

15 July, 2011 5:06PM AWST

Mysterious made art by Brian McKay

By Sharon Kennedy (Cross Media Reporter)

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/07/15/3270762.htm?site=southwestwa>

A simple man absorbed in the mysteries of creating art. That's one way of describing one of Western Australia's most celebrated artists.

Brian McKay has been at the forefront of contemporary Australian art for five decades. This week, a retrospective of his work opens at the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries.

Taking pride of place will be *Egyptian Quartet*, the latest piece to evolve out of his work with aluminium, exploration that's absorbed him for a decade or more.

How does a man in his 80s, who's seen naval service in WWII, who enjoyed the swinging 60s in London, was moved to agitate for democracy in Greece and has received countless awards, commissions and accolades, describe himself as a simple man?

"Simple in my notion about what art is," says Brian as he sits in the chapel gallery surrounded by art waiting to be hung.

"I don't think art is complicated at all. I think it is simply curiosity about one's surroundings.

That curiosity plays out firstly in the way of looking at one's surrounding but not so much in a visual sense, says Brian as he builds on his argument but rather in the experience of your surroundings, the people you are with and the socio-political construct that you look at from time to time.

The making of art then is about developing a form that conveys something of the sensations experienced. That, says Brian, "is as clear as I can put it."

Yet his relationship to the process of making art is not necessarily as cut and dried as that. From the early days of working as a graphic artist, through his early figurative works to his embrace of abstraction and minimalism, Brian McKay has had time to ponder the mystery of creating artist works.

"For years, people have tried to demystify it and classify it," he says, "but it cannot be classified. It's a very mysterious process.

"So you keep probing away with the discoveries that you make - accidentally in some cases."

That's certainly so in his case, he believes, as he's self taught.

"So, part of the mystery is revealed in the experimentation that you do with the materials plus the technical expertise that you gather from working in different materials. From that sometimes, your curiosity is resolved."

Brian's initiation into a modern 20th century use of material and away from a conventional medium of canvas stretched over cedar came about in the early 90s through a commission to create a large panel for a Perth CBD tower block. The scale of the problem wasn't revealed, he says until he saw the actual space. "I was gobsmacked because it was 20m long and 9m high."

"What would you like us to treat the wall space with?" asked the builders.

Brian was faced with some quick decisions. "I can't do a Leonardo with scaffolding," he thought. The solution presented itself then and there as large sheets of aluminium were wheeled past on their way to another part of the structure.

"I knew of work being done with aluminium," says Brian. "No worries" said the builders, "you can have another 160 panels."

What followed was a revelation, he says. "What I found with aluminium, distressing it in certain ways can alter the visual perception of that area.

"It can change the form without changing colour and if you add colour over the top of that, you still get the same effect.

"I've been working in that perception ever since."

This jump from conventional materials to aluminium has been really satisfying, says Brian. He works to abrade the material, "to blush colour onto it using industrial, automotive methods".

The material has both its delights and challenges. Brian uses panels with much the same dimensions as a conventional painting, "say a metre and a half by a metre and a half and if that was painted white, it would be like a conventional support for a painting. You could start painting on it."

Aluminium, however, reacts to more than just the maker's mark. "It does produce very mysterious effects," he states.

"The minute you make a mark on this lustre, it changes the perception of the piece. So it is distressing the surface in ways that create an illusion of depth, or space or form."

What causes difficulty of control, he explains, is aluminium's capacity to pick up ambient colour when distressed.

Brian recalls leaving one piece overnight, only to find when he came back to it in the morning, that the work showed a pink blush that he hadn't seen before. "It was the reflection from a flame tree in flower on the aluminium surface." This chameleon characteristic causes difficulty both with hanging and with the recording of the works. "You can't photograph these works," explains Brian. "The camera can't cope with that optical illusion that's taking place with your eyes picking up the ambient colours from sunset, or greenery.

"So that makes it more mysterious, or much more difficult to make a work of art that will stay still. These things hop about all the time."

One work hung at the Bunbury galleries was placed in the chapel gallery near the stained glass windows, recalls Brian. "It looked better there than it did in my home or in the studio."

"It's the optics that you get working with aluminium that I find challenging, difficult, and they don't always succeed." He laughs. "It's a tough journey."

And a very interesting journey. Born in 1926 in Meckering, Brian took some art classes but was largely self taught. He saw service in the navy during the war.

Back in Perth, he stretched out the artistic dollars doing graphic design work for Boans department store, among other jobs.

The 60s were to be Brian's turning point as they were for so many people. Sydney Nolan encouraged him to go to Europe. Brian complied and packed up the family for Greece. Before long, the unstable political situation forced them to move to London. Here, Brian involved himself in the fight for the restoration of Greek democracy.

"One of the reasons that drove me out of Western Australia in 1964 was a conservative government run by a person who had to my knowledge, very little interest in the arts per se," remembers Brian.

"Especially the visual arts. Going to live in Greece was a totally different experience. You're there at the source - the circle, the square, the triangle."

This absorption of the history of another race, another culture, couldn't help infusing itself into his imagination, says Brian. "First of all, I started to paint the environment, the blue and the white buildings, and I became dissatisfied with that."

In London, at a time when young people were busy shaking off the fusty hangovers of pre-war conservatism, Brian found more satisfying sparks to his imagination.

"For instance, the Institute of Contemporary Art was staging performances by people like Laurie Anderson."

"This cute, pert little person with spiked hair and dimples started to sing and play a violin at the same time." Anderson then used electronics to "deconstruct the sound", Brian recalls, changing the pitch of her instrument and her voice from "soprano to basso profundo."

Looping is standard repertoire for buskers today and performance art has been with us for decades but, as Brian points out, those kind of experiences were fundamental to the way that people looked differently at the visual and performing arts, including music.

"In the visual arts, you would go the Tate Gallery and there'd be an exhibition by Joseph Beuys there where they directly addressed political issues in visual forms."

At that stage, Brian was still pondering the boundaries of art. "To me, it looked like a whole series of political posters and illustrations."

It's a view he put to one of the Tate curators. 'Everything is art', came back the reply.

Brian's own foray in agitprop resulted in banners and posters used in fund raising for Greek political prisoners. Even in hindsight, he feels the effort worth the trouble.

"I think the accumulated effort helped to raise awareness," he says, drawing a parallel with the popular uprisings in the middle east today. "(It was) a popular revolt against the military dictatorship and finally, the Colonels were got rid by this outrage that we all felt."

A look round the retrospective at the Bunbury Regional Art Galleries will find works from each period of Brian's career. The City's own collection includes several works, including *Centurion* and a self portrait.

Centurion is perfect example of Brian's approach to his work today. "The word control doesn't come into my thinking because you never stop believing that you can make this more interesting or mysterious if you do this, this and this.," he says.

"So it's those processes of experimentation and accidental things that you do that become part of your oeuvre. 'Once I know that this effect will produce x and can be reproduced'."

"*Centurion* began as pure abstraction but the more the work progressed, "the more difficult it became to keep it simple and pure.

"What emerged was the notion of a shield. An old fashioned round shield. Not a representation, but a suggestion."

Each of the four sections are distressed in a different way to attract the light in a different way to attract more interest, he adds.

Egyptian Quartet is a work commissioned by Bunbury City for the retrospective. The colours and bordering were

inspired by early Egyptian art and decoration.

"It's simply a progression from the existing works produced over the last ten years," he says. "I've searched for associations with colour and brilliance in a lot of early Egyptian works and ceramics. In 1997, I was in London to see the Tutankhamen and in that were the most extraordinary objects in amazing colour coordinations with gold and ultramarine and deep rich ochres."

Back home, Brian referred to his notes and began experimenting with the aluminium. The decorative border is very Egyptian," he says. "You see it a lot."

The colours to reverberated throughout the Tutankhamen exhibition. "What surprised me more than anything is that these works are from the 15th century BC and they're still survived to this day."

Egyptian Quartet holds something of the essence of the antiquities, Brian feels. "Particularly the decorative border." *Self Portrait* originated from the Mundaring Art Centre Mine Own Execution exhibition of self portraiture.

"I'd never done portraiture except for workmates or navy crew," says Brian.

"What I realised with portraiture is that you have to have proper arts training...to convey something of the essence rather than copy the features."

Despite his misgivings, Brian decided to "give it a go".

Firstly, he tried a series using a mirror. "Unsatisfactory," is how he described the result.

Then he asked a friend to photograph him. "I realised that the photograph is the wrong way round. So I had a copy printed in reverse and tacked it up on the studio wall and copied that onto canvas.

"So it's a fairly accurate representation using charcoal and paint sticks."

Printed over the features is a quote from TS Eliot's *The Hollow Men*

And the end of our exploring

Will be to arrive

Where we started

And to know the place for the first time.

"It seemed to sum up the whole notion of looking oneself and what one has tried to achieve. I thought it was an apt quote for myself."

Topics: [contemporary-art](#), [painting](#)