skilful sculpture

An exhibition of modern works shows off an accessible art form

GALLERY | phil brown

It is my experience that Brisbane cab drivers seldom mention art. They tend to specialise in unsolicited chat about current affairs, but a while ago I was in a taxi, coming from downtown, when the talk turned to, of all things, sculpture.

A pair of large, gesticulating, sculpted hands by Brisbane sculptor Sebastian Di Mauro, which sit outside 175 Eagle Street, had caught the driver's attention. This piece of public art is called *Chat* but the cabbie had another name for it, inspired by the raised finger of one of the hands.

"What do you think of the Hopoate?" he asked.

"The what?" I asked.

"The Hopoate," he said gesturing toward it.

It took a moment for the reference to gel. (Rugby league fans will recall the infamous John Hopoate affair and his digital antics on the field – and I'm not talking technology here.) The cabbie's sporting reference proved that art could be the stuff of everyday conversation.

Sculpture, in particular, seems to have the knack of engaging people, particularly when it's in the public arena – like *Chat* or Christopher Trotter's metal sculpted kangaroos on George Street.

Sculpture often seems more tangible and down to earth than, say, painting or photography or other even more esoteric forms. This is probably why there is a steady stream of satisfied viewers tramping in and out of the exhibition Temperature: Contemporary Queensland Sculpture, now showing in the gallery spaces at the Museum of Brisbane in the city.

Curator Frank McBride has done a great job gathering together a highly accessible array of work for the exhibition and it may surprise some to find that we have so many talented sculptors in our fair state. This survey features 27, many of them from Brisbane, and there isn't a dud work among them, although a couple come close.

As well as a dazzling array of styles and materials, there was obviously plenty of work and skill involved in the making of these works. A good example is a stunning piece by Ken Thaiday, entitled *Triple Beizam Hammerhead Shark Dance Mask*. Drawing on his Torres Strait Island cultural roots, the artist, who now works from a studio in Cairns, has created a playful, intricate and inspiring work that celebrates nature and indigenous life.

One of the more humorous offerings is Wilkins Hill's baffling *The Alley*, which features a continuous video of a rather nervous looking poodle, sitting on a plinth, accompanied by a soundtrack of ten-pin bowling alley sounds. Weird, huh?

The aforementioned Sebastian Di Mauro is also represented in this exhibition with a piece called *blast.gwb.jh*. This Astroturf construction looks like a rather phallic piece of topiary or even a finger pointing toward heaven, which relates it back to his work *Chat*. Enough said.

Another excellent Brisbane sculptor, Stephen Hart, is also represented with *A Victory of Hope Over Adversity*, featuring intertwined wooden chairs, and an inverted figure topped with a rather triumphant-looking carved wooden rabbit. It looks harmless enough, even funny, until you read that the rabbit has Nazi origins. Stephen was apparently inspired by a photo of World War II war criminal Adolph Eichmann cradling a white angora rabbit.

The ironic vision of the monster gently cuddling a bunny set Hart meditating on the contradictions of life and the nature of good and evil. A long bow to draw, but an illustration that there is more than meets the eye in this fascinating exhibition.

More than meets the eye ... Brisbane sculptor Stephen Hart's *A Victory of Hope Over Adversity*

Temperature: Contemporary Queensland Sculpture, until May 23 at Museum of Brisbane, Ground Floor, City Hall. Open 10am-5pm daily. Ph: 3403 8888.