriage of craft practice and art theory, a kind of curatorial aspect of art".

After years of experimenting with different styles, the seasons have become increasingly influential in her quest for balance with her work. "The wire work I love. I do it in my outdoor studio. At the moment, I'm feeling that I can run with the wire forms which is really a form of 3D drawing. I don't braze or weld as Bronwyn Oliver did – I

weave – but there are parallels to our work", she says. "I find the weaving is a nice reference to women's work in earlier times, and I find it lovely when people read into my work what I'm trying to achieve. Drawing is a huge part of my practice. Drawing is the basis of my work. It is part of the response to the seasons and the rhythm. I need to be indoors in winter, and my studio is so warm and cosy. It lets me draw and use all different lines and there is always the element of chance when I do the washes and use shellac inks. I've always loved pen and ink and I just love the effects

I can get. It's easy to clean up, is non-toxic, so I'm not breathing in any fumes and I'm not having to use turps and so on. I've just found it's something I can explore. You can get so many different marks and effects occurring, just like the evocative effects of the natural environment. Recurring themes and patterns bring together a feeling of the bush; the momentary shot of light as it hits a tree trunk, then its gone. How do you transcribe it? But I just love the use of geometry and the forms it makes – the way it allows for people to have their own interpretation, it's as free as you wish, it can take you on a whole new journey or it can be something that is completely decorative to have on your wall. I think its accessible".

An artist...a woman...a mother...a continuing journey. Remember the name, Bronwyn Berman!

Bronwyn Berman's 'Works on paper' exhibition is at The Milk Factory Gallery, Bowral from September 23 - October 4. She will also participate in the Sculpture by the Sea exhibition, Sydney in early November, 2006.

