

Cinderella of the arts acquires new status

The National Sculpture Prize has introduced us to new, outstanding artists, says Sasha Grishin.



SCULPTURE in Australia has always been the Cinderella of the arts. Generally expensive to produce, imposing on space and lacking a firm patronage base, sculpture in Australia has frequently looked to a public forum for its presentation. The *Mildura Sculpture Triennials* (1961-1988) played a vital role in providing a showcase for recent developments in sculpture until superseded by the *Australian Sculpture Triennial* based in Melbourne. Now the mantle has passed to Canberra.

In what can only be described as a bold initiative, the National Gallery in Canberra, supported by \$500,000 sponsorship by the Macquarie Bank, which will extend over the first three exhibitions, has inaugurated the *National Sculpture Prize*. Although details are yet to be worked out, it will probably be held every two or three years.

This year there were 485 entries for the prize, from which 30 finalists were selected and awarded \$2000 each to assist with production costs of the works now on display. As two of the finalists were collaborative pieces, in total 32 artists were invited to participate. The five judges who made the selection and awarded the prize were Dr Brian Kennedy and Dr Deborah Hart from the NGA, Professor Ian Howard, from the College of Fine Arts, and another sculptor, Neil Dawson, from New Zealand, and Julian Beaumont from the sponsoring bank.

This year the \$50,000 prize was awarded to Ah Xian's *Human Human* — *Lotus, Cloisonne Figure 1*, and the modest Highly Commended \$5000 prize to the collaborative work by Geoffrey Drake-Brockman and Richie Kuhaupt. *Chromeskin*.

While the decisions of the professional jury will inevitably be disputed, what is beyond dispute is that this is a historically significant exhibition of Australian contemporary sculpture, possibly the most significant one of this nature to be held for more than a decade. It is a refreshing exhibition, free from

prescriptive aesthetic orthodoxies. What I personally find particularly rewarding is that it introduces to a broader national audience quite a number of new outstanding artists, who until now have been virtually unknown outside their own regional niche.

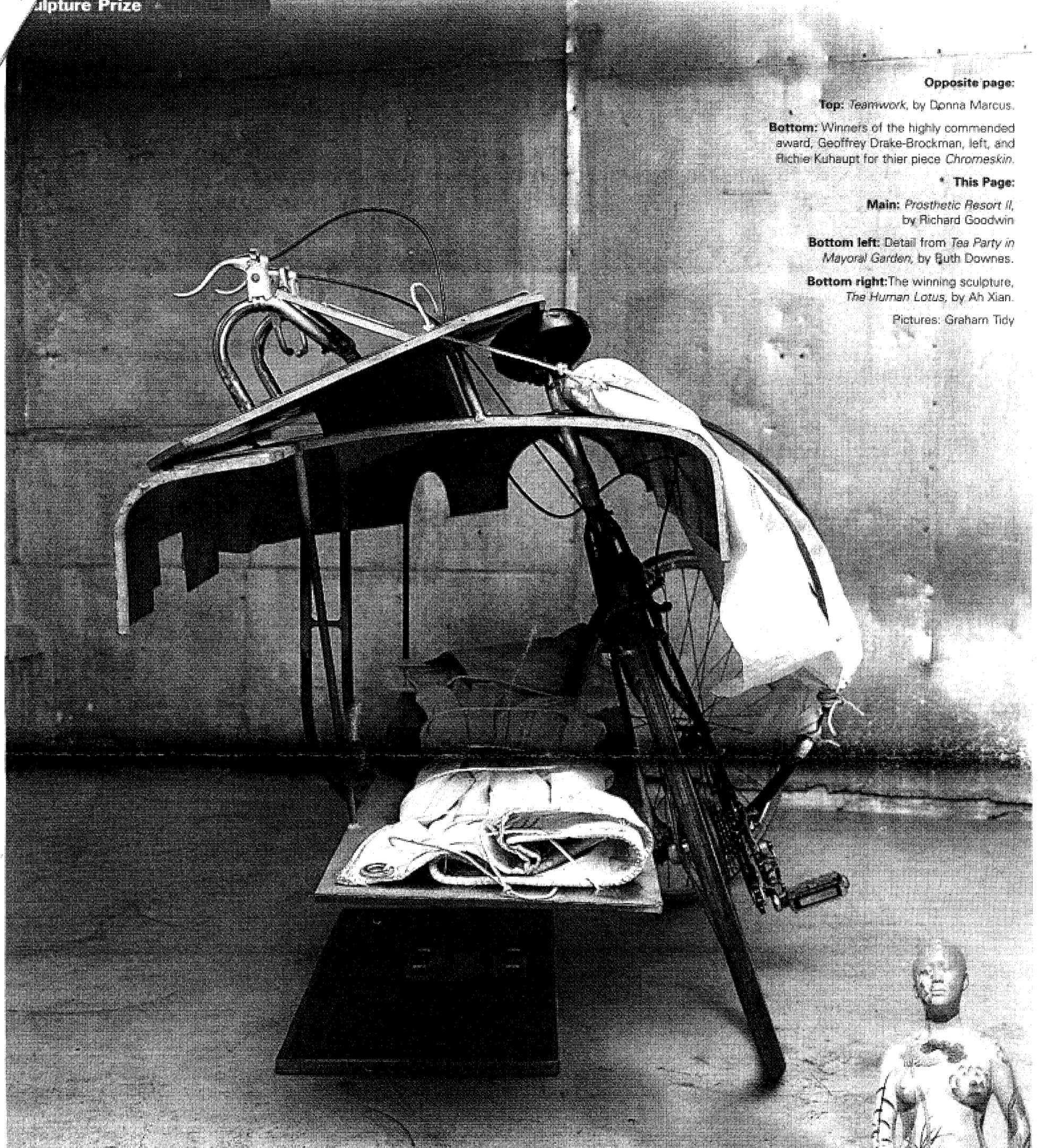
This is quite exciting, for usually in high-prestige public biennial or triennial exhibitions we are confronted by the same jet-set clique of predictable names. This is neither an expression of a conspiracy theory nor, necessarily, is it intended as a denigration of the selected artists. What this exhibition does achieve, which is very praise worthy, is to throw open the boundaries of Australian sculpture.

In the exhibition we have a number of well-known veterans of Australian sculpture who are producing work which continues to be challenging and provocative. These artists include Geoffrey Bartlett, Peter Cole, Kevin Connor, Richard Goodwin, David Jenz, Bronwyn Oliver, Louise Paramor, Rosslynd Piggott, Ari Purhonen and Ken Unsworth. What is also noticeable is that the welded-steel brigade has not been included in the selection, or the bird-feather-and-twigs school of "installations", or the expressive realists, with their bronze busts and naughty maidens displaying their wares.

Much of the sculpture in the exhibition is quirky and funky, irreverent in its treatment of art traditions and inventive in its use of materials. A brilliant virtuoso piece is Donna Marcus's *Teamwork 2*. It is a dazzling 15-metre-long frieze constructed of aluminium teapots and light shades. There is a bold rhythmic energy in the overall design with a meticulous attention to detail. Each humble teapot, on close viewing, carries all the scars of its earlier existence while collectively they make a statement which has a certain profundity, yet is expressed with frivolity.

Pamela Kouwenhoven employs discarded cemetery flowers to create her deeply moving *memento mori*, while Matt Calvert has gathered thousands of Japanese one-yen coins for his ironic monument to false hope and to plunging

Sculpture Prize



Opposite page:

Top: *Teamwork*, by Donna Marcus.

Bottom: Winners of the highly commended award, Geoffrey Drake-Brockman, left, and Richie Kuhaupt for their piece *Chromeskin*.

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Main: *Prosthetic Resort II*, by Richard Goodwin

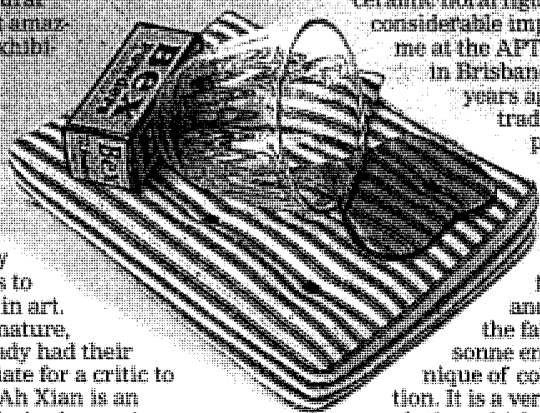
Bottom left: Detail from *Tea Party in Mayoral Garden*, by Ruth Downes.

Bottom right: The winning sculpture, *The Human Lotus*, by Ah Xian.

Pictures: Graham Tidy

economies. For Sebastian Di Mauro *astro turf* serves as the ideal material from which to create ambiguous sculptural blobs and perhaps the most amazing creation in the whole exhibition are the evocative metaphors of natural and artificial environments which Lionel Rawden has created from some 30,000 colour pencils. Not since Dragan Ilich, more than 20 years ago, has an artist so consistently employed masses of pencils to create a personal language in art.

In an exhibition of this nature, where the judges have already had their say, it may seem inappropriate for a critic to revisit their deliberations. Ah Xian is an artist whose work I have admired ever since I first saw it in the *Pop goes Mao* exhibition



at the Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition in Sydney several years ago. His ceramic floral figures created a considerable impression on me at the APT exhibition in Brisbane a couple of years ago. Access to traditional crafts people in China has enabled him to extend the scale to full-length and to exploit the fabulous cloisonne enamel technique of colour application. It is a very graceful resolution which he has now been refining for much of his life.

Geoffrey Drake-Brockman and Richie Kuhaupt's collaborate *Chromeskin* is simply a work which stops you in your tracks. The contrast between the high-tech and low-tech strategies and subtle subversive bits of humour mark this piece as one of a high order and suggest that this youthful duo will go on to become a significant force in Australian art. For its sheer elegance Roslynd Piggott's *Pillow* is certainly one of the most incredible creations in this exhibition. The play with textures, surfaces and the quality of the miraculous, all, at least in one sense, make it into a sculpture which addresses many of the traditions concerns of the art form. Yet the resolution of the formal properties is startling and original. In the same breath I have to confess that David Jenz's monumental *Parallel horizons* is one of the most impressive sculptures in the exhibition.

To maintain the sense of order on such a scale with the concern for spiralling energy dynamism and points of gravity is a major feat. What more than anything else emerges from this exhibition is a sense of excitement and creative fecundity which presently is apparent in contemporary Australian sculpture.

