

# Working locally, influenced globally



Power of the written word: McKay uses text as a compositional device in *Advice to the Civic Leaders* (1964) from the Holmes a Court Gallery

**B**RIAN McKay has been a central figure in West Australian art practice for the past 40 years but, unlike Howard Taylor, Guy Grey-Smith and Robert Juniper, there is little that is immediately identifiable as WA content or influence in his work. Familiarity has locked his work into our consciousness as typically local but, as the retrospective at the Holmes a Court Gallery reminds us, his practice has always been idiosyncratic.

One influence he shares with his contemporaries is the effect of early English modernists such as Ben Nicholson and Victor Passmore. But where others adapted their surfaces and elegant line to describe the dry and sparse landscape of the state, McKay focused on the urban environment, the walls and manhole covers, defying any uniquely local reading.

His use of text is another strategy adopted early from Nicholson. It enabled him to create a more focused political content, but even this is hard to pin down. Text is often deployed as a compositional device and almost

## VISUAL ART

### Brian McKay

Holmes a Court Gallery, Perth.

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Extended to 17 July

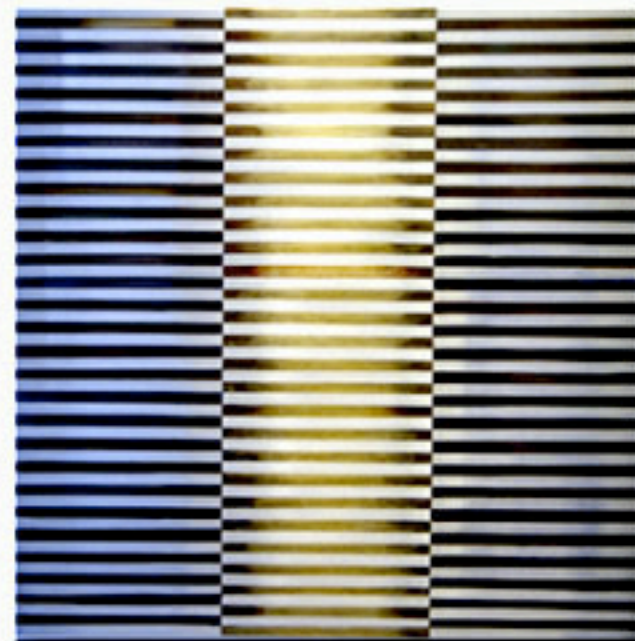
### Brian McKay: Recent Work

Galerie Dusseldorf, Perth. Inquiries:

(08) 9384 0890. Until May 29.

always it's indecipherable. It's most often employed to suggest meaning rather than make it explicit. Additionally, the veneer of age or weathering he applies distances the works further by situating ideas and activities in an unspecified past.

In this way, McKay has always sought to address a wider audience by eschewing the immediate and the local, and his sensibility in the handling of materials and in creating alluring surfaces does have a universal appeal. From the early works produced in Perth through the atmospheric landscapes painted in Greece to these present works created by abrading and



Work like an Egyptian: *Giza* at Galerie Dusseldorf

painting aluminium panels, he has generated a highly sophisticated version of abstraction that is immediately accessible and engaging.

While the starting point is always figurative in his best works, it

remains nothing more than a catalyst for a process of reductive abstraction that pares away all unnecessary detail and reference.

In his concurrent exhibition at Galerie Dusseldorf, the ancient Egyptian Sphinx's headdress is the starting point for a wonderfully refined work that suggests its source in the title *Giza* but leaves viewers to fabricate their own meanings.

McKay is well served by the combination of a retrospective and an exhibition of present work because it reinforces his constancy in examining the ideas that sustain his practice and his ability to give them new form and relevance as each decade passes.

Ted Snell