

## Artsource Lifetime Achievement Awards: Brian McKay

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When Brian asked me to speak about him and his work at this award ceremony, I have to confess I was torn between my desire to pay tribute and publicly express my admiration for Brian and his superb and fascinating body of work and my terror at speaking about such a well known artist to an audience who almost certainly know more about Brian and his work than I do.

My admiration conquered my terror and I'm most honoured to be here with you tonight to celebrate Brian McKay's achievements in such an appropriate way.

In my discussions with Brian, he made it clear to me that his painting and sculpture were embedded in his life – and that sometimes his art had to give way to his community and political enthusiasms, whose effects are evident in his work for those who care to look carefully. Whether he is fighting injustice or overturning our perceptual habits and engaging our aesthetic appreciation, Brian has always demonstrated a passion for engagement with his fellow travellers on this planet and a desire to improve the circumstances of our lives. We are much the richer for it.

His involvement - and immersion – in the peace movement, nuclear disarmament, the restoration of democracy in Greece, the establishment of PICA and his participation in alternative arts spaces have informed his preoccupations and contributed to just causes. As Liz Daale has written, he is “an artist meshed with the social fabric” and as Helen Topliss has observed, his allegiance to abstraction does not overwhelm his enduring concern “to communicate with a wider public.” Brian is a firm advocate of art as a universal experience; firmly repudiating the idea that the only intelligent audiences are those who regard themselves as the guardians of high art and culture. As Brian has explained on many occasions, he is committed to exploring and realising the “social role of art.” His stance is neither polemical nor patronising; rather he draws the viewer into his perspective and appears to invite their imaginative reflection on the images he has created with such meticulousness. Generosity is the prevailing impetus in his work.

As Mateer has argued, “despite McKay's work often being regarded as abstraction, it is seldom plainly so. Much, if not most of his painting, contains pictorial or symbolic elements.” What is more, although his abstract style may not, at first glance, appear to reflect his experiences growing up in WA, in Northam (my father remembers Brian's father's chaff cutting business), a closer inspection often reveals direct and profound effects of being from this place which so powerfully influences so many artists.

In writing about the 2009 exhibition of his work depicting numbers using automotive enamel on etched and sealed Aluminium, he said, “*my interest in letter forms began as a primary school child living in the small wheat belt town of Northam. This was in the early 1930's when almost all the service deliveries were made, house to house, by horse drawn box carts and sulkies. These were the butcher, iceman, grocer, baker, greengrocer and milkman.*

*All the carts and sulkies bore the signage of each profession, in high gloss enamel letters with elaborately decorative scrolls and drop shades in bright colours, outlined in many*

*instances with gold leaf. Even the spokes on the wooden wheels were filigreed with brilliant fine black and gold lines. As an impressionable child, I was fascinated.*

*I left Northam to join the Navy in 1943 and after training at Flinders Naval Base I was posted to, of all places, the Persian Gulf, minesweeping and dropping depth charges on German submarines. I was soon appointed as ship's artist and commissioned to paint an image of a boxing kangaroo and motto on the canvas shroud of the crow's nest. My other task was to paint the identification numbers on the ship's side, suspended in a bosun's chair, the huge numerals in black on grey, 76 J.*

*Demobilised in 1946 I was employed in graphics and advertising, and as a restless youth was drawn to motor racing. Here again my skills were in much demand in applying well designed numbers on the doors of the competing cars.*

*The works in this exhibition are an echo of that bygone period."*

And a profound social commentary on what has been lost; of the absences which populate our lives; the tracks we leave over the millennia, the mysterious and weathered scripts of our passing. The additions and subtractions most of are blind too without the eyes of an artist like Brian McKay.

Brian has been good enough to give me a sneak preview of a memoir he is writing. I'm sure many of you know Brian's background – his young life spent in the bucolic country town of Northam, his precipitously youthful sign up to the Navy in wartime, his return to Australia to work as a graphic designer (and sometime truck driver), the rapid development of his career as an artist from what he calls his "first serious foray into the world of contemporary art" in 1952 and his activism and advocacy in the art world, along with Guy Grey-Smith, Robert Juniper and Tom Gibbons, amongst others, his nearly 10 year Odyssey to Kythera in Greece, to London, Spain, France, Morocco and Ireland, all the while sending his arresting works back to Australia, the many awards and commissions and solo exhibitions. And all this undertaken, it seems, with gusto and optimism. Even in his most interior and dark, contemplative pieces, his essentially sanguine disposition is clear.

What struck me forcibly in reading Brian's memoir is the precision of the vivid and detailed recollections Brian has of his by now rather long – and to envious eyes, almost obscenely productive - life. In his writing and in his art he is acutely sensitive, to change, to degradation and collapse –but equally often, there is a sense of optimistic renewal, or at least of the possibilities for doing things better. He writes of going back to the wheat belt to discover "these once flowing expanses of green wheat crops are now dry soil, bleached and whitened with a crust of salt." His own transformations are shared – his realisation of the obscenity of war, the dragging, abject poverty of many people's lives around the world, the fantastic claims and hypocrisy of established religions. He has, for example, often designed posters to highlight and promote political causes using the techniques he developed in working in commercial art and design. These influences emerge transformed by his flawless mastery of technique into the luminous works we are honouring tonight. And they are expressed through so many different techniques – painting, to print making to work on aluminium work, to massive sculptures.

And on an occasion like this, I cannot fail to mention his wit – not cruel, but always seditious; overturning settled views and defending those whose voices prick the pretensions of the pompous and the powerful. Or his continued campaign to demystify the art object. Or his unselfish support for other artists and his insistence on their pivotal role in society, both hallmarks of Brian's contribution to the life of this community.

But above all, we are here to celebrate the art of Brian McKay; to affirm our admiration for all he has achieved and our gratitude that he has devoted his life to creating such wonderful art in our midst.