

Ian Hamilton | Bowerbird

In 1976 Ian took up a 12-month position as Artist in Residence at Griffith University, Brisbane. His intention was to continue exploring his work with light, colour, space and he did this with several exhibitions at the newly opened Institute of Modern Art. Towards the end of his tenure as artist-in-residence something happened that would change his direction and surprise many.

Always observing and questioning, Ian was out on a recreational walk on the Lamington Plateau in southeastern Queensland when he filmed a male satin bowerbird at work on its bower. Male bowerbirds play no role in nest-building, focussing solely on building structures known as bowers. Ian was intrigued by how the male bird was seemingly able to distance himself from his work. His film recorded the bird inserting a stick in one wall of the bower, stepping back, cocking his head as if in aesthetic assessment, then returning to rearrange the stick. It seemed a deliberate and considered action, one approaching the human concept of art.

This experience led to a merging of the concept of the bower as a playground for ideas with some of his own increasingly esoteric ideas about fluorescent tubes. Ian saw the fluorescent tube as a container for a closed system subject to entropy, in the same way he would later see the cloud forest as a closed system subject to entropy, or at least change. This merging of ideas was expressed in his 1978 outdoors performance *The Ceremony of the Golden Bowerbird: Playground for Paranoids*, at the art event Act 1, Canberra.

In 1978, with support from an Arts SA grant, to 'study the art of the golden bowerbird', Ian travelled to Mt Spec, near Townsville, where he observed a number of active bowers. I spent time with Ian, on a number of extended visits, over some years, in this wonderland. The rainforest itself reminded me of the interior of that cavernous Port Adelaide wool store with its massive columns rising up into an enclosed gloom, light piercing, through cracks in wooden walls. In the woolshed Ian had placed his 'decorations', hoping for recognition; in the forest male bowerbirds placed their decorations, also in the hope of recognition.

It's impossible for me to convey the thrill of hearing the rough rattling call of the male bowerbird as it approached its bower, the flash of gold as he briefly settled nearby, then his briefest of visits to the bower, bill laden with decorations which were quickly but thoughtfully installed, before he was gone. Over time, Ian concluded that the bird possessed consciousness and control over what he was doing. His thinking led to the proposal that '(free) Time Allows the Elaboration of Basic Urges and/or Forms'. This suggested that freedom from things like hunger, predation and territorial dispossession allowed male bowerbirds time to build and decorate elaborate structures entirely separate from nest-building. At first I was happy to accept this idea as metaphor. Being science trained, I was unhappy with it as a literal statement for the bird's behaviour. But in the decades that have since passed, science has recognised that the brain of a bird is wired differently to that of mammals, so much more than we dreamed of was possible.

Over the succeeding years, Ian has continued to meditate on the golden bowerbird and its behaviour. He has continued to redefine his artistic response to what he experienced during that early field work and on many subsequent journeys into the high rain forest. As recently as last year I joined him on a rewarding and enriching week-long field study of bowers and their builders in the World Heritage rainforest near Ravenshoe. For Ian that field trip was a chance to confirm, perhaps review, some of the ideas he'd explored earlier and prepare him for what he told me might be his final exhibition on the bower theme.

Now we find ourselves at West Gallery, Adelaide. It is an exhibition in two parts; one a kind of retrospective including pieces dating back to 1978, the other, in the larger gallery, a series of new and newly re-mastered earlier pieces.

Ian disputes the notion that bower building and decorating is only about attracting females. He sees this as too simplistic and, at best, just part of the story. He understands that bower-building has evolved over a long time and continues to do so. He points out that there is at least as much interest in a particular bower from other males as there is from females. The male bowerbirds can take seven to nine years to learn, to develop necessary skills and establish their own bowers. In the case of golden bowerbirds, these are more correctly called towers, which vary enormously in size, shape and complexity. Ian proposes that the male bowerbirds become fixated in their work and that while attracting females might be a

primary instinct (as it is with human males) it is likely that other urge takes over (as they do with human males).

Ian's art also elaborates on basic urges, as in this particular exhibition of sketches and memories of bowers he saw in the forest. This process of elaboration can be seen in the large hangings. These started as field sketches and then morphed into small sculptures. These were photographed and printed onto canvas, then shown at various galleries, including St Sebastian (Spain), Townsville, Murray Bridge and Prospect. Photographing the sculptures, in preparation for the printing of large images, allowed me further insight into Ian's thinking. For this exhibition the printed canvasses have been painted over with acrylic paint, in the process giving them a new vitality.

Ian is not a bird illustrator, nor an ornithologist. He is an artist responding to one small but intriguing part of the natural world. Bowers might be the primary focus for this exploration, but only because, in their complexity, evolution and uniqueness, for Ian they raise questions about creativity and shine a light on our own place in the world.

- Leo Davis