Sunday Mail 26.4.87

Show time for artful brothers

Melbourne may have its Boyds, but on the Brisbane art scene this week it's a case of Di Mauro the merrier. There's Sebastian, the younger brother of the artistic Di Mauro duo, exhibiting paintings and drawings at Roz MacAllan's Edward Street gallery.

KATE COLLINS

And then there's Sam, the older brother, whose exhibition of ceramic sculptures just happened to coincide a city block away at the Brisbane Civic Gallery in City Hall.

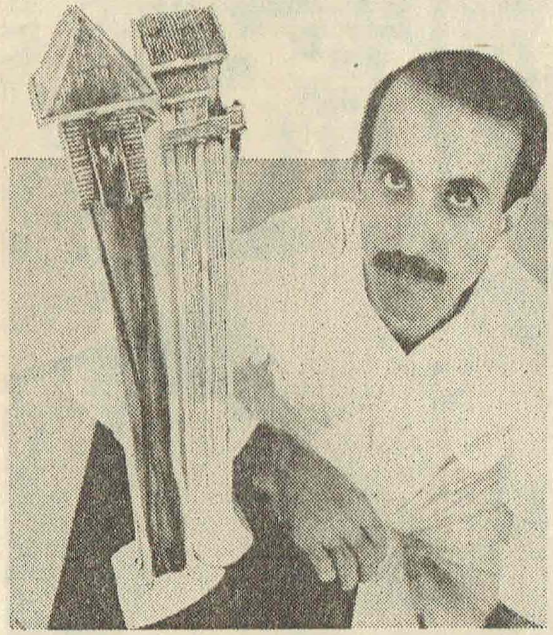
Sebastian even had a friendly hand in Sam's exhibition — his graphic art students at the Queensland College of Art designed and produced the catalogue for Sam's show.

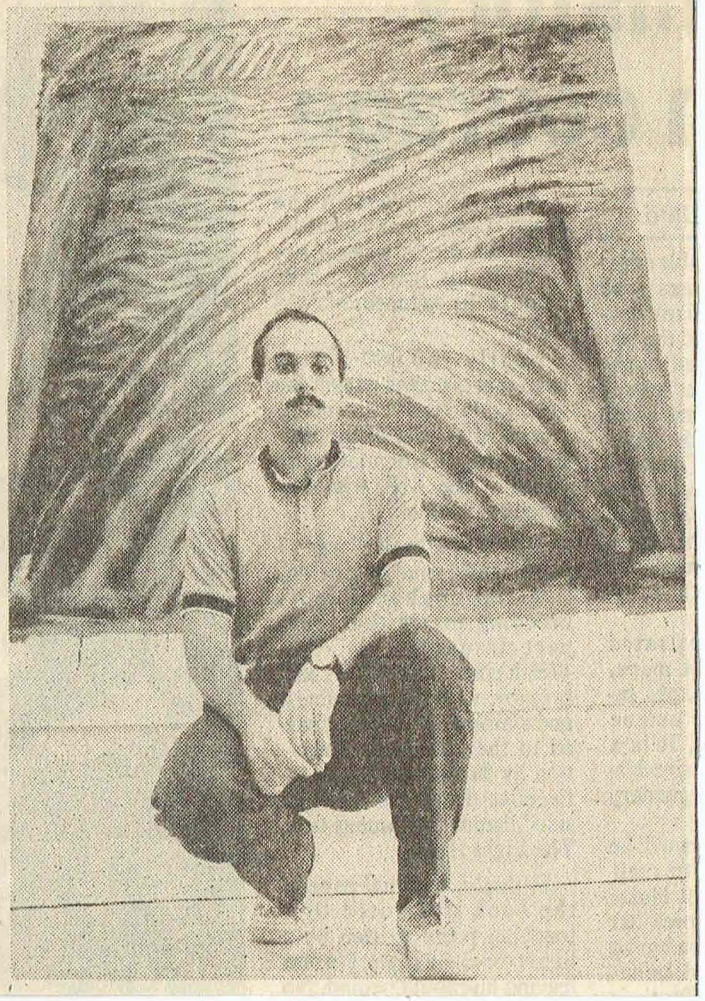
At the risk of complicating matters, Sam also teaches interior design at the college, which must be a nightmare for colleagues and students of the respective S. Di Mauros. Apparently everyone gets confused except them.

"It's because our work is so different that we have this rapport," claims Sam, and their work is certainly about as similar as chalk and cheese, so much so that the vast differences almost complement each other.

Sebastian Di Mauro is a painter of the emotional landscape, or more specifically seascape, and on a grand, operatic scale at that. His canvasses, if not his smaller charcoal and watercolor drawings, would probably do quite well as backdrops for smallish productions of Wagner, if what was wanted was a hot and sunny style of Sturm und Drang, with overtones of Dante's Inferno.

Certain images recur like melodic lines from canvas to canvas, the most immediately apparent being an arc across the upper picture plane. This represents the horizon, the earth's curvature which only becomes visible across an expanse of water.





ART, Di Mauro style ... Sam and sculpture at Roz MacAllan Gallery, above; Sebastian and painting, touring with the Queensland Arts Council, right.
Pictures: GLENN BARNES.

"I'm not trying to paint real appearances so much as a mood, a feeling," says the younger Di Mauro, "and there's something about the sea that always makes me aware of it."

As it turns out, the model is a very down-to-earth stretch of beach at Woodgate, south of Bundaberg, where first the brothers and now the whole Di Mauro family have been holidaying for the past couple of years.

You wouldn't guess it from the finished works. The sea as painted by Sebastian is not so much wine-dark as blood red. Blue or yellow tipped waves scud like tongues of fire across the scarlet surface but the tumultuous ebb and flow of the picture's energy is trapped and harnessed inside a grid-like frame.

This symbolises the human clashing with the elements of sea, fire, earth and air in the love-hate struggle between Man and Nature.

It's all a far emotional cry from Sam's art, which is as small-scale and low-key as Sebastian's is big and colorful.

At first glance, Sam Di Mauro's ceramics look more like finely carved and polished ivory than handled clay. The illusion is heightened by the sepia color of the oxidised carving and incising on the creamy, glazed surfaces, as much as it is by the miniature scale of the work.

If Sebastian's paintings are Wagnerian, Sam's ceramics are an antipodean illustration of a Grimm's fairytale. He has magically reduced the architectural landscape and history of Queensland into a marvellous series of surrealistic models in clay, decorated with oxide drawing and attached wooden details, like miniature stairs.

The distinctive idiom of colonial architecture — wooden house stumps, verandas, intricate fretwork and bull-nosed corrugated iron roofs — is painstakingly reproduced but with significant distortions and exaggerations.

The result is a world just like, but still unlike, anything and everything familiar to people who live in funny wooden houses stuck up on stilts. Di Mauro the elder loves this architectural heritage because he claims it doesn't exist anywhere else, inside or outside Australia, and he's looked around quite a bit.

Being a designer and maker of wooden furniture as well, he is very conscious of the built environment. "People who come from overseas or even from down south laugh and ask how we can stand it, but gradually they're realising what we've got and its unique value," he says.

He began by drawing two-dimensional images of houses onto the surfaces of pots but needed a more three-dimensional vehicle so took to sculpting tubular sections of extruded clay instead.

He shapes, incises, bisque fires, draws on and then glazes the sculpted clay before the final firing. There's an element of affectionate satire about the bizarre results — tiny cottages perched on top of impossibly long stumps stretching down to infinity.

Such dwellings could only be inhabited by Rapunzel-type characters. Di Mauro claims the exaggeration is minimal. Pointing to a piece inspired by a real worker's cottage in Red Hill — all his works are based on existing buildings around Queensland which are photographically documented in the exhibition — Di Mauro said that when the builder restumped it he claimed it wasn't the highest he'd ever done.

Sounds like a tall tale but it all adds to the work's quirky regional charm. When the Di Mauros visit Italy later this year they intend taking some work to show to contemporary galleries in Milan. With more authentic bite than *Crocodile Dundee*, Brisbane's artistic duo should be a big hit.