

# McKay still determined to challenge the status quo

RON BANKS

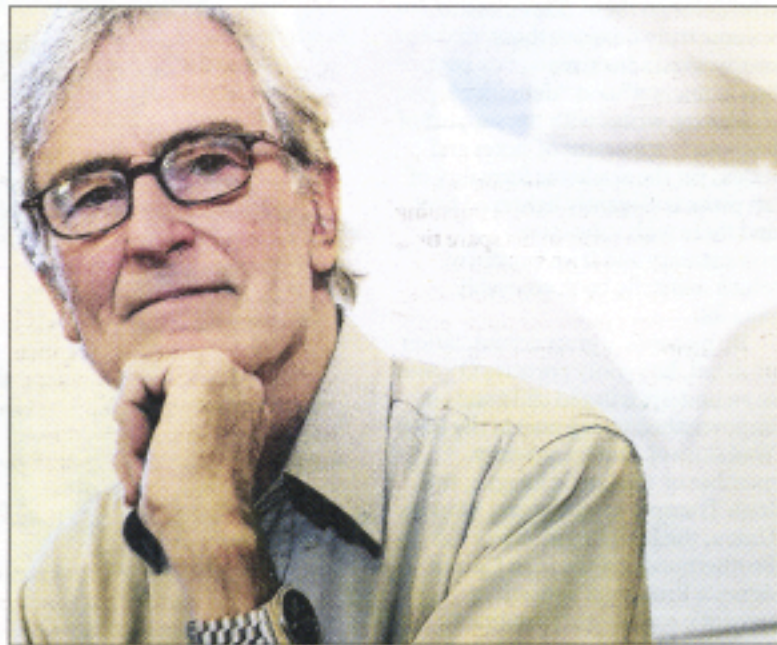
There aren't too many West Australian artists who can claim to being included in an international exhibition at the tender age of 12.

It's an honour that goes to Brian McKay, whose drawing of a gum tree was the only Australian exhibit at the World Fair's art exhibition in New York in 1939.

The curator of the exhibition had come to Australia the year before as part of his worldwide search for paintings by children and immediately selected the little landscape when he visited the children's art pavilion at the Royal Show. Being shown in New York did not immediately spark a desire in the 12-year-old Northam schoolboy to become an artist, but at least it was an early indication of a talent that would later lead to a professional career.

These days McKay is regarded one of the State's most distinguished artists with an impressive body of work. A retrospective of works from 1954 to 2004 is now on show at the Holmes a Court Gallery, with another collection of more recent works at Galerie Dusseldorf in Mosman Park. The retrospective at Holmes a Court is a chance to view some of his earlier works — such as a little portrait of a port worker in Fremantle — and trace his career through to the refined, abstract images on aluminium that have become McKay's trademark in more recent years.

McKay is one of the few Australian artists to have mastered this most difficult medium, either painting on to aluminium or using the material both as surface and image itself. In some of his most



Brian McKay: one of WA's most distinguished artists. PICTURE: ASTRID VOLZKE

remarkable works McKay buffs, polishes, scratches and indents the aluminium to create precise, angular works that have an austere, unique kind of beauty.

One of the keynotes of McKay's style is his fondness for Greek architecture and symbolism, including Greek lettering, that often appears in his work. This is the result of a lifelong fascination with Greek civilisation, fuelled by a year spent living on the Greek island of Kythera in the early 1960s. It was a sojourn undertaken in similar circumstances by writer George Johnston and his wife, Charmian Cliff, who lived on a neighbouring island.

It was unusual in those days for Australian artists to go and live on a Greek island, especially if you had a wife and young children, but

McKay was looking for a sense of adventure. He was also encouraged to go overseas by well-known painter Sidney Nolan, who saw in the young Perth artist's works in the 1950s a distinctively European sensibility.

"Nolan used to come over to Perth to hang his work at the Skinner Gallery, where Perth artists like myself also used to exhibit," says McKay. "We used to help Rose Skinner hang his works and Nolan remarked that because my paintings seemed so European, I should go there."

McKay decided to go to the cradle of European civilisation by living in the Greek islands, sending his paintings back to the Skinner Gallery, the first commercial gallery to be built in Perth.

The political coup in Greece by

the right-wing colonels shattered his Greek idyll and McKay was advised by friends that he should leave. He packed his family into a Kombi van and drove to London, where he lived for the next 10 years, working in a silk-screening factory while pursuing his career as an artist in his spare time. In those early years of Swinging London there were lots of Australian artists making a name for themselves on the British scene, among them Brett Whiteley.

"I used to see him at gallery openings," says McKay. "He was pretty hard to miss because he would turn up bare-chested and bare-footed, wearing only a pair of purple trousers. He was eccentric even then."

With his Greek connections, McKay joined a group of artists and musicians in London campaigning for the restoration of democracy in Greece. He became involved in fundraising concerts, where he met artists such as John Williams and Greek actress Melina Mercouri.

Deciding to return to Perth in the 70s after the election of the Whitlam government, McKay was offered a job as an art teacher at Perth Technical College, despite his protest that he had no formal training. "That didn't seem to matter," he says. "I found everyone was happy if I talked about painting and told stories about the great artists."

McKay became a respected art lecturer but as he grew older he felt the need to devote himself full-time to his own art skills, especially when he gained several major commissions for public artworks. One of these was the huge aluminium mural in the foyer of the new Central Park building in 1990, a work on a massive scale that dealt with his fondness for Greek calligraphy etched into the unyielding shiny surface of aluminium. He also

created another mural for the Reserve Bank foyer in Perth, using a quotation from a Greek poet that was considered controversial because it referred to being "wary of the barbarians". This was regarded as a subtle commentary on the Reserve Bank as a bastion of capitalist greed but McKay refused to capitulate and the controversy eventually faded away.

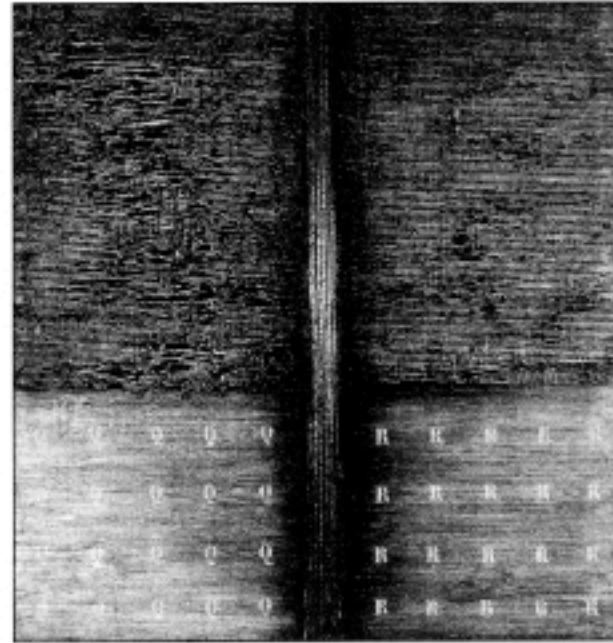
Among his achievements is his leading role in the establishment of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in the 1980s. McKay says he long felt that Perth needed a "serious centre for the study of contemporary art" and laboured with other committed artists to bring the idea to fruition.

At the age of 79, McKay is proof that art must be good for your health because he is remarkably youthful in appearance and still possesses the creative vigour of a much younger man. "I like to go beyond the status quo, to continue to experiment with my art," he says.

His fascination with aluminium gives him plenty of opportunity for experimentation because its qualities as an artistic medium have been relatively unexplored. In this sense McKay is very much a pioneer as he buffs, polishes, shines and etches his sheets of aluminium in his Fremantle studio with an orbital sander.

In some of his latest paintings there is no colour at all: McKay simply buffs or "distresses" the surface of the aluminium so that the shape of images — the curve of a sail, perhaps — is defined by the light as it reflects from the surface. In other paintings he adds strips of colour to create minimalist op-art style works.

One of his most recent public art commissions was for the foyer of the ABC's new headquarters in East



Qatar (1991): mixed media on canvas, by Brian McKay.

Perth. This replaces a sculptural work by his old colleague, Robert Juniper, that was on the outside of the old ABC building in Adelaide Terrace. "They tried to remove Bob's old work and take it to the new building but it was too difficult to get off," says McKay, "so they asked me to create new one."

McKay's many years in silk-screening led to poster art of a political nature, as well as an extensive body of abstract work reflecting his love of Greek architecture and calligraphy. There have also been his trade union banners, his commercial design work and his contribution to the craft of printmaking.

**Brian McKay: Holmes a Court Gallery until June 19. Recent Work: Galerie Dusseldorf until May 29.**