

Webber bronze outside the usual mould

By ROBIN BAYES

THE art of sculpture has woven its way through the past 80 years — adapting equally well to the more subtle and intellectual artistic analyses and the variety of new working materials that has become available.

It is rare that the bronze bust or figurative statue which has dominated Western sculpture for centuries is actually unveiled these days.

The advance to modernism has seen some inspiring creations set their seal on city plazas, and while many continue the futuristic and industrial themes that dominated style early of this century, others are more obscure in their statement.

Local sculptors have adapted to their purposes the various 'modern' mediums available — steel, aluminium, iron, and plastic. But sculptors are often limited by lack of foundries, irregular commissions and a limited buying population.

Two dominating forces, however, isolation and American-European trends, have probably had the greatest effect on sculptural development here.

Isolation ought to have promoted some sort of originality — as it did in our painting — but sculpture in the colonies was for many years little more than a local variation of well-tried European styles, with sculptors making the well-worn London trek to advance their knowledge.

This still exists to a degree, of course, but in the 1970s and 1980s New York and the West Coast are the major centres of innovation.

One could then pose the question: Does "Australian" sculpture actually exist or are we an artistic satellite of Europe and America?

The neoclassical public monuments abound in most parks around Australia — with thanks to the Anzac memorials — and although some tend to extreme naturalism — such as George Lambert's monument to Henry Lawson and Charles Summer's Bourke and Wills

Monument, they still hark back to the classical.

The Bourke and Wills monument, for example, seems to be directly based on Michelangelo's *Giuliano de Medici*.

It is probably safer to describe local sculpture as international. Although sculptors here — John Armstrong, George Baldessin, Roger Klippel, Micki Griff and the innovative Diana Webber, to name a few — rank with any foreign artist — there is no heavy indigenous theme that makes them exceptionally Australian in their style.

It is probably best for our sculptors that they have no stylistic base. Looking at works by sculptress, Diana Webber at the East End Art gallery in Sydney it is interesting to see the products of an unrestricted imagination mixed with an obvious talent.

Her works, 18 pieces in all, ranging from the figurative to the more futuristic pieces, have stirred a lot of interest and attention in this latest exhibition.

Bronze

From the classical bronzes of Orpheus and Eurydice, with the dogs barking at their heels, and Atlas and Perseus, to the modernistic *Woman and Horse*, Diana Webber has covered a wide range of themes.

Particularly interesting is her mixing of modern and traditional elements as in the piece, *What's Black and White and Read All Over*.

The piece consists of bronze children, a theme running through many of her works. The children progress from natural bronze through to red-painted figurines, to those covered in newtype.

Painting bronze might be regarded as sacrilege by some but it adds an interesting perspective to many of her works, possibly breaking some traditional boundary.

The *Rainbow Makers*, based also on child figures linked by rainbow-colored chords, also shows the delightfully futuristic use of bronze in an abstract form.

These pieces are interlaced



THIRST II... one of 18 pieces on show

with those more poignant, such as *Dreaming*, where a child's face, seemingly wrapped in a shell, peers out onto the world.

Ned Kelly also makes an appearance, the child theme again playing a part.

Mr Roger Dunwell, co-director of the gallery, believes sculpture in bronze has been fairly neglected in Australia, because of the shortage of foundries and facilities.

"It is difficult to do large-scale works. John Gardner, an American living here, started up the bronze foundry at the East Sydney Technical College, which has helped" he said.

As an interesting sidelight to this exhibition, the NSW Art Gallery is running an educational display entitled *Sculptors' Means*, which emphasises the materials and methods used by sculptors.

A variety of materials including terracotta, wood, stone, bronze, steel and mixed media is represented in works ranging from the T'ang dynasty and tribal collections through to contemporary European and Australian works.