



COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Research School of Humanities and the Arts

School of Art

VISUAL ARTS GRADUATE PROGRAM

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

CATHRYN VANESSA FRANZI

**An Australian Botanical Narrative: A Practice-Led Enquiry into
Representations of Australian Flora on the Ceramic Vessel as an
Expression of Environmental Culture**

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF THE DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

APRIL 2015

Declaration of Originality

I, Cathryn Franzihereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.

Acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the Australian land who were the first to study and value the indigenous flora and its environment. My deepest thanks go to my supervisors, Patsy Hely, Greg Daly, Janet DeBoos and John Pratt who supported and assisted me through this project in so many ways. Patsy in particular was a dedicated and considerate guide and I thank her with wholehearted appreciation. I have treasured the companionship of fellow students, especially friends Julie Brooke, Kelly Austin and Sally Simpson. Thank you to botanists Tom North and Michael Doherty for revealing their insights into the natural world. I appreciate the time and comments given to me on my draft by readers Ian Hodgson and Anne Brennan. My family has offered unending support and I am grateful to my parents Hazel Candy and Ray Franzi, and to my sister Juanita and brother Brett. Thank you to my children Tyler and Ruby Harford, for giving me their perspective on the current environment. A special thank you to my partner Chris Harford, for his absolute understanding of the material of clay and its demands, being always happy to talk about it and for his invaluable support.

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AN AUSTRALIAN BOTANICAL NARRATIVE: A PRACTICE-LED
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ON THE CERAMIC VESSEL AS AN EXPRESSION OF
ENVIRONMENTAL CULTURE

Abstract

This practice-led research investigates ways in which representations of Australian flora on ceramic vessels can communicate ideas about current environmental culture. The project developed from a curiosity about whether changing attitudes to Australia's environment, from colonisation to the present time of unprecedented species decline, might be found reflected on historical and contemporary ceramic objects. Botanical exploration and the scientific study of Australia's vast flora have produced a rich resource of natural history documentation. The aim was to establish a framework specific to the project that utilises these resources and current theoretical and practical approaches to understanding flora and the environment in both the sciences and humanities. Through this interdisciplinary enquiry, visual arts and botanical research methodologies intersected in the studio informing material, technical and conceptual developments. This exploration takes the form of an installation of wheel thrown vessels with carved and inlaid surface imagery of Australian flora, where, through form, imagery, material and placement, a metaphorical space is made in which to reflect on current environmental culture.

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- Fig. 103.** *Hardenbergia* (2012). Porcelain, engobe, 13 h x 31 w cm. Photo: David Paterson Dorian Photography.
- Fig. 104.** *The Ephemeral Dampiera Fusca: Tinderry Range* (2013). Porcelain, engobe, glaze, 14 h x 18 w cm. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.
- Fig. 105.** Natasha Daintry, *Ocean* (2009). 1000 slip-cast porcelain pots, glaze, dimensions variable. <http://www.natashadaintry.com/pages/sketchbook.php> (accessed 3 November 2014).
- Fig. 106.** Gwyn Pigott, *Pale Still Life with Teapot* (2002). Porcelain, 8-part group, overall 19.5 h x 74 w x 20 d cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. <http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=140717> (accessed 9 November 2013).
- Fig. 107.** Edmund de Waal, *breathturn, 1* (2013). 476 porcelain vessels, aluminium and plexiglass cabinet, 229.6 h x 300 w x 10 d cm. Photo: Mike Bruce. Gagosian Gallery, New York, USA. <http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/edmund-de-waal-september-12-2013/exhibition-images> (accessed 20 November 2014).
- Fig. 108.** *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013) Installation view, CraftACT: Craft and Design Centre, Canberra. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.
- Fig. 109.** *Golden Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013). Porcelain, engobe, gold lustre, underglaze, glaze, up to 30 h x 28 d cm. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.
- Fig. 110.** *Red Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013). Porcelain, engobe, gold lustre, underglaze, glaze, up to 13 h x 36w x 26 d cm. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.
- Fig. 111.** *Golden Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013). Porcelain, engobe, gold lustre, underglaze, glaze, up to 30 h x 28 d cm. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.
- Fig. 112.** *Red Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013). Porcelain, engobe, gold lustre, underglaze, glaze, up to 13 h x 36w x 26 d cm. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.
- Fig. 113.** *Mt Bimberi*, from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013). Paper-clay, engobe, underglaze, 90 h x 1300 w cm. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.
- Fig. 114.** *White Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013). Porcelain, engobe, gold lustre, underglaze, glaze, up to 18 h x 26 d cm Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.

Fig. 115. *The Sanctuary* (2014). Porcelain, raku clay, engobe, underglaze, glaze, 28 h x 54 w x 40 d cm. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.

Fig. 116. *The Sanctuary*, detail (2014). Porcelain, raku clay, engobe, underglaze, glaze, 28 h x 54 w x 40 d cm. Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.

Fig. 117. *Tanami Desert with Silver-leaf Grevillea* (2014). Porcelain, mid-fire clay, slips, engobe, overall 18 h x 1000 l x 10 d cm, Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.

Fig. 118. *Paraku Lakes with Bush Potato* (2014). Porcelain, mid-fire clay, slips, engobe, overall 25 h x 900 l x 12 d cm Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.

Fig. 119. *Paraku Lakes with Bush Potato*, detail (2014). Porcelain, mid-fire clay, slips, engobe, overall 25 h x 900 l x 12 d cm Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.

Fig. 120. *Tanami Desert with Silver-leaf Grevillea*, detail (2014). Porcelain, mid-fire clay, slips, engobe, overall 18 h x 1000 l x 10 d cm, Photo: Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier.

Fig. 121. Attributed to Ferdinand Bauer, *Diuris pauciflora*, and detail (1801). Original drawing during the Flinders Expedition, King George III Sound, 1801. My photograph, Library, Art and Archives Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Richmond, England.

Fig. 122. Attributed to Ferdinand Bauer, *Prasophyllum regium*, and detail (1801). Original drawing during the Flinders Expedition, King George III Sound, 1801. My photograph, Library, Art and Archives Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, England.

Fig. 123. Jacques-Julien Houtou de Labillardiere, *Arundo semiannularis* (1804). From *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen* (Paris: Typographia Dominae Huzard, 1804-1806) My photograph, National Library of Australia Collections, Canberra.

Fig. 124. Jacques-Julien Houtou de Labillardiere, *Gahnia psittacorum* (1804). From *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen* (Paris: Typographia Dominae Huzard, 1804-1806) My photograph, National Library of Australia Collections, Canberra.

Introduction

It is harder, these days, to get caught up in the timeless
meaning of forest, for man is near by.¹

One hundred years ago, Australian flora proliferated in the ceramic medium. Waratahs adorned teacups and saucers, Wattle decorated side plates and Eucalypt leaves and trunks described rims (Figs. 1-3). This abundance of Australian flora on ceramic objects meant more than a new aesthetic appreciation, it was considered broadly as a symbol of nationalism emerging from recent Federation.² However, ceramic historian Peter Timms also attributes this proliferation to a changing attitude to the Australian environment:

As is so often the case, most people did not begin to value their natural environment until it had virtually disappeared from their lives. Thus the late nineteenth century interest in Australian flora and fauna was often as much a nostalgic yearning after lost innocence as it was a patriotic expression of nationalist spirit.³



Fig. 1. Doulton & Co., design by Lulu Shorter. *Tea Cup* (c 1912)



Fig. 2. Rosenthal and Essie Gosper decorator, *Saucer with Image of a Wattle Plant* (1914-15)

¹ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (London: Viking, 1990). 43.

² Deborah Edwards, "Australian Decorative Arts at the Art Gallery of New South Wales," in *Australian Decorative Arts*, (11 November 1991-16 February 1992), ed. Art Gallery of New South Wales, (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1991). 2.

³ Peter Timms, *Australian Studio Pottery & China Painting* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986). 26.

I found Timms' connection between societal attitudes to the environment and an interest in ceramic-based representations of Australian flora intriguing. If ideas about nationalism and nostalgia could be seen reflected in ceramic objects around the time of Federation, what societal attitudes to the environment might be interpreted through ceramic objects before then, or afterwards? For instance, how might ceramics have reflected British attitudes to the Australian environment around the time of colonisation? And, further, how might ceramic objects made currently convey ideas about present understandings of the environment? These questions and my avid interest in Australian plants and in botanical ceramics, along with my concerns about the fate of the natural world, motivated this research.

This practice-led project, then, investigated how representations of Australian flora on the ceramic vessel might communicate ideas about contemporary environmental culture. Specifically, my research aimed to broaden understanding of botanical and environmental influences on the representation of Australian flora in the ceramic medium and in doing so find current relevance and meaning for their use now. I sought to establish a framework specific to the project, which could encompass a range of botanical resources and so enabling me to explore current theoretical and practical approaches to understanding flora and the environment in both the



Fig. 3. Merric Boyd, *Pot* (1920)

sciences and the humanities. This framework, which I termed an 'Australian botanical narrative', provided a useful way to situate ceramic objects within a botanical and environmental context and helped me keep in alignment a history of ideas about the Australian environment and historical developments in ceramics and culture more broadly in Australia.

A further term, 'environmental culture', proved critical in the development of the research. 'According to the European Environment Information and Observation Network, 'environmental culture' is, "the total of learned behaviour, attitudes, practices and knowledge that a society has with respect to maintaining or protecting its natural resources, the ecosystem and all other external conditions affecting human life."⁴ My challenge was to discover the way historical objects and objects made in the studio might convey aspects of, or reference to, environmental culture. Conceptually, this definition opened the way to an exploration of a broad range of historical and contemporary understandings of the environment, expanding the scope from environmentalism only, and so I have adopted the term throughout the project. As the research progressed, I appreciated the inclusivity of this umbrella term to capture the nuances of value attributed to plants and their environment and how this might be referenced in visual arts practice.

Studio research was undertaken through an investigation of wheel-thrown form and surface imagery techniques such as carving and inlay, and through testing and development of materials and processes. Vessels, as containers, have both a close relationship with plants through functional forms, such as the vase, and a long history of carrying floral imagery. In using the vessel as a reference point in my enquiry, these historical associations were examined, while the possibilities of the contemporary ceramic vessel were explored. In my approach to representation, my preference for mark making into the clay surface to create a drawn and textured line reflected what I perceive to be the textural quality of Australian plants.

⁴ European Environment Information and Observation Network, "General Multilingual Environmental Thesaurus." <http://www.eionet.eropa.eu/gemet/en/concept/1905/> (accessed 2 May 2014).

This project is situated within contemporary visual arts practice, where the making of artwork contributes to the discourse on current issues and concerns, while drawing upon and re-examining the past. Practice-led research through the making of artwork is iterative and led by conceptual, technical, process and material research in the studio, which in turn is led by research through reviewing literature and archival material, viewing collections and studying artworks, and through fieldwork. Academics and authors Roger Dean and Hazel Smith describe this reciprocal relationship as “practice-led research and research-led practice” in the creative arts.⁵

My research was informed and contextualised in two ways, by surveying historical and contemporary ceramic objects and, secondly, by situating them within a botanical and environmental framework. To gain an overview of the representation of Australian flora in ceramic history, I researched collections at a number of institutions, including the Powerhouse Museum, the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery, Shepparton Art Museum, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the National Museum of Australian Pottery. Historically, Australian flora was incorporated through a range of techniques and production methods, and depicted in a variety of decorative styles. Therefore, my research included both industrial and studio ceramics, and hand-decorated factory-made art pottery and china painting. I examined objects with naturalistic or stylistic representations of Australian flora, made in Australia and in Britain. I identified representative objects for close study, gathered supporting data in archives and gained biographical information about key artists, such as Rosa Fiveash, Gladys Reynell, Merric Boyd and Neil Douglas. This research was supported by a literature review, which identified the writers Peter Timms, Grace Cochrane, Geoff Ford, Kevin Fahy, Marjorie Graham and Noris Ioannou as particularly significant to the study.

⁵ Roger T Dean and Hazel Smith, *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). 1.

My second task was to develop a framework that would allow me to position these historical objects and my studio research within a botanical and environmental context: in other words, to devise a system to enable me to compare ceramics at specific times with the prevailing scientific approach to investigating and understanding Australian flora and attitudes to the environment. My interest in this approach was driven both by my science background and interest in botany, and as a way to find a visual vocabulary formed within my own European ancestry and culture. To develop an Australian botanical narrative, I looked to the discipline of history where the methodology of narrative provides a useful conceptual framework. According to environmental historian Libby Robin, “the aim of historical narrative is to build a new connection between the present and the past. It need not be an exhaustive story, but it takes evidence from multiple sources, in order to find meaning.”⁶ An Australian botanical narrative therefore, was a way to conceptualise a range of botanical knowledge and documentation across the historical scope of the project, and, through its application to ceramic objects, find meaning.

Although this country has been settled for over 40,000 years, my investigation of an Australian botanical narrative begins when European exploration brought a Western scientific approach to studying the plants. The second half of the eighteenth century was a time of expanding scientific and philosophical thinking, particularly in regards to natural history, and Australia’s unique and vast flora was of great interest. Explorers, botanists, botanical illustrators and collectors all contributed to the evolving understanding of Australia’s flora and environment, producing a rich resource of natural history documentation. Not only was this scientifically important, but the resulting material was culturally significant. As art historian Richard Neville writes in *A Rage for Curiosity: Visualising Australia 1788-1830*, “Colonial art was about documentation, about recording information on the colonisation, possession and gradual understanding of the continent by Europeans.”⁷ This process by settler society has been fraught with difficulties as Old World

⁶ Libby Robin and Daniel Connell, "History and the Environment," in *Understanding the Environment: Bridging the Disciplinary Divides*, eds. Libby Robin, Robert J. Wasson and R. Quentin Grafton (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2005). 11.

⁷ Richard Neville, *A Rage for Curiosity: Visualising Australia 1788-1830* (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales Press, 1997). 8.

assumptions clash with the reality of Australia's particular floristic and environmental features. This is what makes an Australian botanical narrative so interesting and the resulting environmental problems so complex.

Documentation relating to the acquisition of botanical knowledge is wide ranging, from botanical illustration, to plant collections and historical and contemporary texts. I studied this material in archives, collections and exhibitions including the National Library of Australia, the rare book collection in the Menzies Library at the Australian National University (ANU), the National Herbarium of Victoria, the Natural History Museum London, the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art in Kew Gardens and the Kew Garden Archives, and in the exhibition *Capturing Flora: 300 Years of Australian Botanical Art*.⁸ I examined plant specimens and



Fig. 4. Banks' Florilegium Part 1 Australia, Plate 16, *Polygala rhinanthoides*, *Endeavour River, Australia 1770*, and detail (1981-1988).

⁸ *Capturing Flora: 300 Years of Australian Botanical Art* (25 September-2 December 2012, Art Gallery of Ballarat, Ballarat, Victoria).

documentation from the first European expeditions to Australia in museums, in online resources and in original publications such as *Banks Florilegium* (Fig. 4), *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen* and *Illustrationes Florae Novae Hollandiae* (Fig. 5).⁹

To fully investigate historical and theoretical understandings of Australian plants and the environment I undertook a literature review and found the discipline of environmental history valuable in interpreting attitudes to the environment. Environmental history is “the study of the interactions between people and nature in the past, and how they have changed with time.”¹⁰ Environmental historians Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, and environmental lawyer Tim Bonyhady

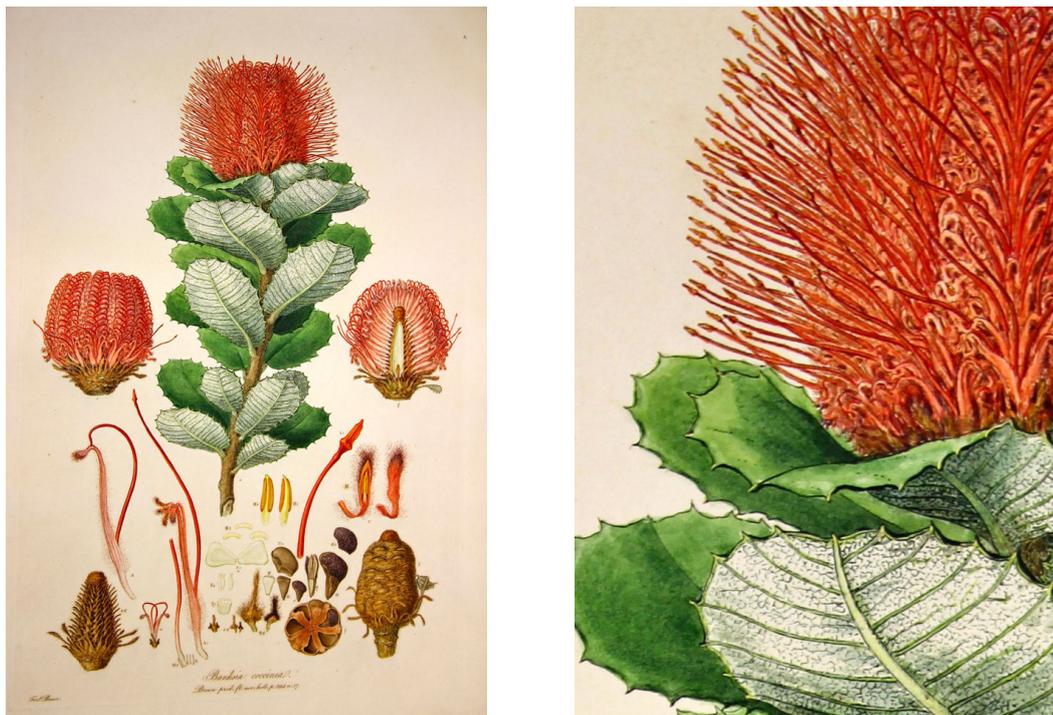


Fig. 5. Ferdinand Bauer, *Banksia coccinea*. and detail. (1813). Original illustration for *Florae Novae-Hollandiae*

⁹ Daniel Solander, Joseph Banks and Sydney Parkinson, *Banks' Florilegium* (London: British Museum, 1981-1988); Jacques-Julien Houtou de La Billardiere, *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen* (Paris: Typographia Dominae Huzard, 1804-1806); Ferdinand Bauer, *Illustrationes Florae Novae Hollandiae*, (London: Venuent apud auctorem, 1813).

¹⁰ Australian and New Zealand Environmental History Network, "What Is Environmental History," The Fenner School of Environment and Society and Centre for Environmental History, ANU. www.environmentalhistory-au-nz.org (accessed 3 May 2014).

were key authors to this part of my research, examining past events and cultural material through the impact upon and value placed on the environment. Their research puts a new perspective on Australian history, fuelling my curiosity as to how ceramic cultural and artistic practice was shaped by the relationship to the environment. Australia's natural environment is dominant, unique and diverse. To grapple with it has been part of a broader search by settler society to understand the environment it inhabits, and to gain a sense of belonging and meaning. Environmental history not only provided a tool to interpret the ceramic and botanical past, it informed my understanding of the current environment. Its value lies, according to Sörlin and Warde, in the way "it seeks to provide the history that can tell us how we arrived here and what we need to know to handle our global environmental predicament."¹¹

Again, to directly inform the making of objects through studio research, and in order to flesh out a current Australian botanical narrative, I sought opportunities to engage with the way current botanical and environmental knowledge is acquired. I participated in fieldwork with botanists, local landcare groups and botanical societies, such as the Friends of Grasslands, the Orchid Study Group and the Australian Native Plant Society. A science background made me well placed to form connections with botanical research centres, such as the Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG), the National Seed Bank and the Australian National Herbarium. I gained an extensive knowledge of the natural environment of my local area, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), and in doing so understood that botanical and environmental research, and stewardship, is connected to a specific place. Opportunities were also taken to do fieldwork in other locations, including Wilsons Promontory and the Lower Goulburn national parks in Victoria, North Head Sanctuary in Sydney and the Tanami Desert and Paruku Indigenous Protected Area in Western Australia.

¹¹ Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, eds. *Nature's End: History and the Environment* (Houndmills, Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). 2.

I also looked beyond the field of ceramics practice and botanical artists to the practice and intention of artists in other media engaging with environmental culture. Contemporary printmakers Maryanne Rosengren and Jörg Schmeisser, painter John Wolseley and jeweller and object maker Julie Blyfield engage with fieldwork, botanical research facilities or botanical collections in the making of their artwork. Each has developed a particular and individual way of documenting, conceptualising and engaging with plants and their environment, and this informed my own visual arts methodology for working in the field and the studio. In this way I situated my art practice within the context of contemporary Australian art.

Plant forms have been drawn, painted, carved and applied to the surface of ceramic objects as decoration for millennia. They are perhaps the “most universal theme in ornament”¹² because they are so easily adapted to suit a wide range of decorative approaches, from the stylistic to the naturalistic. Symmetry and pattern are elements used to stylise a plant form, and many theorists such as David Brett analyse the principles of and cultural and aesthetic values of such decoration.¹³ The decorative approach in ceramics of representing naturalistic plants began in Europe about 1725, and is attributed in part to the growth of and interest in botanical knowledge and botanical publications.¹⁴

Botanical ceramics, depicting “botanically accurate single flowers,”¹⁵ were first made in the Chelsea factory in London about 1755 and were copied from illustrations by botanical artist George Ehret. Chelsea was also the first English factory to make porcelain, a material that was “eminently suitable for accurate and precise botanical painting.”¹⁶ A number of factories took this approach, including the Danish-based Royal Copenhagen, which made the famous *Flora Danica* service towards the end of the period 1789-1803. Botanical illustration, as the link between botanical science

¹² Philippa Lewis and Gillian Darley, *Dictionary of Ornament*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986). 240.

¹³ David Brett, *Rethinking Decoration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Simon Jones, "18th Century Flower Power," *Antique Dealer and Collector's Guide*, vol. 50, no. 8 (March 1997). 24.

¹⁵ Hugo Morley-Fletcher, *Techniques of the World's Great Masters of Pottery and Ceramics* (Oxford: Phaidon-Christie's, 1984). 129.

¹⁶ Oliver Mathews, "English Botanical Pottery and Porcelain," *Antique Collector* (July 1977). 72.



Fig. 6. Royal Copenhagen, *Flora Danica* (1789-1803)



Fig. 7. Derby and William 'Quaker' Pegg, decorator, *Thistle Dish* (c 1800)



Fig. 8. Worcester and Ernest Philip, decorator, *Cup and Saucer, Pink Gum Blossom Design* (1912). Design by Ellis Rowan

and botanical ceramics, is unmistakable in examples such as this, with each of the 2000 *Flora Danica* pieces painted from the botanical work *Flora of the Kingdom of Denmark* (Fig. 6).¹⁷ During my fieldtrip to England, I examined work by renowned artists William Pegg and Thomas Pardoe in the Victoria & Albert and Ashmolean Museums. Pegg's painting on the *Thistle Dish* (Fig. 7) exuberantly fills the space, perhaps indicating the difference between working from plant specimens, as his sketchbooks suggest, and the more common practice of copying from botanical publications.¹⁸ Features of this botanically accurate style include representing the whole plant and not just the flowers, life-size scale, separate detailed views of seeds or flower parts, and a folded leaf revealing its underside, as in the conventions of a herbarium specimen. Australian plants were copied from botanical illustrations onto ceramics in a similar way, for example Royal Worcester and Wedgwood used illustrations by Australian botanical artists Ellis Rowan (Fig. 8) and Helena Forde respectively.

Botanical illustration, therefore, was an important approach to consider in my studio research, for its linkage of science and ceramics and as an accurate approach to representation. To obtain first-hand experience in botanical illustration I was an active participant in the Botanical Art group at the Australian National Botanical Gardens, gaining experience working from live plant specimens and learning illustrative techniques which I adapted for working on clay. Botanical illustration and print were a point of reference as I explored detail, accuracy and composition on the ceramic surface. In addition, works by contemporary botanical artists Rory McEwen and Andrew Seward provided a way to reflect on how artists extend the conventions within a traditional medium by referencing environmental change in their work.

I investigated representation primarily through techniques of carving into the clay surface, particularly sgraffito, in which colour is layered over the surface and then carved to reveal the clay body below. This technique has attributes I was keen to explore, such as the immediacy of the mark making and textural and graphic

¹⁷ Jones, "18th Century Flower Power." 26.

¹⁸ Morley-Fletcher, *Techniques of the World's Great Masters of Pottery and Ceramics*. 133.

qualities I believe suit the expression of plants of a dry climate. Sgraffito and incising have historical links to the representation of plants, such as work made in the late nineteenth century by British artists the Martin Brothers (Fig. 9) and Florence and Hannah Barlow. Australian artists Gladys Reynell, Margaret Preston and Doreen Goodchild used a printmaking style of sgraffito on ceramic vessels during the resurgence of linoblock and woodblock in the early twentieth century. Print in particular uses negative and positive and textural mark making, which I saw as key elements of my own investigation into carving into the clay surface. By exploring botanically accurate, naturalistic representations of Australian flora I was aligning the imagery with botanical illustration and scientific representation, positioning the meaning of the imagery away from the purely decorative, towards a serious and authentic engagement with the issues of Australian flora and the environment.



Fig. 9. Martin Brothers, *Vase* and detail (1893)

The Australian environment is a subject for many contemporary ceramic artists in their work, but few investigate this through the representation of Australian flora. The range of ceramic materials, techniques and processes that artists use to express the environment, however, was of particular interest to my research. The materiality of clay and its making and firing processes can be used to connect to a specific place geologically, as in the work made with local materials by Steve Harrison or expressively, as in Toni Warburton's work. Process-driven imagery, such as the delicate layering, by Pippin Drysdale, of lines on a vessel surface to evoke the ancient dune fields of the Tanami Desert reflect landscape. Julie Bartholomew examines the materiality of porcelain in her sculptural work to communicate ideas of threatened bird species, and investigates the way installation can express ideas about endangered plants in her work *Rarely Seen – an Installation* (Fig. 10). Indigenous artist Malpiya Davey expresses deep cultural and ancestral links to country through symbolic imagery in her work (Fig. 11).



Fig. 10. Julie Bartholomew, *Rarely Seen – an Installation*, detail (2012)



Fig. 11. Malpiya Davey, decorator, *Vase* (2003)

The field of ceramics has undergone many changes since Australian flora was first used on the clay surface. It has become part of contemporary visual art with a broad range of approaches, for example installation, to engage conceptually in visual culture. Craft theorists Howard Risatti, Emmanuel Cooper, Glenn Adamson and Philip Rawson contribute to this field of scholarship, and their work has informed my analysis of the role of function and the vocabulary of ceramic form in my own work. In particular they highlight the role traditional forms such as the wheel-thrown vessel can hold in contemporary art, as Emmanuel Cooper suggests, as “signifier, a container of meaning and of ideas.”¹⁹ The work of ceramic artists Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Edmund de Waal and Natasha Daintry were points of reflection for my own investigation into the way relationships between forms might express ideas, where the use of multiples, placement and installation can extend the meaning of the vessel.

In aiming to broaden the understanding of the botanical and environmental influences on the use of Australian flora in the ceramic medium, my research has been underpinned by a number of questions. How can the perspective of an Australian botanical narrative, or the scientific interaction with Australian plants and the environment, be used to broaden the understanding of the use of Australian flora in ceramic history? How can I investigate a current Australian botanical narrative and in what ways can it inform the studio research aims, to express environmental culture in ceramic visual art? What can botanical illustration and print offer historically and currently to the representation of Australian flora on the ceramic surface? And my key research question; how can the representation of Australian flora on the surface of the wheel-thrown vessel, express, through surface, form, material and display, contemporary environmental culture?

This research is propelled by the intellectual knowledge and philosophical challenge of an environment and climate in crisis. Bill McKibben the author of *The End of Nature* and more recently the founder of www.350.org, an organisation that draws attention to the uppermost safe limit of carbon in the atmosphere, writes of the

¹⁹ Emmanuel Cooper, *Contemporary Ceramics* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009). 59.

importance to the human imagination of the idea of wilderness, and how, as humans have impacted every sphere, the meaning of nature has changed.²⁰ Jason Cowley, editor of the literary journal *Granta*, reflects on how this is altering contemporary nature writing:

For as long as people have been writing, they have been writing about nature. But economic migration, overpopulation and climate change are transforming the natural world into something unfamiliar. As our conception and experience of nature changes, so too does the way we write about it.²¹

In this project I hypothesise that the representation of plants on the ceramic object is also changed by our knowledge and experience of the predicament of the environment in which they dwell. My research is premised on this paradigm shift, that is, in the present global climate, the botanical representation of plants in the ceramic medium cannot be isolated from current environmental culture.

In Chapter One I establish a detailed context for this project through an examination of Australian flora in ceramic history. I investigate how these objects might be connected to the botanical understanding of the time, or an Australian botanical narrative, and how they might reflect environmental culture. Chapter Two explains the development of my studio research, the early investigation of a current Australian botanical narrative and introduces my initial exploration of imagery, ceramic materials and form to express environmental culture. In Chapter Three I discuss the process of gaining more in-depth botanical knowledge by making connections with botanical institutions and how this was intimately tied to place. I explain through a number of works how this botanical fieldwork not only informed my studio research conceptually and theoretically, but also influenced the development of ceramic processes and materials. Chapter Four discusses a series of later works that use multiple forms and display to reflect conceptually on environmental culture and the Australian botanical narrative. Theoretical understandings of the vessel and installation are discussed in relation to ceramic visual vocabulary, function and contemporary ceramics. In this chapter I elucidate the final creative results.

²⁰ McKibben, *The End of Nature*. 43-84.

²¹ Jason Cowley, "The New Nature Writing," *Granta* 102 (2008).

Chapter One

Australian Flora in Ceramic History and an Australian Botanical Narrative

Simply to study nature is not enough. We have to know how artists of all times have interpreted nature; how the same artist, or artists of the same period, treated natural form differently, according to the material employed, conformably with the position of the work, in view of the use it was to serve.¹

Introduction

To contextualise and inform my studio research within ceramic, botanical and environmental fields, I began my research with two distinct lines of enquiry: to survey ceramics decorated with Australian flora; and to establish an Australian botanical narrative, one I drew from botanical science and related sources from the time of European contact. By examining them in parallel, I discovered relationships between ceramic objects, the way they were made and the interest of the artists, with growing botanical and environmental knowledge. This analysis provided a way to investigate how the use of Australian flora to decorate ceramic objects might reflect, not only social history and cultural and artistic changes, but also the changing attitudes to and understanding of the environment; in other words, environmental culture.

In this chapter I begin by discussing Australia's specific botanical and environmental features, and how they both excited scientific curiosity and confronted settler society's expectations. Then, I give an overview of the appearance of indigenous flora on ceramic objects which I found in collections and through literature review, examining specific works that are significant to my study. I discuss the period from the 1870s and into the early twentieth century in detail, as Australian flora became popular in ceramics, and, all decorative arts, and how this was indicative of a more positive view towards Australian flora and the

¹ Lewis F. Day, *Nature in Ornament* (London B.T. Batsford, 1892). 7.

environment. In particular, I examine the influence of botanical illustrators, botanists and advocates in facilitating the occurrence and popularity of Australian plants on ceramic objects. I consider the way botanical processes, such as illustration, influenced, amongst others, china painter Rosa Fiveash and the way ceramic materials and techniques such as modelling and sgraffito, offered other ways of expressing Australian flora in studio pottery. Finally, I mention a number of artists, such as Neil Douglas, who worked in the 1950s, and those working currently, whose work references botanical knowledge or attitudes to the environment.

The nature of the Australian continent and the colonial period

For me, a distinguishing and fascinating feature of the early colonial period is the juxtaposition of Australia's particular environment and flora, with colonial and settler preconceptions and assumptions about it. Australia's environment was not just unusual to new arrivals from the northern hemisphere, it is now understood to be, "exceptional."² The vast continent is geologically ancient, and weathering has eroded the land to flatness and depleted the soils of nutrients. The extremely arid and irregular climate is caused in part by the El Nino-Southern Oscillation affecting Australia more than anywhere else. Paradoxically, these conditions have caused a rich biodiversity to evolve, with over 10% of all species on Earth and 91% of the more than 20,000 plant species being unique to the continent.³ Australian plants have adapted to fire and retain scarce nutrients by ever-greenness and the characteristic texture of small, rigid leaves. These conditions have produced what scientist Tim Flannery describes, as "a unique, fragile and highly interconnected ecology unlike that of any other continent."⁴

It was inevitable that British settlers, convicts and colonial officials compared the Australian environment to the physical and cultural landscapes from whence they came. These attitudes, values and beliefs influenced the individual and shared

² Libby Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007). 154.

³ Will Steffen et al., *Australia's Biodiversity and Climate Change* (Collingwood, Vic.: CSIRO Publishing, 2009). 7-8.

⁴ Tim Flannery, "The Fate of Empire in Low- and High-Energy Ecosystems," in *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*, eds. Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin (Victoria, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1997). 50.

perception of the Australian bush, and they ranged widely from wonder to aversion. For instance, Watkin Tench, arriving as a marine officer with the First Fleet in 1788 observed: "In those places where trees are scarce a variety of flowering shrubs abound, most of them entirely new to an European, and surpassing in beauty, fragrance, and number, all I ever saw in an uncultivated state."⁵ By contrast, Barron Field arriving from England in 1816 to fill the appointment as Supreme Court Judge in New South Wales, wrote the following impressions on crossing the Blue Mountains:

Yet the foliage of the eucalypti is always scanty; that of the acaciae acerose; ... Be this as it may, no tree, to my taste, can be beautiful that is not deciduous. What can a painter do with one cold olive-green? There is a dry harshness about the perennial leaf, that does not savour of humanity in my eyes. There is no flesh and blood in it: it is not of us, and is nothing to us.⁶

Tim Bonyhady attributes the condemnation of the eucalyptus tree by newcomers such as Field, to the prevailing negative attitude to the environment, requiring a public demonstration of "enduring civilization and good taste."⁷ At this point in colonial history the initial enthusiasm towards the flora had been replaced with a harsh comparison to an English standard. Geographer Anne Young emphasises in *Environmental Change in Australia since 1788*, that terms such as "wilderness' and 'nature' are not clear descriptors; they are value-laden words, and the meanings that they carry are not constant."⁸ Competing views of Australian flora and nature would continue, shifting between individuals and groups, historical periods and the imagined vision for the environment.

For Australian flora to appear on ceramic objects they had to acquire some value or meaning to those producing the ceramics or to those owning them. British critic David Whiting describes the ceramic object as an "ornamental image, a mirror of

⁵ Quote from Watkin Tench in Richard Aitken, "The First Fleet and Its Impact," in *Capturing Flora: 300 Years of Australian Botanical Art* (Ballarat: Art Gallery of Ballarat, 2012). 86.

⁶ Quote from Barron Field in Bernard Smith ed., *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia 1770-1914* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975). 36.

⁷ Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2000). 71.

⁸ Ann Young, *Environmental Change in Australia since 1788*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000). 186.



Fig. 12. Staffordshire, *Mug*, detail (c 1793)



Fig. 13. George Stubbs, *The Kongouro from New Holland* (1772)

the society and the values that produced it.”⁹ Australian flowers might have value scientifically, but they needed to be symbolic of society’s values, for example through political, national, commemorative or environmental reason, to appear on a decorative object for display or use in the domestic sphere.

In Britain, great interest was shown in the arrival of specimens of Australian flora and fauna from the early exploratory expeditions.¹⁰ The kangaroo in particular had curiosity value in its “apparent aberration”¹¹ and appeared on an earthenware mug made in Staffordshire England around 1793 (Fig. 12). Described, by the founding curator of Australian decorative arts at the National Gallery of Australia, John McPhee, as the *Kangaroo Mug*,¹² the transfer-printed and painted image of a kangaroo appears to be situated in its natural environment, perhaps the first depiction of Australian flora on a ceramic object. The distinctive kangaroo is attributed to *The Kongouro from New Holland*, a painting by George Stubbs, commissioned by Joseph Banks in 1771 or 1772 (Fig. 13).¹³ Stubbs based the work

⁹ David Whiting, “The 20th-Century Ceramic Narrative,” in *The Ceramic Narrative*, ed. Matthias Ostermann (London: A&C Black, 2006). 105.

¹⁰ Richard Neville, *A Rage for Curiosity: Visualising Australia 1788-1830* (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales Press, 1997). 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 18.

¹² John McPhee, “Ceramics in the Collection of Australian Decorative Arts in the Australian National Gallery,” *Pottery in Australia* 21, no. 2 (1982). 4.

¹³ Markman Ellis, “Tails of Wonder: Constructions of the Kangaroo in Late Eighteenth-Century Scientific Discourse,” in *Science and Exploration in the Pacific: European Voyages to the Southern Oceans in*

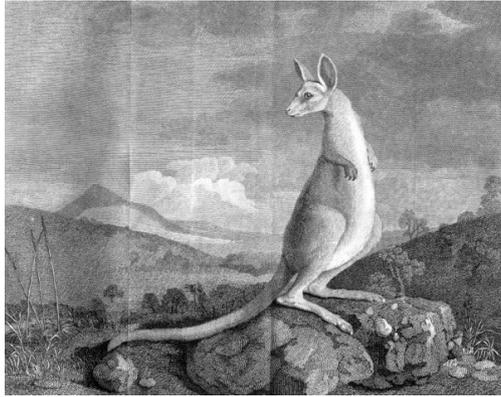


Fig. 14. John Hawkesworth, from *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His Present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere* (1773)



Fig. 15. Thomas Bewick, from *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1790)

on “a stuffed or inflated pelt”¹⁴ brought back from Cook’s expedition on the Endeavour and sketches and descriptions by artist Sydney Parkinson. Versions of ‘Stubbs’ kangaroo’ and variations on its habitat appeared in other publications such as John Hawkesworth’s, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His Present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, published in 1773 (Fig. 14) and Thomas Bewick’s *A General History of Quadrupeds*, published 1790 (Fig. 15).

The background vegetation varies widely between Stubbs’ original painting, subsequent publications and the earthenware mug. In the ceramic transfer print the flora appears to follow the same composition as in the original, but, apart from tall grasses, there the similarity ends. Instead of eucalyptus trees, there appear to be palms and densely foliaged conifers, and, rather than the peaked mountain in the original painting, a similar shaped structure resembles a glasshouse. Lastly, behind the kangaroo, a body of water resembling a lake or pond makes the scene very English. This may be artistic licence or it may be that the flora was based on

the Eighteenth Century, ed. Margarett Lincoln (Woodbridge, Suffolk UK: The Boydell Press in association with the National Maritime Museum, 1998). 175.

¹⁴ Royal Museums Greenwich, “The Kongouro from New Holland’ (Kangaroo),” Royal Museums Greenwich, <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/573621.html> (accessed 3 September 2014).

Richmond Park, Kew Gardens, just outside London, where Wilfrid Blunt notes in *The Ark in the Park: the Zoo in the Nineteenth Century*, live kangaroos were kept from 1792.¹⁵ In many ways this object reflects the excitement and desire for natural history curiosities and the oddity that the Australian flora and fauna posed to the British at this time.¹⁶ However, for popular appeal, this may have been more agreeable within a familiar setting.

I found no evidence of Australian flora as primary decoration on ceramics made in Australia for nearly the first hundred years of settlement. This appears to be due to the fledgling status of the ceramic industry, the product demands and also the bias of the new colony. Historian and collector Geoff Ford, in his book *Australian Pottery: the First 100 Years*, notes the difficulties faced by early potters settling in the colony. Besides the limitations of basic equipment and the necessity of testing all new materials, there was little support as “Government policy was that all needs of the colony were to be supplied from England.”¹⁷ This meant that building materials, storage containers and day to day kitchen paraphernalia were the main production, rather than decorated tableware, as exemplified in the announcement in the *Sydney Herald* by potter James King in 1834: “I intend to manufacture only such coarse bulky articles as the mere price of the freight from England has hitherto excluded from the colony.”¹⁸ Australian pottery was seen as inferior to British made and local potteries certainly lacked the established technological and skill base of the vast industries in Stoke-on-Trent to attempt refined hand painted botanical ware.

Another hurdle Australian flora faced was potters arriving from England and Europe continued with the skills, techniques and processes they knew. Decoration where present, was achieved through relief moulds, impressed stamps and spriggs, reflecting work typical of Staffordshire. Often motifs were copied from pattern books or intrinsic to the tools and moulds brought over from England, a typical example being a jug made by Irrawang Pottery c1844 (Fig. 16). In my

¹⁵ Wilfrid Blunt, *The Ark in the Park: The Zoo in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976). 67.

¹⁶ Neville, *A Rage for Curiosity: Visualising Australia 1788 - 1830*. 20.

¹⁷ Geoff Ford, *Australian Pottery: The First 100 Years* (Wodonga, Vic.: Salt Glaze Press, 1995). 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 22.

observation of the pottery collection from the first hundred years of settlement in the National Museum of Australian Pottery, there is scant floral decoration at all until the second half of the eighteenth century. Then it is predominately either domesticated crops, such as wheat, grapevine and maize, or culturally symbolic plants from the homeland, such as oak, ivy, thistle, holly and berries, occurring as relief on moulded industrial ware (Fig. 17). This was commensurate with, on the one hand, the colony's priority for and pride in agricultural expansion and, on the other, the longing and nostalgia for the homeland. One can imagine that decorative ceramics entering the home were fulfilling the same role for the settler as their establishment of English gardens, being as historians Katie Holmes, Susan Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi write in *Reading the Garden: the Settlement of Australia*, "important reminders of home, carrying memories of people and places."¹⁹

During the same period, from the time of the *Kangaroo Mug* to the 1880s, I found no evidence of English potteries making ceramics decorated with Australian flora either. This was despite the technical expertise and the availability of Australian flora to work from, both as live plants in the horticultural trade, and as illustrations in publications, such as botanist James Edward Smith's *A Specimen of the Botany of*



Fig. 16. James King's Irrawang Pottery, *Jug* (1844–1853)



Fig. 17. Lithgow Valley Colliery Pottery, *Cheese Stand with Cover* (c 1889)

¹⁹ Katie Holmes, Susan K. Martin, and Kylie Mirmohamadi, *Reading the Garden: The Settlement of Australia* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008). 26.

New Holland in 1793 and the popular *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*.²⁰ The fashion for scientifically accurate botanical ceramics had ended by the early nineteenth century, perhaps contributing to their absence, however it is more likely that they were not in demand. It would not be until the 1880s that English potteries would find a receptive public interest in Australian flora and cultivate such a market.

Late nineteenth century environmental culture

Up until the 1880s however, the predominant colonial view of Australia's nature was as a commodity, leading to indiscriminate clearing and inappropriate farming practices. A zeal for 'improving' the land motivated the introduction of plants and animals that were to become major pests and weeds. The environment was being altered profoundly and irreversibly, as academic Paul Cox writes, where as early as the 1860s "the notion of the ruined natural landscape was often heard in the colony."²¹ Objections to such destruction by a small minority, mostly due to the fear of declining resources, had been present from first settlement, but they now became more vocal. Tim Bonyhady suggests Australia had the first 'conservation' organisation in the world when the Northern District Forest Conservation League was established in Victoria in August 1888.²² Despite government action to create timber reserves, there was little legislation and management to enforce their protection.

By the late 1870s, a positive attitude to the environment was developing amongst the urban population. As cities became crowded a more leisured populace began to appreciate the outdoors for the benefits of fresh air. Groups were formed to enjoy and study nature, such as The Field Naturalists Club in 1880 and walking clubs from 1894.²³ Bonyhady notes there was an "international rise in environmental

²⁰ Tony Cavanagh, "A Short History of the Cultivation of *Grevillea*," The Society for Growing Australian Plants, <http://anpsa.org.au/APOL9/mar98-5.html> (accessed 4 August 2014).

²¹ Paul Fox, "Keeping Aridity at Bay: Acclimatisation and Settler Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Australia," *Ecological Humanities Review*, no. 36 (July 2005). 6.

²² Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*. 184.

²³ Geoffrey Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers: A History of Australians Shaping Their Environment*, 2nd ed., Australian Experience. (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992). 99.

concern in the second half of the nineteenth century”²⁴ and in Australia, the Royal National Park was declared in 1879, the second national park in the world. The following description of the Park in the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia* in 1886 exemplifies this appreciative attitude:

The natural ruggedness and freedom have been largely and wisely preserved; it is a bit of original Australia kept to recall to us what the coast country was like in the earliest days; it is a bit of wild nature within easy reach of the civilisation of a great metropolis; it is a wilderness for those who like the change from hot and dusty streets; it is, and will probably long continue, a place where the labours and worries of town may be temporarily forgotten, and where on all holidays the multitude may get out and find scope for the free enjoyment of all innocent natural propensities.²⁵

Similarly, the following description in the same publication, of the annual Manly Wild Flower Show reveals the growing esteem in which Australian flora was being held by those in the suburbs:

Flowers fill all the bush about Manly in the spring. Heath-like epacrids of many varieties carpet the table-lands; wattles, of various shades of yellow, bloom in the scrub on the flats; waratahs or native tulips shine like crimson cones in the gullies; the aromatic native roses and other boroneas grow in profusion; the gold and silver stars of Bethlehem lie thickly tufted on the ground, and on many rocky faces of the coast ravines are beautiful orchids called rock-lilies. The suggestion was to blend these beauties of the bush together. The idea was eagerly taken up, and was by tasteful hands made a reality.²⁶

The picking of wildflowers became a popular pastime until the concern over their decrease in urban areas and the expansion of farming led to legislation to protect native plants from 1926.²⁷

²⁴ Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*. 130.

²⁵ Andrew Garran, (editor) *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Sydney: Picturesque Atlas Publishing 1886). 98.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 71.

²⁷ Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers: A History of Australians Shaping Their Environment*. 107.

Another influence on the growing public appreciation and understanding of Australian flora, and for botany itself, came from the Victorian government botanist Ferdinand von Mueller. From about 1870 he had begun to advertise in newspapers for plant collectors, ultimately forming what academic Penny Olsen describes as “the largest network on any continent – approaching 3000 known collectors – and [he] maintained it by a phenomenal body of correspondence to them.”²⁸ His aim was to seek all Australian plant specimens to be able to write a flora of Australia. The rarity and narrow range of so many species required widespread assistance and he encouraged women, about ten per cent of collectors, to use their ‘spare time’.²⁹ Mueller in turn supported women botanical illustrators, such as Ellis Rowan and Helena and Harriet Scott, by identifying the plants they painted and providing letters of introduction to publishers and scientists.³⁰ By the time of Mueller’s death, “his name was known throughout the land, and his industry and networking had put Australian botany on the map internationally.”³¹ Other botanists such as Joseph Maiden continued supporting what today would be called citizen science, advocating for more widespread appreciation of Australian flora. Maiden was the first curator of the Sydney Technological Museum (later the Powerhouse Museum) from 1882, NSW Government Botanist and Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney, and was active in the “movement to retain large areas of native forests.”³²

Early Australian flora on ceramics

In this more favourable atmosphere towards Australian flora and the natural environment, the first examples of ceramic objects decorated with Australian flora appeared, indicating the value to society they now held. This would begin a rise in popularity that would continue and peak over the next sixty years, from the late 1870s to the 1930s, influenced by art movements, decorative styles and changing social and political influences. Also, it was encouraged and supported by botanists, botanical illustrators and botanical advocates. This newfound popularity began with

²⁸ Penny Olsen, *Collecting Ladies: Ferdinand Von Mueller and Women Botanical Artists* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2013). 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 16.

³¹ *Ibid.* 22.

³² Mark Lyons and CJ Pettigrew, "Maiden, Joseph Henry," Australian Dictionary of Biography, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/maiden-joseph-henry-7463> (accessed 20 November 2014).

English hand painted industrial ceramics, followed by Australian industrial pottery, china painting, art pottery made in small local industrial potteries and individually made studio pottery.

According to my research, one of the earliest distinct botanical representations of Australian flora on ceramics occurred when Josiah Wedgwood and Sons Ltd in England produced the transfer-printed and hand painted limited edition *Australian Flora* series between 1879 and 1883 (Fig. 18).³³ The designs were based on twelve botanical wildflower Christmas cards by Australian botanical illustrator Helene Forde (nee Scott) and began the connection between botanical illustration and print and the representation of Australian flora in ceramic imagery. The Australiana Fund has in its collection blue transfer-printed Wedgwood plates obviously based on the same designs c. 1882 (Fig. 19).³⁴ The naturalistic imagery was based on the scientific representation of Australian flora. However, the purpose of the Wedgwood range is considered by Powerhouse curator Eva Czernis-Ryl as an “attempt to test the Australian market”³⁵ possibly as commemorative ware with the approach of the centenary in 1888.



Fig. 18. Wedgwood, *Australian Flora* Series (1880-1882). Designed by Helena Forde

³³ Eva Czernis-Ryl, "Australian Flora' Wedgwood", Powerhouse Museum collection, <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=7037> (accessed 15 October 2014).

³⁴ *Australia Revealed: Decorative Arts from the Australiana Fund*, (13 April-30 June 2013), Canberra Museum and Gallery, Canberra.

³⁵ Czernis-Ryl, "Australian Flora' Wedgwood".



Fig. 19. Wedgwood, Plates (1880-1882). After Helena Forde

The first Australian-made pottery with indigenous flora, appears to be relief moulded fern motifs around 1880, encouraged perhaps by ‘fern fever’ that had swept Britain from the mid-nineteenth century and to some extent, Australia. Many new species of ferns had been identified in Australia, the world’s largest *Dicksonia antarctica*, becoming a popular attraction in places such as Fern Tree Gully near Melbourne. The valuing of this botanical feature seems to be evident when *The Lithgow Mercury* described on 30 September 1882 work from Lithgow pottery as “...tastefully, and – for Australia – appropriately ornamented with ferns in basso rilievo”(Fig. 20).³⁶ Around this period, mould maker and potter William Holford designed a relief motif of flowers, including ferns, that became known as the Premier pattern (Fig. 21), and which was widely used, with slight variations, in other potteries. Writer Helen Stephens describes it as consisting of a “... bouquet of Australian plants and leaves.”³⁷ The plants are stylised and not distinctly identifiable, perhaps fulfilling the desire for familiarity to both those born in England or Australia, particularly in its most common use, on the garden pot.

Doulton & Co., in Staffordshire, England, was also significant in introducing, collaborating in and advocating for the use of Australian flora in ceramics. John Shorter opened a Doulton agency in Sydney in 1892, and was particularly

³⁶ Ford, *Australian Pottery: The First 100 Years*. 97.

³⁷ Helen Stephens, "William Holford Review," Craft Victoria, http://www.craft.org.au/Learn/Craft_Culture/william-holford-review/ (accessed 2 February 2015).



Fig. 20. Lithgow Valley Colliery Pottery, *Teapot* (c 1889)



Fig. 21. Lithgow Valley Colliery Pottery, *Flowerpot* (c 1886)

passionate about Australian flora. He became part of a network of advocates for the use of Australian flora, for example donating to Joseph Maiden, curator at the Sydney Technological Museum in 1893, a large collection of Doulton ware, which became a source of inspiration for students of china painting and, later, studio potters.³⁸ Designs were created specifically for the Australian market and, by 1895, Doulton was importing dinnerware decorated with transfer-printed Australian flora. Doulton's *Manly Beach* series was perhaps made in response to the popularity of the Manly Wildflower Show (Fig. 22).³⁹ In these examples Australian plants are depicted in an English style, offering to the owner an affirmation of the landscape that surrounded them, while retaining an identity to the 'homeland'. As Marjorie Graham revealingly notes about the Doulton design, *Rose & Waratah*, released in 1900, "This does not immediately strike the viewer as particularly Australian, and it was probably not intended to do so."⁴⁰

Louis Bilton, a china painter employed by Doulton, travelled to Australia in the mid 1880s to "depict sketches of the Australian flora from life for decorative purposes, such drawings to be utilised by that firm in its various porcelain manufactures."⁴¹

³⁸ Peter Timms, *Australian Studio Pottery & China Painting* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986). 3.

³⁹ Ford, *Australian Pottery: The First 100 Years*. 94.

⁴⁰ Marjorie Graham, "Printed Ceramics in Australia," *The Australian Society for Historical Archaeology* (2006), http://www.ashadocs.org/occasionalpapers/OP02_Graham.pdf. 17 (accessed 22 January 2015).

⁴¹ Richard Thomas Baker and Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Sydney N.S.W.), *The Australian Flora in Applied Art* (Sydney: Department of Public Instruction, 1915). 31.



Fig. 22. Doulton & Co, *Manly Beach* series (c 1895)



Fig. 23. Doulton & Co and Louis Bilton, decorator, *Plaque* (c 1886)

While in Sydney, he painted ceramics, including a plaque decorated with Waratahs and Wonga Wonga vine, which was shown at the 1889 Melbourne Exhibition, obtaining a Gold medal (Fig. 23).⁴² Bilton made many significant pieces decorated with indigenous flora while in Australia, and most likely promoted the practice of china painting.

It was evident that the botanically accurate representation of flora in illustrations or directly onto ceramics required the artist to have access to botanical knowledge. Botanists provided the expertise needed for plant identification and assisted artists to be able to work from live specimens. An example of such a network is shown in the following correspondence between John Shorter, the Doulton representative, to Joseph Maiden, NSW Government botanist, about the artist Louis Bilton and the response from the Victorian Government botanist Ferdinand von Mueller, written 29 October 1891:

In Melbourne I had the honour of a visit from Baron von Mueller who expressed his unstinted praise of our goods, giving Louis Bilton high praise for three vases which I happen to open there of his, one being the grass like arrangement, which you may recalled I said Bilton obtained from Wiseman's Ferry, that, the Baron told me, he easily recognised not as a grass but a heath from the bell-like flowers and further named *Dracaena* from its likeness to the Dragon tree of (I think) Madagascar.⁴³

⁴² Kevin Fahy et al. editors, *Australian Art Pottery, 1900-1950* (Sydney: Casuarina Press, 2004). 10.

⁴³ Powerhouse Museum Archives. Original correspondence, no. 988, John Shorter to J.H Maiden, 29 October 1891.

Local industrial potteries responded commercially to the interest in and fashion for Australian flora, adapting techniques and materials from England. In 1901, Bakewell Pottery brought out skilled workers from England to replicate the tissue-transfer technique used by Doulton.⁴⁴ This was the first Australian firm to do so, producing a competitive tableware range in green and sepia with patterns of Wattle, Flannel Flower and Australian Rose.⁴⁵ Thomas Stevens helped develop a nature printing technique used in 'Foliage Ware' at Doulton in England, which he then introduced to Mashman pottery, Sydney in the 1890s and which was continued by George Day into the 1920s (Fig. 24).⁴⁶ Eucalypt leaves were pressed into the soft clay surface, resulting, after firing, in "a reddish coloured perfect imprint of the leaves on the surface of the object."⁴⁷



Fig. 24. Mashman Bros. and George Day, *Jardiniere* (1923)

⁴⁴ Ford, *Australian Pottery: The First 100 Years*. 94.

⁴⁵ Graham, "Printed Ceramics in Australia." 18.

⁴⁶ Ford, *Australian Pottery: The first 100 Years*. 104.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 104.

The advocacy for Australian flora in ceramic decoration

As previously outlined, from the 1880s, botanists were raising the profile of indigenous flora. Adding to this convergence were botanical artists (predominately women), curators and teachers, who enabled and promoted their use in ceramic decoration. They supported and assisted each other, although focused on their own specific aim, whether it was scientific advancement, earning an income in an appropriate field as a woman or the formation of a national art. By the very nature of their interest many were vocal advocates to preserve Australian flora and the natural environment.

Botanical art was often the precursor to women's involvement in ceramics, particularly through china painting.⁴⁸ From early settlement there had been women, in more privileged situations, involved with the acceptable pastimes of amateur botanising and flower painting. Helena and Harriet Scott, Rosa Fiveash and Ellis Rowan were significant for the professional status they gained, and must have influenced the emerging china painting trend. The Scott sisters illustrated *Australian Lepidoptera and their Transformations* in 1864, before Helena had illustrations of Australian flora printed onto ceramics. Rosa Fiveash was commissioned to illustrate *The Forest Flora of South Australia* in 1882, subsequently teaching china painting and encouraging the use of Australian flora in a botanical style. Ellis Rowan pushed the boundaries within the established male art world when she won gold in the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition, challenging the perception of botanical subject matter as just scientific illustration or merely a female pastime.⁴⁹ She was a popular and prodigious artist, recording over 3000 plants, some of which are now extinct.⁵⁰ By 1898, Rowan had "achieved such recognition in Australia and the international art world that she was already an Australian household name."⁵¹ Royal Worcester used Rowan's designs, hand painted by decorators such as Albert Shuck (Fig. 25).

⁴⁸ Joan Kerr (editor), *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book: 500 Works by 500 Australian Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955* (Roseville East, NSW: G+B Arts International, 1995).

⁴⁹ Olsen, *Collecting Ladies: Ferdinand Von Mueller and Women Botanical Artists*. 146.

⁵⁰ Leonie Norton, *Women of Flowers: Botanical Art in Australia from the 1830s to the 1960s* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2009). 80.

⁵¹ Patricia Fullerton, *The Flower Hunter: Ellis Rowan* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2002). 2.



Fig. 25. Royal Worcester and Albert Shuck, decorator, *Plate with Pink Gum Blossom Design* (1912)



Fig. 26. Deliniers and Laurence Howie, decorator *Vase* (c 1910)

Influential botanists, such as Joseph Maiden, Ferdinand von Mueller and Richard Baker, were all advocates for Australian flora. Baker was particularly passionate about their use in the decorative arts, actively collecting and commissioning work in his position as curator at the Sydney Technological Museum, from 1898 to 1921. From 1906, the Museum had over 200 items in the *Australian flora in Art* display, including one Baker commissioned from Lawrence Howie (Fig. 26).⁵² The purpose of the exhibition was, as curator Margaret Betteridge writes, “to illustrate the successful adaptation of Australian floral motifs to design.”⁵³ In 1915 Baker published the first of what he hoped to be a series of books, *The Australian Flora in Applied Art – Part 1, The Waratah*. Baker argued that copying non-endemic flora showed, “a lamentable lack of originality or imagination, whilst surrounded as we are with forms of great adaptability for our artistic conceptions.”⁵⁴ This sentiment was behind the call for a distinctly Australian national art, resonating with a desire, particularly with Federation, to form a distinct and separate identity from Britain.

⁵² Timms, *Australian Studio Pottery & China Painting*. 30.

⁵³ Margaret Betteridge, *Australian Flora in Art: From the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney* (Sydney: Sun Books, 1979). 5.

⁵⁴ Baker and Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Sydney N.S.W.), *The Australian Flora in Applied Art*. 12.

Adding to the exponents of Australian flora came artists and teachers, influencing their students from the late 1880s through the newly established art schools. One of the most vocal was Frenchman Lucien Henry, who arrived in Australia in 1879 and immediately embraced the aesthetic possibilities of the local environment. He was employed to teach at the Sydney Technical College in 1881, and called for an ‘Australian Art’ based on elements of the local environment rather than European or Classical ones, which he felt were “... foreign and alien to the people that use them...[and that] ... they do not belong to them... [and] ...express nothing of them.”⁵⁵ Henry created over 100 designs for his unpublished book, *Australian Decorative Arts* 1889-1891, including two for ceramic plates in a botanical illustration style, one of a Tasmanian Waratah and the other *Lambertia formosa* (Figs. 27-28).⁵⁶ Many of his students spread the cause by advocating for the use of Australian flora through their teaching positions in other states.

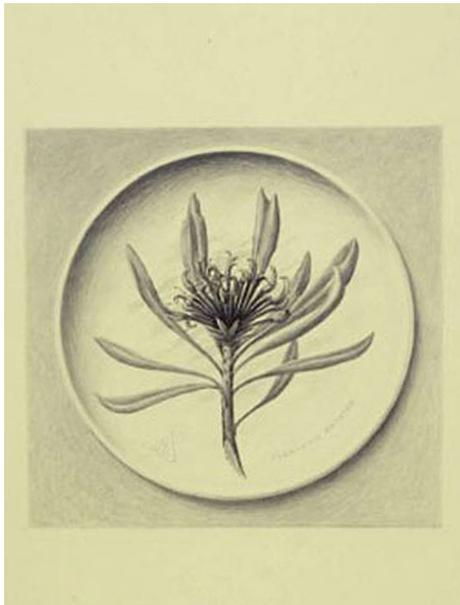


Fig. 27. *Tasmanian Waratah Plate*



Fig. 28. *Lambertia Formosa Plate*

Lucien Henry, Designs from unpublished book *Australian Decorative Arts* (1889-1891)

⁵⁵ Lucien Henry as quoted in Smith, *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia 1770-1914*. 242.

⁵⁶ Powerhouse Museum Collection online, Design ‘Tasmanian Waratah Plate’, Statement of Significance.

<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=324637&search=lucien+henry+plate&images=&c=&s=> (accessed 4 June 2014).

China Painting

China painting became a very popular activity amongst women from the mid 1890s for many social, political and artistic reasons. However, the technique itself was conducive to a botanical style of representing Australian flora. Detailed brushwork, using a range of mixable colours onto a smooth white imported porcelain or bone china blank, was similar to botanical painting, allowing for accuracy and detail. Rosa Fiveash was one of the earliest formal teachers of china painting, teaching in 1894 at the School of Design, Painting and Technical Craft in Adelaide.⁵⁷ Her interest and ability in botanical illustration also meant she was one of the earliest Australian china painters to concentrate on painting naturalistic, accurate images of Australian flowers, working from live plant specimens (Fig. 29).⁵⁸

This practice followed in other states with many women, such as Helen and May Creeth in Western Australia, transferring their skill in botanical illustration to the medium of ceramics (Fig. 30).⁵⁹ Societies of Arts and Crafts formed from 1903⁶⁰ with



Fig. 29. Rosa Fiveash, decorator, *Buttercup Plate*, detail (1913)



Fig. 30. May Creeth, decorator, *Plate with Leshenaultia* (c 1920)

⁵⁷ Avis Carol Smith, "Changing Fortunes: The History of China Painting in South Australia" (Thesis, University of Adelaide, 2008). 37.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 46.

⁵⁹ Fahy, et al., *Australian Art Pottery, 1900-1950*. 45.

⁶⁰ Grace Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A History* (Kensington, NSW: NSW University Press, 1992). 17.

aims such as “to encourage and assist the use of Australian materials and motifs in work and design”.⁶¹ Emerging international styles such as Art Nouveau had a botanical foundation, likewise encouraging the use of Australian flora. This also suited the medium of china painting and there were many notable artists whose work shows the influence of this style, such as Ethel Warburton, Flora Landells and Ethel Atkinson (Figs. 31-33).



Fig. 31. Ethel Warburton, decorator, *Coffee cup and Saucer* (c 1950)



Fig. 32. Flora Landells, decorator, *Teapot* (c 1913)



Fig. 33. Ethel Atkinson, decorator, *Salad Bowl with Gum nut and leaf design* (c 1912)

⁶¹ Keith Free, "Art and Crafts Potters in Sydney: The Sydney Technical College School," in *Australian Art Pottery, 1900-1950*. 10.

As Federation approached, and continuing afterwards, Australian flora became symbolic of its “new identity and independence,”⁶² reinforcing at the same time a positive attitude to the environment. Botanical knowledge was widespread and esteemed, and the use of Australian flora in ceramic decoration was promoted in museums, exhibitions, education, and as a women’s hobby. Ceramics from this period, for instance in the Powerhouse Museum, display a wide range of plant species in a diverse range of styles. My impression, walking through the collection, is of a celebration of Australian flora, appreciated for their newly found potential in ceramic decoration and from an awakening to their and the broader Australian environment’s value.

Studio pottery

In the early 1900s, studio potters began to emerge who, by definition, made, decorated, glazed and fired their own work. In Australia as in England, “there was a public who would pay for pottery because it was beautiful and made by hand; the potter had come to be recognised as an individual artist and the ceramic medium was considered a valid means of artistic expression.”⁶³ This was a major change in the creation and intention of ceramics, differentiating the work from industrial pottery, art pottery and china painting. Studio potters were free from the restraints of industry, exploring ceramic techniques, styles, materials, form and imagery in an individual way. Many of the earliest studio potters in all states were interested in using Australian flora in the period between 1918 and the 1930s, most influenced by the still dominant Arts and Crafts movement and Art Nouveau. They included Maude Poynter in Tasmania (Fig. 34), Flora Landells in Western Australia, Merric Boyd and Alan and Ernest Finlay in Victoria, Martin Moroney in Brisbane (Fig. 35), Gladys Reynell in South Australia and Ada Newman in NSW. Techniques such as slip and glaze decoration limited the way flora might be represented, often making it less identifiable, particularly when compared to china painting.

⁶² Nina Crone, "Symbols of a New Nation: Australia's Flora in the Decorative Arts 1890 -1914", in *Planting the Nation*, ed. Georgina Whitehead (Melbourne: Australian Garden History Society, 2001). 76.

⁶³ Malcolm Haslam, *English Art Pottery, 1865-1915* (Woodbridge, England: Antique Collectors' Club, 1975). 1.



Fig. 34. Maude Poynter, *Pot with Kangaroo Paw Decoration* (1934)



Fig. 35. Martin Moroney, *Vase with Gumleaf and Flower Design* (1914)

Studio potters were able to explore the subject of Australian flora in more diverse and expressive ways, through the use of materials and processes, as Merric Boyd, Gladys Reynell and Klytie Pate demonstrate. Boyd, rather than being interested in botanical representation purely through imagery, integrated wheel-thrown and sculptural form, creating three-dimensional decoration through relief, carving, brushwork and glaze. Handles, rims or bases, for example, were modelled with wind-swept Eucalypt and Tea-trees (Fig. 36). Boyd was committed to using Australian flora and elements from his rural lifestyle. As he said in a newspaper article in 1930, “The use of our own flora and fauna is of the first importance...”⁶⁴ Potter John Yule emphasised the new territory Boyd had entered, in his obituary for him in 1959:

His work... was marked by a peculiarly Australian character. His motifs derived from his obsessive love of the primitive element in the country... the gum tree he perceived as a wiry sculptural object quite unlike any other

⁶⁴ Victoria Hammond, *Merric Boyd: Studio Potter, 1888-1959* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1990). 23.



Fig. 36. Merric Boyd, *Vase* (1916)



Fig. 37. Margaret Preston, *Plate* (1917)

artist's vision of it... He was evolving for the first time in Australia the language of Expressionism... Merric Boyd's gnarled and restless gothic rhythms not only established him as our first and most original art potter, but struck nearer to the heart of the Australian condition than did any of the more classical poetry of Streeton and his school.⁶⁵

Boyd's work was textural, gestural and expressive of the Australian environment while representing Australian flora.

Gladys Reynell was credited with bringing modernism into Australian studio pottery when she and Margaret McPherson (later Preston) exhibited works in Adelaide shortly after their return from England.⁶⁶ They brought ideas, influences and techniques back to Australia, such as the use of slip, as in English slipware, and sgraffito. Preston seems to be testing the possibilities for Australian flora to be expressed in a modernist style in the work *Plate* (Fig. 37). Reynell's *Beaker* (Fig. 38)

⁶⁵ John Yule as quoted in Grace Cochrane, *White Gums and Ramoxes: Ceramics by Merric and Arthur Boyd from the Bundanon Trust Collection* (West Cambewarra: Bundanon Trust, 2009). 36.

⁶⁶ Robert Reason, *Gladys Reynell: The Most Delightful Thing on Earth* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2006). 10.



Fig. 38. Gladys Reynell, *Beaker (with repeating design of a row of terraces, a dog and a cat on a wall)* (1917)



Fig. 39. Margaret Preston, *Teapot with Boiling Billies and Gumtree Design* (c 1917)

and Preston's *Teapot with Boiling Billies and Gumtree Design* (Fig. 39), made in 1917 in England, appear to have a strong printmaking approach in their use of sgraffito. This has been a major influence on my approach to imagery, as I will discuss further in Chapter Two.

Australian flora was also gaining symbolic meaning, as was perhaps evident in a work by Gladys Reynell (Fig 40). The debate over a national flower had waged for years, between those in favour of the Waratah, such as Richard Baker, and those in favour of the Wattle. In 1909 the Wattle League formed and as Katie Holmes, Susan K Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi write, "the use of the wattle as a means of encouraging a sense of national identity and patriotism was quite explicit, and all sorts of parallels were drawn between the wattle and the character of the land and its people."⁶⁷ However, in South Australia, according to Libby Robin, this took on added meaning. The Adelaide Wattle Blossom League provided a place for women to take an active role in public life, so much so that "*Acacia pycnantha* stood for South Australia's leadership in women's rights."⁶⁸ Perhaps this was the intended sentiment in *Wattle Blossom Mug* made by Reynell in Adelaide in 1921, as it appears to be a representation of this distinctive species.

⁶⁷ Holmes, Martin, and Mirmohamadi, *Reading the Garden: The Settlement of Australia*. 99.

⁶⁸ Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation*. 90.



Fig. 40. Gladys Reynell, *Wattle Blossom Mug* (1921)



Fig. 41. Klytie Pate, *Bottle-brush Vase* (c. 1939)

The range of techniques used by studio potters to represent Australian flora continued to expand the expressive possibilities. Klytie Pate explored a range of techniques and subjects, but her striking piece, *Bottle-brush Vase* (Fig. 41) used deep relief carving and texture to describe the plant. The distinctive pattern of the seedpod is replicated in texture on the neck of the vase, and the edges of the deeply carved leaves are serrated. The overlapping movement of the relief leaves, framed by the seedpod texture gives life and energy to the work, evoking the rigid textural qualities of the plant. Botanist and Banksia expert Alex George, in writing about this work, notes that, despite the title, the work is “clearly inspired by a Banksia (probably *B. serrata*).”⁶⁹

The most significant advocate for the use of Australian flora as an acceptable subject in visual art was possibly Margaret Preston. Primarily a painter and printmaker, her modernist approach captured something textural, geometric and distinctively un-European about Australian flora. She also promoted the idea of a national art, both through her use of Australian flora and her use of Aboriginal influenced designs. She recognised that Aboriginal art was based on a spiritual connection to the environment, and that motifs and symbols depict the country, its elements and their

⁶⁹ Alex George, Kevin Collins and Kathy Collins, *Banksias* (Melbourne: Blooming Books, 2008). 73.

relationship to the animals and plants. She saw this as a way white Australians could have the “shift in cultural consciousness”⁷⁰ needed to achieve a distinctive Australian art. Preston encouraged the valuing and acknowledgment of Aboriginal visual culture. However, she approached this in terms of appropriation, and her attitude has been seen as one of both admiration and condescension.⁷¹ Preston examined Australian flora and the environment in detail, analysing form, geometry, light and colour. She writes:

Australian artists must feel inherently the difference between their land and that of others...the tremendous difference in our flowers... so our treatment of our flora must be different. If it isn't then it is merely copy and repetition.⁷²

Preston, like Ellis Rowan helped to shift society's acceptance of Australian flora as a subject in art, this time bringing them into the modernist twentieth century.



Fig. 42. Emily Bryce Carter, *Bowl* (c 1945)



Fig. 43. Premier Pottery, Remued Ware, *Pot* (1935)

⁷⁰ Deborah Edwards, *Margaret Preston* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005). 75.

⁷¹ Catriona Moore, "Margart Preston at Home," in *Radical Revisionism: An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art*, ed. Rex Butler (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2005). 207.

⁷² Margaret Preston as quoted in Edwards, *Margaret Preston*. 151.

Post Federation ceramics

The momentum for the use of Australian flora in ceramic decoration continued and strengthened with the outbreak of the First World War, particularly in industry. Shortages of imports allowed local potteries to expand their markets, and emerging patriotism “brought about a growing demand for Australian-made products and themes.”⁷³ Relief moulded or applied sprigged leaves and gum nuts were used by many studio potters such as Emily and Eric Bryce Carter (Fig. 42), as well as by industry, such as Hoffman Pottery with Melrose Australian Ware and Premier Pottery Preston with Remued Wares (Fig. 43). Bakewell Pottery produced the Newtowne art pottery range from about 1937, hand painted with Australian flora (Fig. 44). Artists such as John Castle-Harris modelled a range of species, favouring Flannel Flowers, working within and outside of industry (Fig. 45).

By the end of the 1940s the market seemed saturated with Australian motifs, particularly with gum leaves. It certainly felt that way to me looking at the ceramics of this period in the Shepparton Art Museum and Tasmanian Museum and Art



Fig. 44. Bakewell Pottery, *Newtowne Range* (1930-1940)



Fig. 45. John Castle-Harris, *Flannel Flower Wall Vase* (c 1930-1940)

⁷³ Aitken, "The First Fleet and Its Impact." 39.



Fig. 46. Mylie Peppin, *Bowl* (c 1950s)

Gallery collections. Curators Victoria Hammond and Adrian Collins suggest that by this time indigenous plants and animals had become “outdated and over-worked Australian clichés.”⁷⁴ Saturation point had come earlier in the art schools according to Harold Brown, head of the Art Department at the Melbourne Technical College. In an article for the Melbourne newspapers in the mid-1930s, he wrote that “no student would dare produce an object decorated with gum leaves for fear of having it destroyed by his or her fellows.”⁷⁵ The period when Australian flora was highly popular in china painting, studio pottery and art pottery had come to an end, having had symbolic meaning ranging from environmental appreciation, national identity, nationalism and patriotism.

However, Australian flora didn’t completely disappear in industrial ceramic objects after this period. A new market, tourism, reignited the curiosity value of Australian flora. In the catalogue for the exhibition, *Bush Curiozities: Flora and Fauna in Art and Design*, Victoria Hammond and Adrian Collins write that “the curiosity aspect of indigenous plants and animals reached an all-time peak during the 1950’s, when they became the favoured Australian symbols featured on tourist-trade and suburban kitsch.”⁷⁶ This perhaps reflects the opening up of Australia, as the interior, the Outback, became accessible to domestic and international tourism, revealing another dimension of the Australian environment to society’s imagination.

⁷⁴ Victoria Hammond and Adrian Collins, *'Bush Curiozities': Flora and Fauna in Art and Design*, ed. Shepparton Art Gallery (Shepparton: Shepparton Art Gallery, Oct 12 - Nov 9 1986). 7.

⁷⁵ Juliana and Toby Hooper, *A Guide to Collecting Australiana*, Third ed. (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1978). 86.

⁷⁶ Collins and Hammond, "'Bush Curiozities': Flora and Fauna in Art and Design." 7.

The second half of the twentieth century

From the 1950s, most studio potters were exploring the new stoneware aesthetic promoted by English potter and writer Bernard Leach, which suited some of the more abstract and geological aspects of the Australian environment. When Australian flora was used it was motivated more by an individual's personal interest, in the plants in the case of Mylie Peppin (Fig 46), and in plants and conservation in the case of decorator Neil Douglas (Fig. 47).⁷⁷ Douglas was a partner in the Arthur Merric Boyd Pottery, and his use of Australian flora can be directly attributed to his environmental concerns, as Hammond and Collins write: "As a keen conservationist, Douglas regarded native plants and animals as part of an endangered world that very much mattered."⁷⁸ Douglas's passion and efforts were such that he "was awarded an MBE for services to conservation and the arts."⁷⁹

The 1960s and 70s brought in a new era of environmental awareness and social change, challenging established values. Despite the ongoing understanding and



Fig. 47. Neil Douglas, *Tiles* (c 1950s)

⁷⁷ Glenda King, "Mylie Peppin," Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, University of Tasmania, http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/P/Peppin.htm (accessed 2 February 2015).

⁷⁸ Collins and Hammond, "'Bush Curiozities': Flora and Fauna in Art and Design." 7.

⁷⁹ Joe Pascoe, "Neil Douglas," in *Australian Art Pottery 1900-1950*, ed. Kevin Fahy et al. (Sydney: Casuarina Press, 2004). 143.

appreciation of the Australian environment by settler society, Ann Young writes that “the most dramatic changes in attitude towards the Australian environment have been recent – since about 1970 – and new laws have formalized these altered viewpoints.”⁸⁰ These laws include restricting pollution, protecting endangered species and the establishment of extensive conservation areas. Jock Marshall, in *The Great Extermination*, and WK Hancock, in *Australia*, both wrote strongly about the extent of environmental degradation and poor land management. The need for an ‘ecological vision of Australia’ to take into account and respond to the specific needs of the unique environment gained public momentum through writing by academics such as George Seddon and others writing for a popular audience.⁸¹

Studio ceramics was also undergoing social and political change, redefining itself as being increasingly aligned with visual art rather than craft. Support through journals, state craft councils and the since disbanded Crafts Board of the Australia Council provided a framework for artists to identify themselves as part of a group, as Australian, and to legitimately express this through their own approach to materials, imagery and form.⁸² Ceramic artists began to address a broader range of political, social, cultural and personal themes in their work, including



Fig. 48. Toni Warburton, *Shell Turning* (1979-1980)



Fig. 49. Australian Fine China, design by Barbara Swarbrick (1993)

⁸⁰ Young, *Environmental Change in Australia since 1788*. 185.

⁸¹ George Seddon and Mari Davis, *Man and Landscape in Australia: Towards an Ecological Vision: Papers from a Symposium Held at the Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 30 May-2 June 1974* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1976).

⁸² Conversation with Robert Bell, Senior Curator of Decorative Arts, National Gallery of Australia, 27 May 2014.

environmental, as were other visual artists. For example Toni Warburton's work *Shell Turning* (Fig. 48), made in 1979–80, addresses "the degradation of the marine life of Sydney Harbour, resulting from decades of industrial pollution."⁸³ An exuberant expression of Australian flora occurred in the work of a number of artists in the 1980s and into the early 1990s, such as in the tableware designs of flora and fauna for Australian Fine China by Barbara Swarbrick (Fig. 49). This was due in part to a renewed interest in symbols of national identity with the commemoration of Australia's bicentenary of European settlement.

Contemporary ceramics and the environment

In contemporary ceramic visual arts, Australian flora emerges at times in a diverse range of styles, techniques and intentions. Some notable examples include artists in the Aboriginal communities of Hermannsburg and Ernabella (Fig. 50), who include Australian flora in imagery as part of "a contemporary and evolving expression of their culture."⁸⁴ Les Blakebrough uses the qualities of porcelain and water erosion to depict Eucalypt leaves, for example in *Bowl (Macdonald Ranges Gum)* (Fig. 51), while Sandra Black uses piercing (Fig. 52). Stephen Bowers hand paints detailed botanical imagery of indigenous flora in his commentary on Australian culture and ceramic



Fig. 50. Ernabella Community Artists, Works in Progress (2011)



Fig. 51. Les Blakebrough, *Bowl (Macdonald Ranges Gum)* (2005)

⁸³ National Gallery of Australia, "Toni Warburton, *Shell Turning*," <http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=106664> (accessed 7 October 2014).

⁸⁴ Trish Barnard, "From the Earth," *The Journal of Australian Ceramics* 48, no. 1 (2009): 8.



Fig. 52. Sandra Black, *Hardenbergia 1* (2008)



Fig. 53. Stephen Bowers, *The Links to Charmshire (an Antipodean Homage to Grayson Perry)* (2007)

tradition (Fig. 53). Issues of the environment, endangered Australian flora, and the relationship of science to both their decline and preservation are subjects in Julie Bartholomew's practice.⁸⁵

The Australian botanical narrative continues, as scientists, politicians and the public struggle to understand the impact of humans on all of earth's ecosystems and climate. Conservation biologist David Lindenmayer states that Australia "has one of the highest rates of land degradation of any nation"⁸⁶ and its extinction and threatened species rates are some of the highest in the world. Climate change will further impact on the fragility of the environment. According to Libby Robin, "conditions on this continent are already more variable and uncertain than in the rest of the world, and this story can only become more complicated as global warming and human-induced climate change affect areas already under stress."⁸⁷ This creates an environmental culture of uncertainty and fear, as the 'end of nature' takes the human race into the unknown. Each era brings new scientific knowledge and cultural perspectives on Australian flora and the environment, initiating a renewed examination of the representation of Australian flora and the expression of environmental culture in the ceramic medium. Perhaps this will hold, as Timms suggests it did for artists a hundred years ago, and, as it does for me now, a nostalgic yearning for a time when species were being found, not found extinct.

⁸⁵ Altair Roelants, "Interrelated Worlds," *The Journal of Australian Ceramics*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2013). 50-57.

⁸⁶ David Lindenmayer and Mark Burgman, *Practical Conservation Biology* (Collingwood, Vic.: CSIRO Publishing, 2005). 3.

⁸⁷ Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation*. 2.

Conclusion

Through the research summarised in this chapter, a connection was established between the history of the use of Australian flora in ceramics and scientific and environmental knowledge. The environment and its perception have undergone profound changes since European settlement. The use of, and even the absence, of Australian flora in ceramic history, such as in the early years of colonisation, reflect settler society's attitude to the Australian environment. In many examples, such as in the china painting by May Creeth and Rosa Fiveash, there was a strong intersection between botanical knowledge and the representation of Australian flora. In others, for example in Neil Douglas' tiles or Merric Boyd's vases, clues to environmental culture were through context, along with the artist's biographical details. The botanical and cultural value associated with particular flora contributed other meaning, such as in the use of the Waratah in Lawrence Howie's vase, as the debate over a national floral symbol was waged. The extraordinary period when Australian flora emerged and was prolific in ceramic decoration is a rich legacy in Australian ceramic history.

In undertaking this research I gained a deep understanding of Australian ceramic, botanical and environmental history, and saw the potential of archival material, botanical fieldwork, illustration and other processes as a resource for further investigation. The research outlined in this chapter was undertaken alongside the progression of my studio and botanical research, and, in the next chapter, I discuss how this developed as I investigated how to reflect current environmental culture through the representation of Australian flora on the ceramic vessel.

Chapter Two

Development of the Studio Research

The role of Science, like that of art, is to blend proximate imagery with more distant meaning, the parts we already understand with those given as new into larger patterns that are coherent enough to be acceptable as truth.¹

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss my early studio-based research to investigate how to represent Australian flora on the ceramic vessel, so as to acknowledge environmental conditions in which they exist today, just as others have done in the past. To do so I investigated an Australian botanical narrative, the current scientific knowledge of Australian plants, and the associated material produced. My aim was to express in ceramic objects my understanding of society's attitudes, practices towards and knowledge of Australian plants and their natural environments: in other words, environmental culture.

It was not, initially, apparent to me how I might express environmental culture, whether through form, imagery, materials or processes, or, as yet, what aspects of the environment were significant to my study. Therefore, in this early stage of the research I experimented with various approaches. This chapter includes my early investigation of ceramic materials and processes, my first foray into the field to gain an experience of plants in their environment, and the influence of botanical illustration on my approach to representation.

Studio approach

Before discussing individual works, I outline the framework of my studio research and introduce the materials and processes I began with. British curator Martina

¹ Edward O Wilson, "The Bird of Paradise: The Hunter and the Poet," in *In Search of Nature* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996). 129.

Margetts writes about contemporary craft: "... the role of making is to create new ways of thinking, through engagement with the materials, techniques and ideas."² Historical and theoretical research informed the project, as I have recounted in the previous chapter, but it was through the investigation of ceramic materials and processes, studio-led research, that I found the vocabulary to communicate ideas through visual form. This process was also one of acquiring skills and experience, to gain tacit knowledge, and yet as David Brett points out, it is not just learning a "narrow range of supposedly traditional accomplishments; but rather [gaining] the *appropriate* skill, which the artists themselves very frequently invent for themselves."³ Prior to this project, during my Master of Visual Arts research in 2009, I had begun the development of an approach to the mark-making technique of sgraffito referencing relief printmaking. This PhD project began a new investigation, of how to locate the ceramic vessel and representations of indigenous flora within an Australian botanical narrative to communicate current understandings and perceptions of the environment.

The term 'decoration' is commonly used to describe the surface treatment of a ceramic vessel. However, ceramist Peter Lane notes, "in the absence of any other more appropriate word, 'decoration' must also serve in reference to those design elements that contribute to a deeper union achieved between form, pattern, colour and texture."⁴ Thus, in the history of the ceramic vessel, decoration may be integral to the piece as a whole, or treated separately to the form as embellishment, exemplified in the theories of decorative art in the nineteenth century. To overcome this inconsistency I use the term 'surface imagery' rather than decoration. This gave me conceptual freedom to explore the possibilities of meaning moving across both surface treatment and form.

In looking to represent Australian flora through mark making, I began with the technique of sgraffito, as it has a number of interesting characteristics. Sgraffito and related carving techniques allow for a direct relationship between the artist's hand

² Martina Margetts, "Action Not Words," in *Power of Making: The Importance of Being Skilled*, ed. Daniel Charny (London: V&A Publishing and the Crafts Council, 2011). 43.

³ David Brett, *Rethinking Decoration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). 264.

⁴ Peter Lane, *Ceramic Form: Design and Decoration* (London: A&C Black, 1998). 120.

and the incised mark, intimately connecting gesture with form and surface. This is embodied in the ceramics made by Florence and Hannah Barlow (Fig. 54) and the Martin Brothers I studied in the Victoria & Albert Museum.⁵ The immediacy of the mark making is fresh and confident, revealing the assuredness gained by working repeatedly with one technique. In describing work by Hannah Barlow, Edmund de Waal writes:

...[her] incised ceramic surfaces show an exceptional understanding of the craft of drawing, in particular of the varying weight of lines that clearly define a perspective on the complex curved surface of a vase form. This gives her work unusual depth and an atmospheric quality.⁶

The possibilities for creating varied texture using sgraffito resonated with my perception of the textural nature of plants of a dry climate. This was validated by the use of texture by botanists to describe features of a plant, for example the term 'scleromorph' defines "a plant whose leaves (or stems, if leafless) are hard in texture, usually having thick cuticle and containing many fibres."⁷



Fig. 54. Doulton & Co. and Hannah Barlow, decorator, *Jug* and detail (1874)

⁵ Fieldwork to the UK: Victoria and Albert Museum, Ceramic Study rooms, 14 July 2013.

⁶ Edmund De Waal and Claudia Clare, *The Pot Book* (New York, N.Y.: Phaidon, 2011). 19.

⁷ A. McCusker, "Flora of Australia: Glossary," www.anbg.gov.au/glossary (accessed 3 March 2012).

A less common approach to sgraffito is the interplay between negative and positive space analogous to relief printmaking, an approach I wished to develop further. Margaret Preston, Doreen Goodchild (Fig. 55) and Gladys Reynell explored this approach in a small number of ceramic works in the early twentieth century, influenced, I believe, by the resurgence of, and at least for Preston, interest in woodblock printing and the new artists' material, linoleum. Besides predominately leaving the design in positive, a particular characteristic of linoblock printing is the shallow clearing away of background areas, resulting in ridges where the tool leaves an edge. These pick up the ink, leaving a textural effect between the raised areas and the background. Reynell has used this effect in the work *Emu Beaker* (Fig. 56), leaving distinct channels in the carved background using "a small pocket knife"⁸ rather than scraping the background away smoothly.

Margaret Preston's woodblock prints, rather than her ceramics, were more influential on my exploration of this approach to sgraffito, firstly because the subject matter of the prints was Australian flora and secondly because of her ideas about form and composition. She writes: "In my search for forms which will suggest Australia I prefer woodblocking to painting, for the wood hinders facility and compels the worker to keep forms in his compositions severe."⁹ This resonated with



Fig. 55. Doreen Goodchild, *Vase* (1930)



Fig. 56. Gladys Reynell, *Emu Beaker* (1917)

⁸ Gladys Osborne, "Reynella Pottery," in *A Book of South Australia: Women in the First Hundred Years*, ed. Louisa Brown et al (Adelaide: Rigby, 1936). 215.

⁹ Elizabeth Butel and Margaret Preston, *Margaret Preston: the Art of Constant Rearrangement* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1985). 76.

the difference I perceived between the technique of china painting, and that of sgraffito, to represent Australian flora.

Initially, I was unsure how I might use ceramic form to indicate environmental culture other than by referring to plants through the use of vessels such as vases. As I am primarily drawing on the conventions of the ceramic vessel, the tool traditionally used to form them, the wheel, is my tool of choice. However to move away from the circular, 'perfect' wheel-thrown form, with its reference and meaning embedded in repetition and function, I began by altering form. This technique entails a deliberate and considered manipulation of the clay while it is still soft. Peter Lane observes that, "historical and cultural traditions often influence our understanding, analysis, and even approval of vessel forms."¹⁰ Altering provides a way to retain yet extend the ceramic vessel vocabulary, encouraging gesture and expression, and, as ceramic artist Ashley Howard observes, is a way to "realise a concept or ideal."¹¹ By altering I could create form that was less symmetrical and less predictable, like nature, and so explore the possibilities of form containing additional meanings aligned with my research aims.

Initial work

In the early studio work I experimented with subject matter, form, imagery, composition, materials and colour on the individual vessel. *Mt Majura Nature Reserve* (Fig. 57) was a study of plants growing in a local nature area that had been impacted by urban encroachment. The form was loosely based on a handled vase, with plant imagery confined within a mountain silhouette and, to reinforce the urban setting, restricted by carved lines of white, angular rooftops. White mid-fire clay was used, for its workability, colour and firing temperature. The clay surface was coated in commercial underglaze, a flexible product that can be applied when the clay is moist, becoming matt and opaque when fired, its advantage being that I could readily mix and develop colours, creating charts to match to plant material, while I was learning to 'read' the variability of colours pre- and post-firing. At this stage, I began testing a number of commercial sgraffito and associated tools exploring ways I could achieve a variety of texture.

¹⁰ Lane, *Ceramic Form: Design and Decoration*. 21.

¹¹ Ashley Howard, "Altered States," *Ceramic Review* 205 (2004). 38.



Fig. 57. *Mt Majura Nature Reserve* and detail (2011)



Fig. 58. *Vessel* (2011)

In the next work, *Vessel* (Fig. 58), I wanted to experiment with ways of connecting botanical history with the present. To do this I drew upon the work of botanist Alex George, who 300 years after William Dampier first collected specimens in WA, revisited his expedition site. Dampier in 1699 was the first European to make a collection of Australian plants and the first to publish drawings of them, in 1703.¹² George collected and compared his plant specimens to Dampier's, describing his findings in *William Dampier in New Holland: Australia's First Natural Historian*.¹³ On an oval handled form, I divided the surface into areas to depict old and new material. By carving and rubbing with an iron wash I copied a map and an illustration of *Acacia ligulata* from Dampier's expedition journals, reproduced by George. Another area I coated with a green underglaze and using sgraffito represented the same plant by referring to an image from the online database, the Australian Plant Image Index.¹⁴

Through undertaking research for *Vessel*, I discovered the rich resource and stories that herbaria and historical plant collections offer. Dampier's specimens still exist, and like all herbarium specimens, are essential for botanical research, such as for taxonomic and anatomical comparison. For example, George describes the identification of Dampier's specimen *Acacia ligulata* by subsequent botanists as over time new knowledge was applied.¹⁵ Herbarium specimens are always linked to a time and place and the field methodology for obtaining them is largely unchanged. What I also noted was the way a herbarium specimen might reveal insights into the human experience at the time of collection, for example when Alex George writes: "Dampier's specimens are in full flower, and the shrubs must have made a colourful showing at the time of his visit."¹⁶

In these two initial works the surface was divided into panels, and imagery juxtaposed and layered. This approach to imagery is used by artists working in other mediums to great effect, for example printmaker Mary Rosengren layers

¹² George Seddon, "Foreword," in *William Dampier in New Holland: Australia's First Natural Historian*, Alex S. George (Hawthorn, Victoria: Bloomings Books, 1999). viii.

¹³ Alex George, *William Dampier in New Holland: Australia's First Natural Historian* (Hawthorn, Vic.: Bloomings Books, 1999).

¹⁴ A joint project between the Australian National Botanic Gardens and the Australian National Herbarium, <http://www.anbg.gov.au/photo/>

¹⁵ Alex George, *William Dampier in New Holland: Australia's First Natural Historian*. 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 62.

imagery of plants, their environment and botanical history.¹⁷ I met with Rosengren to discuss the way she uses historical and microscopic imagery sourced from wildlife, insect and herbaria collections at the CSIRO. Her work explores the overlay between visual art, science and technology, contrasting the conventions of historically accurate images with the different possibilities of digital visualisation (Fig. 59).¹⁸



Fig. 59. Mary Rosengren, *Digitalis 2 – moss cells (sphagnum)*, detail (2006)

This encounter with Rosengren clarified a decision I faced in regard to the scientific imagery I was examining as I drew together an Australian botanical narrative. Would I directly source historical imagery to represent Australian flora and replicate them using copying techniques? There are many ceramic techniques available to do so, such as customised decals and transfers that can print digital images on the clay surface. Historical botanical imagery was very enticing, but, as in botanical illustration, I sought the more subjective, embodied approach that direct contact between hand, surface and object can bring. I was more interested in how historical imagery could inform, through composition, medium, methodology and narrative, my own exploration of original line and mark making.

¹⁷ Recipient of a Synapse Residency, CSIRO 2011

¹⁸ Mary Rosengren, *Re-Imaging Nature: Hidden Visions & Ground Truth*, (Canberra: CSIRO Discovery Centre, 12 July to 2 August 2011).

My next line of enquiry was to find ways to communicate the complexities and significance of historical attitudes to the environment, and to do so I explored text. Text in ceramic imagery, just as text in two-dimensional art, can shift the reading of the work to literal rather than visual metaphor. In many ways words, more readily than imagery, could make complex historical and environmental points. In *Waste of Waratahs* (Fig. 60) and *Tribute to Val Plumwood* (Fig. 61) I inscribed text behind the carved plant, the first quoted from Richard Baker's letter to the Sydney Morning Herald, *Waste of Waratahs*, in 1912, and the second from *Environmental Culture: The*



Fig. 60. *Waste of Waratahs* and detail (2011).



Fig. 61. *Tribute to Val Plumwood* and detail (2011).

Ecological Crisis of Reason by environmental philosopher Val Plumwood.¹⁹ I explored text with stamps and brushwork also, but, like sectioning the surface, I found the composition busy and disruptive in an already complex sgraffito surface. Although it was an approach that was useful for referencing historical material, it wasn't a line of enquiry I continued.

Next, I explored ways to represent a specific threat to a species through visual imagery. Again, I used forms loosely based within the vocabulary of the ceramic vessel, in this case open forms. In the work *Endangered Spider Orchid* (Fig. 62) urban encroachment leading to loss of habitat was again symbolised through white carved rooftops, and in *Coalmine* (Fig. 63), a black and white representation of a coalmine was carved behind the threatened plant. In reflecting on these works I found the imagery overly literal and didactic, and therefore problematic. Furthermore, I was uncomfortable with the form and the way it was unrelated to the imagery.

¹⁹ Richard T Baker, "The Waste of Waratahs," *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 November 1912. 5. Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Environmental Philosophies Series. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002). 3.

Throughout this initial research, the forms I developed had a distant relationship to plants or none at all, my main focus being on surface imagery. I felt constrained in the size and shape of the forms I was making, as I attempted to cover the entire surface with imagery. In writing about decoration, art historian Ernst Gombrich notes in *The Sense of Order*, that one of the restrictions of using flowers ‘growing’ is the need for orientation.²⁰ As he points out, the adaptation of plant form into repeat pattern is a way of overcoming multiple viewpoints on the surface of objects, such as plates, textiles and tiles. Flat forms such as plates may be viewed vertically, therefore acting more like a page or canvas. However, my inclination was to make vertical forms with a straight smooth wall for the representation of plants in an upright position. As my research developed, it became apparent to me that by having vertical imagery I could explore the possibilities of form being dynamically involved in the meaning of the imagery.

The aim of the next series of work was to examine form more closely, experimenting with ways to integrate form and imagery. In doing so I explored a different approach to expressing environmental culture, using disruptive processes and a range of materials. To symbolise a degraded environment, and as a contrast to pristine imagery of flora, I gouged, tore, inserted, ripped rims and disrupted the convention of the vessel form. I contrasted iron-rich groggy clays with fine white



Fig. 62. *Endangered Spider Orchid* (2011)



Fig. 63. *Coalmine* (2011)

²⁰ E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979). 159.

clay and experimented with poured slip, texturing, technical instability, cloth-applied slip, glaze, terra sigillata, burnishing and ink. In the example below (Fig. 64), I used rough, dark clay with poured porcelain slip to create areas for sgraffito imagery. The form, the basis for the floral imagery cracked, symbolising the instability of the plants existence. In the work in Figure 65 the space for carving the flora is a fragment of the whole where the torn rim destabilises the imagery. In the example in Figure 66, the imagery is defaced or destroyed in part by applying slip with cloth, and in Figure 67 the vessel has a clay insert imprinted with an industrial texture, disrupting the sgraffito imagery.



Fig. 64. *Study* (2011)



Fig. 65. *Study* (2011)



Fig. 66. *Study* (2011)



Fig. 67. *Study* (2011)

These materials and processes had interesting possibilities, but I felt it would be through a focus on specific plants and their environment that I could best explore ways of representing contemporary environmental culture. During this period, I obtained easily available plant specimens in flower from local parks and gardens or used images from online plant databases when making work about a specific environmental issue I had researched. However, this could not give me an insight into the location and broader environmental culture surrounding the plant. I was now curious to find out about a plant's natural habitat, its scale and variation relative to other species, and the topographical features of its surrounding landscape.

Engagement with place

With this in mind I sought opportunities to study a location with significant floristic and environmental features. I applied to the Environment Studio in the ANU School of Art to attend the Plumwood Mountain Waratah Festival, at the estate of the late Dr Val Plumwood (1939-2008). Plumwood was an environmentalist and philosopher, who analysed human relationships to nature, concluding that it was vital "to re-situate humans within ecological systems, and to re-situate non-humans in ethical terms."²¹ The Waratah Festival brought together members of the Ecological Humanities group,²² including academics Deborah Bird Rose, Kate Rigby, and Freya Matthews, to discuss the role of the humanities in ecological and environmental thinking. Plumwood argues that it is necessary to develop, "an environmental culture that values and fully acknowledges the non-human sphere and our dependency on it, and is able to make good decisions about how we live and impact on the non-human world."²³

Plumwood's interpretation of environmental culture resonated with my increasing understanding of the meaning of the term as my research progressed. This encounter expanded my focus on scientific environmental research to include a foray

²¹ Patrick Curry, "About Ecological Humanities," <http://www.ecologicalhumanities.org> (accessed 14 November 2014).

²² Ecological Humanities Group, a group of scholars initially connected to the ANU. <http://www.ecologicalhumanities.org/> (accessed 14 November 2014).

²³ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. 3.

into philosophy, nature writing and the cultural meaning of nature. Plumwood's writing informed my understanding of perceptions of the environment through twentieth century environmentalism, and in this way contributed to my understanding of a contemporary Australian botanical narrative.

Plumwood Mountain is located on the coastal escarpment near Braidwood NSW. Adjacent to Monga National Park, it contains deep valleys of Plumwood trees, *Eucryphia moorei*, and tree ferns *Dicksonia antarctica*. I was introduced to the cultural and ecological significance of the location, including the philosophical and conservation activism that culminated in Plumwood and her husband and fellow philosopher Richard Silvan publishing *The Fight for the Forests: The Takeover of Australian Forests for Pines, Wood Chips and Intensive Forestry*.²⁴ I had the physical and sensory experience of walking among the ancient Plumwood trees and the startling joy of seeing endemic waratahs in bloom in the wild.

Back in the studio I explored, through a series of vessels, ways to express or signify the environment of the Monga Waratah and the Plumwood trees (Figs. 68-71). During my field trip I had learnt the environment was fragile and tenuous, easily destroyed by a change of legislation or policy. I made ceramic forms on the wheel, picking them up and dropping them on a slight angle, then gouged and tore the rim. I poured a newly developed green slip down the walls of the vessels to provide a contrasting surface for carving and deliberately left areas of white. Clay I had collected on site, I tested as a slip, which matured to warm reddish brown when fired. I also poured this down the vessel, connecting the work materially to Plumwood. Working in opposite materials, I made forms from commercial red-brown clay, pouring white porcelain slip over the surface, followed by green slip as a place for sgraffito imagery (Fig. 71). Waratahs and Plumwood flowers were carved into the surface, based on my research in the field, and the flowers painted with underglaze colour. This use of colour was a way of highlighting and contrasting the surrounding, and referenced hand-coloured lino and woodblock prints. Although the plant imagery was confined to an area created by the poured slip, the materiality of the surface was integrated to the form more closely and successfully than in

²⁴ Val Plumwood (Routley) and Richard Routley, *The Fight for the Forests: The Takeover of Australian Forests for Pines, Wood Chips and Intensive Forestry* (Canberra: Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1973).

previous work. The composition of the carving was responsive to the movement in the form and the carved background acted as a setting for the plant. Rather than being pattern, the plant was in situ, in a complex tangle of shapes.

The Plumwood field trip was an important breakthrough in my understanding of the importance of physically engaging with a specific place botanically, environmentally and culturally. To learn more, I looked to other artists working in



Fig. 68. *Plumwood study I* (2011)



Fig. 69. *Plumwood study II* (2011)



Fig. 70. *Plumwood study III* (2011)



Fig. 71. *Plumwood study IV* (2011)

this way such as John Wolseley and printmaker Jörg Schmeisser (Fig. 72). Both overlay imagery drawn from location, including flora, fauna and topography, infused through memory and emotional experience. Curator Peter Haynes writes of Schmeisser's ability to,

... imbue his chosen subject matter with an inner quality that speaks of its essence, of its *spiritual core*. This ability to evoke the spiritual core of the places he (re) visits is about his understanding that place has to be experienced; to be encountered physically and intimately before its aesthetic dimension can be articulated in the artist's particular expressive language.²⁵



Fig. 72. Jörg Schmeisser, *Mangrove and Notes* (2010)

At Plumwood Mountain I was able to consider the individual endemic plant within its unique environment, note its botanical characteristics, and explore, in discussion with experts, the ecosystem and aspects of the cultural and environmental history of place. In the studio I considered the whole environment conceptually in my approach to making, where form, surface and imagery, materials and processes were intrinsically interconnected. I was drawing upon my research, memory and experience of place, rather than working from a plant in isolation as I had done previously.

²⁵ Peter Haynes, "Jörg Schmeisser: Blue Mud Bay and Other Journeys," *Imprint* 47, no. 3 (2012). 10.

Botanical illustration and representation

At this stage in my studio and allied research I was at a point to examine ways I could represent ideas about plants and the environment on ceramic form more rigorously and I began to do this through exploring the methodology and practices of botanical illustration. In his definitive book, *The Art of Botanical Illustration*, Wilfrid Blunt states:

You must notice the texture of the petal, the veining of the leaf, the structure of the seed-pod; you must watch the bud unfold, the flower mature to full beauty, the petals wither and fall.²⁶

He insists on observing not just the morphology of a plant, but its growth pattern and the way it changes throughout the seasons. To learn more about such an approach I joined the Australian National Botanic Gardens Botanic Art group, to work directly from live plant specimens onto ceramic form. Here I learnt from other artists about botanical illustrating tools, composition, and natural habit of growth, botanical emphasis and practicalities such as working from a plant over time. Importantly I had access to a wide geographic range of live Australian plant specimens to explore composition and imagery on form. Through this process I observed the plant with more attention, as Blunt advises, and experienced the process of knowing the plant through the act of mark making. Although my aim was not to achieve, and indeed my choice of technique did not allow, a close resemblance to botanical illustration, I wondered whether this approach to representation combined with sgraffito, could create new possibilities on the ceramic surface.

Author and advocate Shirley Sherwood writes: “Botanical art has been described as the meeting place between the arts and the sciences.”²⁷ Its purpose, to aid the scientific description and identification of plants, made it a perfect model for the works I hoped to develop. I considered the many botanical illustrations I viewed in archives and publications to also be beautiful and meaningful artworks, just one example being the work of Margaret Stones. In her artworks of Australian flora for *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine* in the Kew Garden Archives, I observed her use of

²⁶ Wilfrid Blunt, *The Art of Botanical Illustration* (London: Collins, 1950). 4.

²⁷ Shirley Sherwood, *A Passion for Plants: Contemporary Botanical Masterworks* (London: Cassell, 2001). 8.

detailed brushstrokes in creating her particular emphasis on light and shade (Fig. 73). Original botanical illustrations reveal the gestures and mark making of the artist as Peter Timms notes about Stones work, “Even the most sophisticated printing techniques cannot adequately convey the particular graphic qualities of pencil, ink and watercolour expertly applied.”²⁸

The working methods of visual artists using the subject of plants may not be vastly different to that of botanical illustrators. Margaret Preston studied the botanical structure of the plants she was depicting as she describes: “When I’m painting flowers I’ll pull one of its kind to pieces. I will know exactly how it’s formed. When I’ve done this I draw from another one – I do this with all my flowers.”²⁹ Preston also used scientific conventions, as curator Deborah Clark notes about the woodcut print *Wheelflower* c 1929 (Fig. 74): “The firewheel flowers are depicted in various stages of life and decay, a convention that is common to botanical illustration but is represented in *Wheel flower* as if randomly...”³⁰



Fig. 73. Margaret Stones, *Correa decumbens* and detail (1957)

²⁸ Peter Timms, *Flowers of Tasmania: The Botanical Drawings of Margaret Stones and William Buelow Gould*, ed. Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, (Launceston: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, 2007). 10.

²⁹ Margaret Preston as quoted in *Margaret Preston*, Deborah Edwards et al. (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005). 156.

³⁰ Deborah Clark, "Wheel Flower," in *Margaret Preston*, Deborah Edwards et al. 94.



Fig. 74. Margaret Preston, *Wheel flower* (c. 1929)



Fig. 75. Rob Kessler, *On Closer Inspection* (2001)

Contemporary British artist Rob Kessler considers his work as a continuation of the botanical genre in ceramics, while developing imagery of flora from the cutting edge of science. He is engaged in interdisciplinary research with seed morphologist Wolfgang Stuppy of Kew Garden's Millennium Seed Bank, using Scanning Electron Microscope technology to examine the forms and structures of pollens and seeds.³¹ This imagery is used in collaboration with industry, such as Wedgwood, to make ceramic artwork, for example *On Closer Inspection* (Fig. 75). Kessler writes of the botanical ceramic genre:

To me, ceramic history appears like a long line of specimens that exhibit an infinite array of horticultural symbolism, from refined illustration to excessively florid extravagances. Many styles have evolved along the way to reflect the prevailing cultural trends and advances in science and technology. This is a rich and fertile seam through which I meander, trying to assimilate the lineage that I am seeking to extend.³²

He references important works in the history of botanical ceramics, such as *Flora Danica*, by placing images onto dinner services of flora reflecting current scientific understanding and imagery. Kessler believes that even with the scientific technology he uses to make his images, the individuality of the artist's perspective is revealed. He writes: "Historically the work of the finest botanical artists has risen

³¹ Rob Kessler, "A New Phytopia," *Infocus*, no. 8 (December 2007). 44.

³² Rob Kessler, "Jardim Porcelanico," *Ceramic Review* 251, no. September/October (2011). 31.

above the mere recording of specimens for scientific purposes and in creating this new body of work I am striving towards communicating the same sense of wonder within a contemporary context.”³³

Historically, artists representing plants by hand in the ceramic medium worked essentially in two ways, directly from plant specimens or from botanical sketches or illustrations made by themselves or others. Ceramic objects, such as tableware, are not the same scale or format as an illustration and this has been dealt with in various ways. In *Flora Danica* (Fig. 76) the plant is incorporated onto the form by cutting the stem and positioning one half next to the other. In referencing this work, Les Blakebrough and botanical artist Lauren Black collaborated on the series *Flora Tasmanica*, scaling the plant down to fit into the centre of the plate and using the rim to display conventional botanical detail (Fig. 77).

The work of artist Rosa Fiveash, including the *Forest Flora of South Australia*, 1882 and *South Australian Orchids*, 1911, was of particular interest, as she was a botanical illustrator and painted directly onto ceramic objects. In Fiveash’s *Buttercup plate*, the spray of Australian buttercups and the background grasses are composed to fit the structure of the ceramic form, with the tallest flower extending in a curve to fit the inner area of the plate, creating a sense of circular movement (Fig. 78).

The relationship of the surface imagery to the form was an area of continual investigation, and this time I worked directly from botanical illustration onto a three-dimensional surface to explore composition and botanical accuracy further. I studied Fiveash’s original illustrations from *Forest Flora of South Australia* (Fig. 79) transposing them onto rounded enclosed forms in the works *After Rosa Fiveash* (Figs. 80-81). To achieve line work and retain a smooth, rather than carved, white background, I investigated other techniques than sgraffito, such as slip trailing and brushwork. Because of this I used porcelain clay as it is very fine, translucent and white, and the unglazed or uncoated surface has a quality unobtainable with most stoneware clays.

³³ Kessler, "A New Phytopia." 45.



Fig. 76. Royal Copenhagen Porcelain, *Menyanthes trifoliata*, *Flora Danica* (1789-1803)



Fig. 77. Les Blakebrough and Lauren Black, *Flora Tasmanica edition 3* (*Brachyglottis brunonis*) (2003).



Fig. 78. Rosa Fiveash, decorator, *Buttercup plate*, detail (1913).



Fig. 79. Rosa Fiveash, *Hakea multilineata*.
Var.-*Grammatophylla* (1882)



Fig. 80. *After Rosa Fiveash I* (2012)

The difference I experienced in surface quality between stoneware and porcelain clays resonated with the difference in quality between paper and vellum botanical artists such as Rory McEwen experienced. Art critic John McEwen writes, “The greatest change in Rory’s work in the 1960s was to discard paper for vellum... No paper can match the smoothness of its surface or lend such translucency and richness to watercolour.”³⁴ I observed the visual quality of vellum in the exhibition *Rory McEwen: The Colours of Reality* in the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art.³⁵ Vellum allows for clarity, fine detail and, through the process of overlaying paint, a three-dimensional quality, superbly achieved by McEwen. Porcelain, likewise, allows for very fine and detailed carving, clarity of colour response, and a smooth, reflective surface, particularly if polished after the first and second firings. When it is thin the porcelain wall is translucent adding a three dimensional aspect to the play with light and even colour, where, for example coloured glaze is present.

³⁴ Martyn Rix, "Rory McEwen as a Botanical Painter," in *Rory McEwen: The Colours of Reality* (Richmond, Surrey UK: Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2013). 62.

³⁵ *Rory McEwen: The Colours of Reality*, Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. UK, 11 May-22 September, 2013.



Fig. 81. *After Rosa Fiveash I-III* (2012)

Botanical illustration and environmental culture

Interestingly, many contemporary botanical artists are expressing environmental concern while staying within the conventions of the medium. According to Sherwood, the resurgence of botanical art in the last thirty years is driven in part by the urge to record and highlight endangered ecosystems, and artists directly reference this, through title, composition and subject matter.³⁶ In the exhibition *Capturing Flora: 300 Years of Australian Botanical Art*, artist Andrew Seward uses seaweed and plants as subject matter, but “his drawings exist as symbols of larger conceptual ideas even though they appear to be purely representational...”³⁷ In the drawing *Study of Adaptive Ramification (Grevillea Australis)*, Seward’s use of pencil to draw a lifeless branch accentuates the starkness indicated by the title (Fig. 82). *Grevillea australis*, endemic to Tasmania, requires a cool climate to flower, and Seward’s work indicates one impact of climate change, where in drier conditions plants cope by dying back.³⁸ Western Australian botanical artist Philippa Nikulinsky

³⁶ Shirley Sherwood, B. E. Juniper, and Stephen Harris, *A New Flowering: 1000 Years of Botanical Art* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2005). 14.

³⁷ Gordon Morrison, "Decline and Rebirth: Botanical Art in Australia from 1900 to the Present Day," in *Capturing Flora: 300 Years of Australian Botanical Art*, ed. Peter Freund (Ballarat: Art Gallery of Ballarat, 2012). 260.

³⁸ Australian Native Plants Society (Australia), "Grevillea australis," <http://anpsa.org.au/g-aus.html> (7 October 2014).



Fig. 82. Andrew Seward, *Study of Adaptive Ramifications (Grevillea australis)* detail (2012)



Fig. 83. Rory McEwen, *Richmond Hill (Oak Leaf)* (1979)

includes dead wood and half eaten leaves in her illustrations of arid zone flora. I arranged to hear Shirley Sherwood's floor talk about the exhibition *Rory McEwen: The Colours of Reality*, where she discussed his series of single leaves (Fig. 83).³⁹ McEwen collected dying and diseased fallen leaves on walks around London and painted each, scaled up with minute detail, variously positioned on the vellum and titled with location as well as species. The works, though situated within botanical art, speak of place, time and loss. These are examples of artists working within a traditional genre while portraying contemporary concerns.

Location was also a key to my expression of contemporary environmental ideas, as a way of connecting a plant to a place, if not within its natural environment. *Black She-oak* (Fig. 84) was based on a specimen in the Australian National Botanic Gardens, a living plant resource for my research, where I focused again on botanical detail using porcelain. The silhouette of the branches against the sky or as a shadow, created spaces of light and I was interested in how this could be explored in black and white, referencing printmaking more closely, for example through shadow, texture and an interplay with negative and positive, using varied mark making. This included brushwork, using black underglaze on uncoated porcelain, white surface

³⁹ Shirley Sherwood, "Rory McEwen: The Colours of Reality," (Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art, Kew Gardens, July 2013).

carving and marks inlaid with ceramic ink, and then, by coating parts of the surface with black, I used sgraffito, both white line and black silhouette, finally colouring the flowers bright red to create a focal point, just as they are on the plant. *Black She-oak* was a study in a more complex use of technique and composition. The imagery of the She-oak branch continued over the rim connecting the outside of the form to the inside, and the surface imagery extended around and visually beyond the form. Philip Rawson writes about such an approach to pictorial space where the imagery can, “vanish’ beyond the edge of the format as if it continued in space beyond it. For the pot’s own space is continuous with the space around it, into which it extends and which it makes perceptible.”⁴⁰ In this way I could move the perception of the imagery from the surface into the form and leading out of the form into space and perhaps across to other forms. My exploration of imagery relating across multiple forms began from this work.



Fig. 84. *Black She-oak* and detail (2012)

⁴⁰ Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*. 184.

To work from a live plant specimen was particularly important in the making of *Black She-oak*, in that the three dimensional form of the plant was considered in relation to the three dimensional form of the object. The imagery on the form was viewed in fragments from different angles in the same way a plant is viewed in nature. To add to this effect, the form was based on the shape of the drooping branch, where the swelling in the lower portion was like the hanging foliage and the narrowing of the neck was like the thin branch above. This gave me specific areas in which to consider the composition of the imagery. I aimed to achieve what Philip Rawson describes, where “the surface ornaments may be related to the form of their pot not only through proportion and rhythm – important though these are – but through actual formal echoes.”⁴¹

Research based in specific natural environments

I continued to seek opportunities to engage with natural areas of significance, where I could research scientific knowledge and gain experiential knowledge of a place. I undertook fieldwork to Wilsons Promontory, a national park in southeast Victoria with a range of interesting habitats. I was particularly drawn to an area of extensive woodland, dominated by *Banksia serrata* that had been burnt in the 2009 bushfires. Two years on, the Banksias were regenerating and the woodland comprised blackened gnarled trunks, grey weathered dead branches and vivid green new foliage sprouting from trunks and branch crevices.

In response, I made three large cylinder forms, both vase and trunk like, and coated them in black underglaze. While the clay was still quite soft I deeply carved the silhouette of trunks and branches. However, part way through I changed my mind, and tried to smear the clay smooth, as it was still very soft. It smudged, like charcoal on paper, resulting in an unexpected effect reminiscent of the impact of the fire. This illustrated an important feature of practice-led research, the role of accidents and technical mishap in the discovery of new effects. This is an acknowledged aspect of

⁴¹ Ibid. 151.



Fig. 85. *Banksia Woodland Post-fire* (2012)

ceramic practice, owing particularly to the uncertainties and variability of the materials, and making, drying and firing processes.

The work, *Banksia Woodland Post-fire* (Fig. 85), was an investigation of imagery on individual forms and imagery across three related forms. Each vessel represents a single tree and together they represent the woodland. Undulations in the form were incorporated into the imagery to emphasise gnarled trunks and branches. Black glaze on the inside of each vessel accentuated the impact of the bushfire, and green underglaze in the carved leaves represented new growth and regeneration.



Fig. 86. *Mt Majura She-oaks* (2012)

Mt Majura She-oaks (Fig. 86) continued this investigation of composition on and across forms. This work was made after field research in Mount Majura Nature Reserve, part of Canberra Nature Park. The reserve contains an area of hills and ridges including the highest peak in suburban Canberra. Variation in geology, soils and altitude gives rise to different ecosystems, including the critically endangered Yellow Box-Red Gum Grassy Woodland, and is a location for rare and endangered species, such as the Canberra Spider Orchid.⁴² Mt Majura holds the largest stand of *Allocasuarina verticillata*, or Drooping She-oak, in the ACT, and its cones are the main food source for the endangered Glossy Black Cockatoo.⁴³ It is this stand of trees just below the ridgeline I responded to. The deeply furrowed bark and the sparse ungainly branches are a measure of the skeletal soil and intense westerly sun. In *Mt Majura She-oaks*, I explored creating imagery across three forms simultaneously from a single plant specimen. In addition to carving and brushwork, slip trailing was used; a technique where coloured slip is extruded through a thin nozzle to create a raised line. This technique was suited to the thin stepped line I required to represent the textured segments of the *Allocasuarina* branchlet, creating texture in relief. This work integrated multiple form, surface imagery and concept, being a response to a moment in environmental time and space, much like a botanical specimen is a recording of time and place.

Conclusion

At this stage of my research I had explored and progressed a number of lines of enquiry. I had developed an initial vocabulary of ceramic forms, techniques, materials and processes relevant to the aims of the project. Through systematic trial and error I found I could create a range of textures and marks to represent Australian plants, using inlay, brushwork, slip trailing and a variety of approaches to sgraffito. Clays had been tested to find how I could achieve the properties I desired, and I concluded porcelain had qualities analogous to vellum in botanical illustration, ones I was eager to employ. I realised the importance of responding to specific locations through fieldwork in the environment, rather than through a generalised approach to an isolated plant. My study of botanical illustration methodology and practice contributed to my understanding of the

⁴² Conservation Council ACT Region, "Plants of Mt Majura," Conservation Council ACT Region, www.conservationcouncil.org.au (accessed 3 June 2012).

⁴³ Ibid.

representation of plants, in attending to botanical detail by working from a plant directly, and the importance of specimens to composition on a three dimensional surface. I had moved from the idea of imagery being framed, a space into which the viewer looked on an unrelated form, to one where the form and imagery were conceived of together.

My investigation of ways to express environmental culture had begun with specific representations of degradation and threats based on my own understandings and concerns. However, I came to see, the possibilities of a more subtle reflection of environmental culture through materials, form, title and subject. Val Plumwood's view of environmental culture, which values and acknowledges the non-human sphere and the impact of humans on other species, resonated with my ideas. Through an investigation of the scientific approach of artists John Wolseley, Mary Rosengren and Rob Kessler I was able to position my methodology and art practice within the context of contemporary art. My understanding of a current Australian botanical narrative was in its early stages. I recognised that to move from generalised knowledge to the specific, I required botanical knowledge in a place I could research in depth, my local area, and this became my next line of enquiry.

Chapter Three

Making Connections to Place

The natural world is important because it is genuine and real, yet at the same time mysterious: it is what the Earth has to offer. ... One way to approach the Mystery is to study it. The scientific names which initially appear cold and abstract eventually become familiar, as do the organisms they represent. A forest is no longer just 'trees', but a mixture of individual species each with their own names, like a group of old friends. And the names introduce you to their relatives, distribution, and past history. In this way you become familiar with your surroundings and feel more at home in the world.¹

Introduction

The biographies of many artists who have used Australian flora in their work indicate how their understanding of plant species developed by getting to know and understand their local environment. Neil Douglas painted on earthenware the flora and fauna from his local bushland and Margaret Preston worked from life, knowing the plants from her bush garden in Berowra. Ellis Rowan's curiosity extended beyond one environment, leading her to travel extensively into remote and challenging areas of Australia, to find new plants and to know them through direct experience and the act of painting. Contemporary artists, such as John Wolseley and Julie Blyfield continue this engagement with the natural environment.

In this chapter I discuss how, in the next stage of my research, my investigation of a contemporary Australian botanical narrative required a more in-depth scientific engagement. I had reached the limits of my own botanical knowledge in the field and so I sought ways to participate in botanical research where the focus of the

¹ Daniel J. Bickel, "Foreword," in *Hidden Rainforest: Subtropical Rainforests and Their Invertebrate Biodiversity*, ed. Geoff Williams and Terry Evans (Kensington, NSW: NSW University Press in association with the Australian Museum, 1993). viii.

investigation was the Canberra region, my local area, guided by expert researchers in the field. At the same time, my aim was to clarify a research methodology for working in the field that was interconnected with studio-based research. To do this I examined the approach taken by a formal Environment Studio Field Studies program and by two artists, John Wolseley and Julie Blyfield. I explain, through a number of ceramic works, how the botanical and visual arts methodologies I developed became intrinsically connected, where studio research became an embodiment of botanical research.

Canberra's natural environment

Canberra in the ACT contains a range of natural areas, including over thirty-three nature reserves within the urban environment, known collectively as Canberra Nature Park. To the south and the west of the city lie Namadgi National Park and the declared wilderness area, Bimberi Nature Reserve. Ecologically diverse, the ACT forms the intersection of three major habitats, the western woodland grassy plains, the coastal hinterland mountain forests and the southeastern Australian Alps.² As I discovered, the study of plants for science or conservation is intimately connected to a specific place, and yet place itself also a microcosm of broader knowledge and issues. This suggests the legitimacy of focusing on my local environment for research. There were practical advantages too, such as the observation of daily and seasonal changes and, furthermore, I cared about these areas, more so as I became familiar with individual species, and, as Daniel Bickel writes, “more at home” in my natural world.³

The ACT has its own particular cultural and environmental history. Canberra is the traditional home of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people and was a “significant meeting place for neighbouring nations.”⁴ European settlers from the early

² Ian Fraser and Peter Marsack, *A Bush Capital Year: A Natural History of the Canberra Region* (Collingwood, Vic.: CSIRO Publishing, 2011). xi

³ Bickel, "Foreword." viii.

⁴ ACT Government Territory and Municipal Services, "Explore," ed. ACT Government (Canberra: ACT Government, 2013). 4.

nineteenth century found the wide grassy plains valuable pastoral land, as botanist Alan Cunningham records, in the first botanical study of the area in 1824:

The beautiful undulation of surface of this extensive open forest is abundantly watered by a stream or small river that meanders thro' it but is at the same time perfectly dry by reason of the facility with which the rains can escape hence their eligibility as extensive pastures for sheep, the boundary hills furnishing the necessary timber for the construction of huts and sheep yards of magnitude.⁵

In 1912, American architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin won an international competition to design the city of Canberra, bringing a sensitivity and appreciation of nature to their plan, including the revegetation of many of the then degraded hills. Today, the nature reserves they intended are important remnants of two endangered ecosystems, Natural Temperate Lowland Grasslands and Yellow Box-Red Gum Grassy Woodland, habitat for rare endemic species.⁶

National environment-related institutions based in Canberra include the Centre for Australian National Biodiversity Research, encompassing the Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG), the National Seed Bank and the Australian National Herbarium. The ANBG, as Director Judy West notes, "is the only place in the world where you can see this diversity of Australian native plants in one location."⁷ This was a valuable resource for identifying and working from live plants when at times this was difficult in the wild, such as for the work *Murrumbidgee bossiaea*.

⁵ Sarah Ryan, "History of Canberra Nature Park: Report for the Act Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment," (Canberra: Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, April 2011). 4.

⁶ Environment ACT, "Canberra Nature Park Management Plan," (Canberra: Department of Urban Services, 1999).

⁷ Judy West, "What's On " *Australian National Botanic Gardens* (April 2011), <http://www.anbg.gov.au/gardens/whatson/news/> (accessed 12 June 2013).

Botany, or plant science, is a broad field, encompassing all aspects of the study of plants from structure to molecular genetics and applications such as understanding and maintaining biodiversity. It was not apparent which aspects of botanical research would prove most useful for my project, but fieldwork with experts was the obvious starting point. I undertook field research with botanists from the National Seed Bank to collect seeds, participating in and learning botanical field methodology. This included identifying a particular plant in a natural environment, taking herbarium specimens, understanding a plant in relationship to the environment and other plants, seasonal variation and conditions, and threats. At times it was not possible to research in the field and I looked to other ways to study plants, such as the ANBG and the Australian National Herbarium, with over two million dried plant specimens.

I participated in a number of local interest groups, such as the Australian Native Plant Society (ANPS), Friends of Grasslands, the Orchid Study Group of the ACT, Friends of specific nature reserves and Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens. Many of these have online resources specific to local areas, such as the ANPS plant list and the Canberra Nature Map, sharing information and sightings of rare and endangered plants. I joined weeding and landcare sessions, participated in rare-plant surveys and plant identification walks. Importantly, I met others who in the words of local writer and naturalist Ian Fraser, “love this land and its ancient, teeming and subtle life passionately.”⁸ He continues, “We are extraordinarily privileged to be living here and now, but with that privilege comes the responsibility of stewardship.”⁹ Through this involvement I was able to extend my practical, localised botanical knowledge.

⁸ Fraser and Marsack, *A Bush Capital Year: A Natural History of the Canberra Region*. xii.

⁹ *Ibid.* xii.

Extending the studio research

Following on from my experience at Plumwood Mountain, and as a prelude to working more closely in my local area, I took the opportunity to participate in an Environment Studio Field Studies program, through the ANU, to the regional area of Shepparton in Victoria. I wanted to compare the approach I was developing for working in the field to a formal program that aims, as Head of the Studio, John Reid writes, to take participants, “beyond the artist studio ‘into the field’ where sustained research opportunities combine quality sensory, intellectual and reflective experiences to inspire the production of fine art.”¹⁰ The focus of the fieldwork was the community cultural assets of the Goulburn and Broken Rivers, and the group was briefed by a range of stakeholders, including Indigenous leaders and rangers, environmentalists, council leaders, developers and scientists. The Goulburn Valley River region is an area of intensive agriculture and irrigation, with its ecological health rated as very poor.¹¹ It had suffered during the 2000s drought, but experienced a flood event during the fieldwork.

My fieldwork methodology for working in the environment was further refined by this experience, which included walking, taking photographs, making drawings and notes, listening to and discussing a range of perspectives, examining and researching the flora, materials collection, including plant specimens and clay samples, repeat visits and further literature research. Through these activities I became engaged intellectually, sensually and emotionally with a location and its issues. This experience also confirmed my desire to engage more deeply with my local environment through being involved with a range of experts in botanical and environmental areas.

¹⁰ John Reid, *Engaging Visions: Engaging Artists with the Community About the Environment* (Acton, A.C.T.: The Australian National University, 2010). 5.

¹¹ P. Davies, et al, *Sustainable Rivers Audit*, (Canberra: Murray-Darling Basin Commission, 2008). 146.

The aim of the Field Studies program was to produce visual art, and I subsequently made two groups of work. *River Red Gum Seed Jars* (Fig. 87) was made in response to my observation of the flooded young gum trees reflected in the rising water of the Goulburn River in a once in a decade flood event. As I had learnt from the Park rangers, River Red gums are iconic to the floodplain river systems, and yet are under increasing pressure from climate change, drought and reduced environmental water flows.¹² I represented the angled saplings on the edge of the river by a group of tall leaning cylinder forms, using the metaphor of the lidded container for



Fig. 87. *River Red Gum Seed Jars* (2012)

¹² Parks Victoria, "Lower Goulburn National Park," State Government Victoria, http://parkweb.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/315877/Park-note-Lower-Goulburn-National-Park.pdf. (accessed 2 April 2012).

preservation. I tested cobalt blue, red iron oxide and a prepared slip, made from the found clay of the riverbank, to evoke the mottled colours of the bark, the brown floodwaters and the reflected watery blue sky. The work was not specifically representational in its imagery, but drew upon the cultural and environmental value of the River Red gums and my experience of seeing them in flood.

In the second body of work, *Half a Dozen Flora of the Lower Goulburn River* (Fig. 88) I responded to the poor quality of the environment in the newly created Lower Goulburn National Park, already degraded by uncontrolled weeds, illegal campfires and littering. I examined scientific reports to gain a sense of the previous and existing flora in the area, and concentrated on species endangered or threatened. I used red clay to make 'tin cans' like the ones I saw littering the park and chose six of the endangered flora as 'labels'. This work expressed one perspective of the environmental culture I observed in the field.



Fig. 88. *Half a Dozen Flora of the Lower Goulburn River* (2012)

Painter John Wolseley has developed a similar way of working in natural environments. As arts writer Annemarie Lopez writes: "His methodology, refined over many years, is a combination of strategic journeys, rigorous scientific research and immersion in a landscape."¹³ Wolseley uses his notes, sketches and scientific observations in the field as ideas and as inclusions in the final artwork. His approach to making, and to observing and recording landscapes over time, is a way of reflecting environmental culture, as he writes:

I like to think that the large works on paper on which I assemble these different drawing methods represent a kind of inventory or document about the state of the earth. I want to reveal both the energy and beauty of it, as well as show its condition of critical even terminal change.¹⁴

Through this research I realised two key points about artists working in the field. The intention of the artist, although perhaps interested in the same things as the scientist, and his or her knowledge being greatly enhanced by being with them, is not to observe and record objective data (although this may be included). Rather, the intention is to respond and react to the natural environment to express something of it in visual form. As John Reid points out: "All fine art that responds to place is an aesthetic evaluation of place."¹⁵ Secondly, the artist approaches the natural environment with a subjective and selective approach, using a methodology they have developed to suit their individual needs. The artist is searching in the field for the observations, experience and materials that are meaningful conceptually, aesthetically and materially to the making of their individual art. From the field, subsequent research in the studio explores the ways this might be achieved.

At this stage I had a significant technical breakthrough in formulating a suitable ceramic surface coating. For over six months I had been testing and developing a recipe for a vitreous slip or engobe that could provide thickness and a smooth even surface for carving. Technically, it needed to tolerate being applied when the form was leather-hard and to fire to a vitrified, hard surface, even when remaining in tiny

¹³ Annemarie Lopez, "John Wolseley Pattern Hunter," *Australian Art Review* (Mar - April 2011). 40.

¹⁴ John Wolseley, "John Wolseley," <http://www.johnwolseley.net/> (accessed 4 October 2014).

¹⁵ John Reid, *Water Water: Aesthetic Responses to the Goulburn Broken Catchment*, ed. Shepparton Arts Museum (Shepparton: Australian National University Field Studies, 2012). 10.

residual marks. I wanted the material to have a soft sheen as a contrast to textural mark making, to be reminiscent of printing ink and to reference the influence of botanical or relief prints on my approach to sgraffito. It was important the final surface would appear finished without needing glaze, as glaze would fill and diminish the textural quality. An inherent thickness in the engobe would allow a depth to the sgraffito carving, allowing greater variation in mark making, and could be used for related techniques such as slip trailing, inlay, and brushing, thus giving me flexibility in the use of white space in the surface imagery. The base recipe needed to have good colour response, especially with chrome oxide, one of my main colourants. Finally, after much testing, I developed a recipe for such a material.

Through materials research into clays, engobe and underglaze I was formulating a colour and textural palette to evoke an Australian environment. Academic George Seddon explains the evolution of Australia's botanical features:

The colour range is highly distinctive: grey, grey-green, blue-green, black-green, and then translucent copper reds in the new flush of growth (because in nutrient-poor soils, the production of anthocyanin outstrips that of the more nutrient-demanding chlorophyll). Foliage is often pendant and tough (sclerophyllous) as a protection against insolation; prickly or harsh as a protection against grazing and browsing animals. Foliage is often resinous, too, a fresh fragrance to our Australian noses, but a deterrent to many insect predators. Flowers may be exquisite but small: even banksia cones are made up of a multitude of small individual flowers. Flowers are often rich in stamens, like tiny pincushions, but poor in petals. In less brilliantly lit climes, large petals guide the fertilising bees and moths to the functional core of the flower, stamens and stigma, but such crude traffic signals are rarely needed here.¹⁶

Therefore, developing a colour and textural palette to reflect the particularities of Australian flora was vital to the expression of the environment in my work. This materiality might be considered using shiny or matt glazes, textured and mottled clay, or as a surface depth in my smooth coloured engobe.

¹⁶ George Seddon and C. J. Totterdell, *The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants, and People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). 21.

A Canberra-based botanical narrative

My fieldwork research and early involvement with local botanical resources drew my attention to the way environmental values may specifically reflect the cultural values placed upon an individual Australian plant, and the approaching Centenary of Canberra was a way to explore this. A plant to commemorate the Centenary was selected by committee through a process that initially considered a rose, perhaps an indication of the lower cultural status still attributed to Australian plants.¹⁷ The final choice was the new cultivar 'Canberra Bells' from the Australian genus *Correa*. Canberra Bells has heritage values, one of its parent plants being 'Federation Belle', itself commemorative of the Centenary of Federation in 2000.¹⁸ Its horticultural properties, its ability to grow in the Canberra climate and to flower in autumn during Canberra Day, were essential to its selection.¹⁹ Canberra Bells is a small open bush with bright red and cream bell-shaped flowers scattered through dark green leaves. This cultivar was bred by Australian plant horticulturalist Peter Ollerenshaw and I visited his nursery to speak with him about cultivation, to view the parent plants and to obtain a newly released specimen. I undertook further research at the ANBG to draw and photograph the habit of more established plants.

The vase form was explored in the resulting work *Canberra Bells* (Fig. 89), based on its implicit meaning for floral display and appreciation, signifying the commemorative value of the plant. However, the Canberra Bells plant is better suited to garden beds or pots, rather than as a cut flower. Knowing this, my idea was to use form and surface to represent the plant, where the profusion and celebration of the plant was in the objects rather than in what they might contain. To do this I studied the shape of the bell flower both right way up and upside down, making vase forms with varying proportion and scale. Karl Philipp Moritz, in *Preliminary Ideas on the Theory of Ornament*, analyses the vase form and the way it expresses the idea of containment, very much like the flower itself, as he writes: "For the ancients, as for ourselves, it was the most natural and obvious idea to build vases up from the base, in shapes that resemble the calyces of flowers."²⁰

¹⁷ Ian Warden, "Canberra Bells to Make Our Day," *The Canberra Times* 6 March 2012. 8.

¹⁸ Australian Cultivar Registration Authority, "Correa 'Federation Belle'," Australian National Botanic Gardens, <https://www.anbg.gov.au/acra/descriptions/acc850.html> (accessed 3 March 2012).

¹⁹ 100 Canberra, "The Correa Canberra Bells," ACT Government, <http://www.canberra100.com.au/programs/the-correa-canberra-bells/> (accessed 3 March 2012).

²⁰ Karl Philipp Moritz, "Preliminary Ideas on the Theory of Ornament," in *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European & American Writings, 1750-1940*, ed. Isabelle Frank (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). 259.

I explored composition on the porcelain surface of the bell-shaped vases, using my newly developed engobe. Spaces contained within the stems were coated with dark engobe to carve overlapping stems and leaves in sgraffito, and engobe was delicately brushed onto remaining white areas to depict single stems. The flowers were painted with colour and brushed with clear glaze to reflect the light. The deep green of the engobe absorbed light in the same way as the rough textured leaves of the plant and so helped emphasise the shiny flowers. I developed a pale green glaze to use in the interior of the forms to reference the same colour on the inside of the



Fig. 89. *Canberra Bells* (2012)

flower. My concept in using the vase form was to contain the idea of the Canberra Bells through surface and form only, without the intention of holding the cut plant. In this way I was testing Moritz's claim: "The vase, the container par excellence, is thus an ornament in itself – because it embodies the idea of *the thing that isolates and contains within itself*."²¹ I massed the vase forms together, to create a profusion of gem-like flowers amongst a tangle of leaves and stems, just as one would see in an ornamental garden bed of Canberra Bells (Fig. 90).

After this body of work, I researched a lesser known plant that has different botanical and cultural values. The Ginninderra Peppercross, *Lepidium ginninderrense* is one of seven endangered endemic plants in the ACT²² and, therefore, has special status under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity



Fig. 90. *Canberra Bells*, detail (2012)

²¹ Ibid. 259.

²² Australian Government, "Epbc Act List of Threatened Flora," Department of the Environment, www.environment.gov.au (accessed 5 June 2012).

Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act).²³ Laws reflect society's values including environmental ones, and, as Tim Bonyhady writes in *A Colonial Earth*, are "crucial, both as an embodiment of society's commitment to protecting particular places and species and as a vehicle for securing that protection."²⁴ Through such legislation, the Department of Environment has in place a recovery plan, "to maximise the long term survival in the wild of a threatened species or ecological community."²⁵ In my volunteer capacity at the National Seed Bank I accompanied botanists to collect seeds from local endangered plants, as part of the "research and management actions" undertaken to support their recovery.²⁶

My research aim was to explore ways to express environmental culture within the conventions and language of ceramic visual art, and the value assigned to the Peppercreess was aligned with my original definition of environmental culture, the "... attitudes, practices and knowledge that a society has with respect to maintaining or protecting its natural resources..."²⁷ I was unsure how I might express concern for this particular species in the ceramic medium, but the first step in my methodology for researching a plant and its environment was to observe the plant within its natural habitat. There is only one single population of Ginninderra Peppercreess and as I was unable to gain access at this time, I arranged with the Australian National Herbarium to study the Peppercreess as a herbarium specimen.

The Ginninderra Peppercreess is an unassuming plant, under 20 cm height with tiny leaves and flowers, and is a species of the Natural Temperate Lowland Grasslands, one of the most threatened ecological communities in Australia.²⁸ I viewed the dried specimen in the herbarium, taking notes and photographs, and making drawings. As I studied the magnified specimen through a microscope I was drawn into the textural detail, such as the way the stems are marked with delicate grooves and the papery thin capsules had split to reveal a smooth brown seed. This way of observing

²³ Australian Government, "Recovery Plans," Department of the Environment, Commonwealth of Australia, <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/recovery-plans> (accessed 5 June 2012).

²⁴ Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2000). 2.

²⁵ Environment, "Recovery Plans."

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ European Environment Information and Observation Network, "General Multilingual Environmental Thesaurus," <http://www.eionet.eropa.eu/gemet/en/concept/1905/> (accessed 3 May 2014).

²⁸ ACT Government, "A Vision Splendid of the Grassy Plains Extended: Act Lowland Native Grasslands Conservation Strategy," (Canberra: Arts, Heritage and Environment, 2005). iii.



Fig. 91. *Ginninderra Peppergrass*, detail (2012)

the plant, through a circular lens, brought to mind another round, glass, scientific piece of equipment, the petri dish. I realised I could use this shape in ceramic form to signify the approach I had used to study the plant, and in doing so reference scientific methods used to protect it. In the case of the Ginninderra Peppercreess, the National Seed Bank is assisting its recovery through collecting seeds from every living plant, to ensure genetic diversity, “with the aim of producing over 50,000 seeds that can be used to recreate an entirely new population.”²⁹

In the studio, I made shallow porcelain forms to reference a petri dish, a protective container for preservation and study. To soften an otherwise industrial looking form, I retained gestural throwing lines, situating the form back into the hand made, and as a way to indicate my individual perspective on a scientific approach. Background colours applied to the inner base were subdued muted tones of ochre and green, as seen in the dried plant specimen. With permission, I returned to the herbarium with my prepared forms and carved the imagery of the Peppercreess directly into the ceramic dishes while looking at the plant under the microscope. The resulting work *Ginninderra Peppercreess* (Fig. 91) signified both the scientific approach I used and the way society values the protection of this plant.

The establishment of a fieldwork and visual arts methodology

I was fascinated by the work of South Australian contemporary jeweller and object maker Julie Blyfield, and to discover the parallels between her botanical and studio methodology and the evolution of mine. Blyfield too, uses the vessel within contemporary craft practice and the subject of Australian flora to communicate ideas about environmental culture. Art critic Wendy Walker describes an example of Blyfield’s research process in the field, “where (adopting her customary methodology) Blyfield took photographs, made sketches and gathered plant specimens...”³⁰ Likewise, Blyfield studies Australian flora in historical plant collections and herbaria, and through botanical illustration and print. For example, her series of brooches, *Acacia*, made in 2004, came out of research she undertook into

²⁹ Council of Heads of Australian Botanic Gardens Inc., "Australian Seedbank Partnership: Recovering Peppercreess," Council of Heads of Australian Botanic Gardens Inc., <http://seedpartnership.org.au/partners/anbg/peppercreess> (accessed 5 June 2012).

³⁰ Wendy Walker, "Julie Blyfield: Botanic Orientations in Jewellery," *Craft Arts International* 77(2009). 58.

lithographs of drawings made by Ferdinand von Mueller.³¹ I was able to examine works by Mueller in the State Botanical Collection at the National Herbarium of Victoria. I was particularly interested in the woodblocks prepared for his publication *The Native Plants of Victoria*, 1879, where the exquisite botanical detail of line and shading was revealed in their carved and textured surface (Fig. 92).³²



Fig. 92. Woodblock prepared for *The Native Plants of Victoria*, by Ferdinand von Mueller (1879)

To represent Australian flora in her objects, Blyfield uses her knowledge of plant structure to inform her metalworking processes in the studio. The shape and texture of a leaf is replicated with chasing, a technique applied to the surface to sink the metal into a groove or indentation.³³ In the work *Acacia Oraria* (Fig. 93) the vessel appears formed from a delicate layering of the leaf from this species, with its characteristic texture of three prominent longitudinal and fine reticulate veins. *Drought Vessel* (Fig. 94) imitates the structure of a plant as an open spacious form. The cordate or heart-shaped leaves appear thin and tough, highly textured with parallel grooves, suggesting either an adaptation to harsh, dry conditions or papery-

³¹ Stephanie Radok and Dick Richards, *Julie Blyfield* (Kent Town, S. Aust.: Wakefield Press, 2007). 18.

³² The National Herbarium of Victoria Archives. (visited 17 April 2014)

³³ *Ibid.* 105.

thin, parched leaves retaining the last remnant of moisture for survival. The vessel, rather than being decorated with leaves, has metaphorically become the plant itself.

Blyfield communicates ideas about the environment and the contemporary crafted object through a sophisticated interaction of botanical research and studio practice. The character and history of metalworking is embedded in her representation of a plant, and botanical texture is replicated by the action of the process. Her use of title directs the meaning of the object towards a botanical or environmental perspective. The vessel form, in addition to its historical reference, is an expression of the plant itself and its environment.

Blyfield's relationship between her botanical research and studio practice clarified the methodology I was formulating for my research. At this stage I had established ways to undertake research in the field to gain botanical knowledge, environmental understanding and an engagement with place, and I knew how and where to seek further scientific information. Botanical research was important not only for informing my ideas, but, as I realised with greater clarity, was central to directing the materials, processes and techniques to express them. In this way, I saw studio research might embody the botanical research.



Fig. 93. Julie Blyfield, *Acacia Oraria* (2007)



Fig. 94. Julie Blyfield, *Drought Vessel* (2009)

Studio research as an embodiment of botanical research

In the next phase of my project I focused on the way botanical research might inform and direct studio processes, and to do so I set myself a weekly task. The purpose was to research a diverse range of locations with my now more established botanical knowledge of local plants and the environment, and to respond quickly in the studio, experimenting with and extending my evolving ceramic vocabulary of techniques, form and surface imagery. The resulting works were sketches or studies, freeing myself as much as is possible from the constraints of the lengthy staged process to test and develop ceramic materials. This research was profitable in that it indicated where more in-depth resolution of processes and materials was needed, and gave me further experience in meaningful exchange of dialogue with experts.

In the first of three studies I will discuss, I explored Callum Brae, a reserve in Canberra Nature Park. Bulbine Lily was in bloom in the Yellow Box-Red Gum Grassy Woodland. The bright yellow, star-shaped flower lasts for just one day, and my response was to make a very thin porcelain form based on the shape of the bud.³⁴ I brushed engobe and locally found clay slip on the surface as a basis to the imagery and then, to enhance the delicate smooth surface, I burnished the coatings (Fig. 95). This produced a transformed silky surface and was a process I continued with throughout the project.



Fig. 95. *Study (Callum Brae)* (2012)



Fig. 96. *Study (Button Wrinklewort)* (2012)

³⁴ Lyndsey Vivian, "Bulbine Bulbosa," Australian National Botanic Garden, <http://www.anbg.gov.au/gnp/interns-2003/bulbine-bulbosa.html> (4 November 2012).

The next study focused on the endangered Button Wrinklewort, a daisy “with only 27 populations left in the world – 10 of those in Canberra.”³⁵ ACT Parks and Conservation was undertaking a three-year program to reintroduce a population into one of the local nature reserves, with the aim for them to reproduce in significant numbers.³⁶ My involvement with the Friends of the ANBG gave me the opportunity to visit one of these populations. The symbolism of the lidded vessel to contain and preserve was used in this response, designed with a flat lid for imagery of the flower. The daisy has a characteristic form and by looking down onto each flower I could see this feature, an effect I wished to represent (Fig. 96)

The third study was based on a field trip with the ACT group, Friends of Grasslands, to a lagoon noted for its large population of the endangered *Rulingia prostrata*.³⁷ On crown land, the lagoon had dried in the 2000s drought, which was followed by grazing on the site. I based the form on the aerial shape of the lagoon, by throwing a wall and adding a flat base after it was altered. This was a prelude to working further with an altered thrown wall and a joined base. Placing the imagery on the inside and outside wall of the form, I applied engobe over stencils cut into *Rulingia* leaf shapes. I played with positive and negative composition, and relief texture using a water erosion technique (Fig. 97).



Fig. 97. *Study (Rulingia prostrata)* (2012)

³⁵ David Sharaz, "Our Button Wrinklewort a World Treasure," *The Canberra Times* 29 November 2012. 10.

³⁶ Ibid. 10.

³⁷ Friends of Grasslands, Fieldtrip to Rowes Lagoon, NSW. 11 November 2012.

In January 2012, another endemic ACT plant, the Murrumbidgee Bossiaea, was added to the list of endangered species and this seemed a timely opportunity to investigate its situation and characteristics.³⁸ This plant is found in only 'ten known sites along the Murrumbidgee, Paddy's and Cotter rivers.'³⁹ Although I later visited a number of these populations with the National Seed Bank, at this point this wasn't possible and so I examined the living plant in the ANBG. Unable to see it in its natural habitat, I concentrated on the morphology of the plant, returning repeatedly to take photos and make drawings from different angles. The form and structure of the plant is interesting in that the flattened stems act as leaves, so the raised inner rib of the stem has flattened wings and the single bright yellow pea flower emerges at angles along the stems.

The studio research I undertook for this work resulted in a significant development and it came about while investigating ways to represent the plant through my existing mark-making techniques. I was unable to create the particular mark I



Fig. 98. Tools

³⁸ ACT Government, "Action Plan Murrumbidgee Bossiaea No. 34," (Environment ACT, 2013). 1.

³⁹ Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, "Murrumbidgee Bossiaea," ACT Government, http://www.environment.act.gov.au/cpr/conservation_and_ecological_communities/information_on_action_plans/murrumbidgee_bossiaea (accessed 12 November 2012).

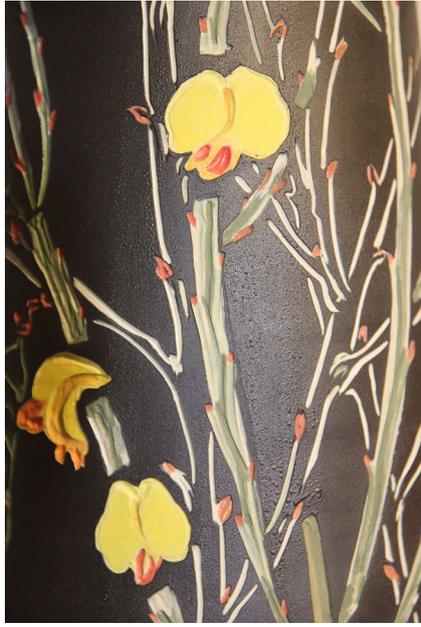


Fig. 99. *Murrumbidgee bossiaea*, detail (2012)



Fig. 100. *Murrumbidgee bossiaea* (2012)

required to describe the flattened stem of the *Bossiaea* using my existing tools and realised I needed to make my own carving tools, designed specifically to slice through the thickness of my engobe to create an individual mark for each plant shape (Fig. 98). For the *Bossiaea*, I used a thin metal strip shaped into a wedge and cut a triangle out of the middle. When sliced through the engobe, it left a raised notch in the middle of the broad mark. This rib was essential to the character of the plant, creating the raised stem within the wings of the flattened leaves (Fig. 99). My studio methodology subsequently included making specific tools for each body of work.

My aim for the ceramic form in *Murrumbidgee Bossiaea* (Fig. 100) was to represent or refer to the plant by its height; approximately 80 cm. Making larger forms extended my studio research, in technique and by creating a greater surface area for exploring imagery. When reflecting on this work, however, I concluded the vase form was unrelated to the plant form, as it had been in the work *Canberra Bells*, therefore disassociating the meaning of the imagery from the form itself. I found this problematic, therefore requiring further investigation of the idea of function and metaphor in the ceramic form.

Art theorist Howard Risatti defines craft through its property of function in *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression*. He argues:

Function can be abstract and metaphorical without the object necessarily losing its identity because, even if abstract and metaphorical, function is still the subject matter of the work; it is still around function that the object springs forth into the viewer's consciousness.⁴⁰

In other words, the conventions of craft allow us to recognise and comprehend an object.⁴¹ For example the vase inherently implies the act of containing and displaying plants, a meaning useful to my investigation. However, I was curious to examine the possibilities of exploring objects with abstract or metaphorical function and where function was not the subject or the purpose of the work. To investigate the possibilities of form holding other meaning, my next line of enquiry was to explore the way the meaning implicit in the imagery might interact with and inform the vessel form.

In the next group of work I investigated a more open vessel, a non-specific container, with a visible interior. I altered the rim to refer to landscape or horizon, and by widening the opening made the inside apparent. This raised the question of the relationship of the inside to the imagery on the outside, both in form and materials. For the work *Banksia* (Fig. 101) I developed a speckled rutile glaze for the inside which evoked the yellow mottled colour of the flower spike. The outside was coated in black engobe in which to represent the plant, with the background mark making echoing the texture and shapes of the leaves and spikes. The flower colour was referenced with glaze, forming a connection between the outside surface imagery and the inside. By leaving the undulating rim uncoated and retaining the white of the porcelain, a space was created between the two areas. Ideas of landscape, flower texture and colour were evoked while retaining the idea of containment. In the subsequent studies, *Red Box Gum* and *Hardenbergia* (Figs. 102-103), I continued this exploration of altered form and ways to express the character of each flower through mark making, colour and glaze.

⁴⁰ Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 288.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 9.



Fig. 101. *Banksia* (2012)



Fig. 102. *Red Box Gum* (2012)



Fig. 103. *Hardenbergia* (2012)

In February 2013, I was invited to join a research fieldtrip to the Tinderry Range, just beyond the ACT in the Monaro, NSW with botanists and staff from the ANBG and Richard Snashall, a documentary filmmaker.⁴² The aim was to search for and collect seeds from the endangered and ephemeral plant, *Dampiera fusca*, found only in a few locations on the eastern edge of the Southern Tablelands. 'Ephemeral' in botanical terms describes a plant that is short lived, usually when the conditions are favourable.⁴³ In this case, a bushfire had severely burnt the area a couple of years before, triggering the seed to germinate in large numbers. Features of the landscape were recorded such as soil type, sunlight, topography, aspect and landform, as information to further understand the plant.⁴⁴ The environment was one of granite tors, charred trunks and bleached branches, with regenerating *Acacia* and Tea-tree and patches of prolific *Dampiera*.

It was an insightful experience to enter the world of the *Dampiera fusca*, unfamiliar and stark, yet one in which the plant thrived. The specific environment recorded by the botanists, with its propensity for fire, is essential to the plants existence, forming the basis of my ideas in the studio. In the study and then the final work, *The Ephemeral Dampiera fusca: Tinderry Range* (Fig. 104), I nested three forms, my aim being to reflect the layers of hills and tors both protecting and containing the plant. I sliced wheel thrown walls on an angle before joining to a base, so as to reveal the imagery and form of the vessel within. Black engobe symbolised fire, particularly with landscape imagery, and referenced relief printmaking. The small innermost vessel was the focal point, representing a patch of plants, coated with green engobe to reflect the colour of the *Dampiera* leaf, carved, painted with the blue of the flower and glazed. This work was significant in extending my newly formed ideas about the vessel form, where the concept for the form was based on botanical and environmental experience, rather than directly from the vocabulary of ceramic form, thereby reflecting more actively aspects of the plant and the environment.

⁴² Richard Snashall, "Going on a Seed Hunt," in *Stateline 7.30 ACT* (Australia: ABC, 15 March 2013). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG_yY86U_h8

⁴³ A. McCusker, "Flora of Australia: Glossary," www.anbg.gov.au/glossary (accessed 3 March 2012).

⁴⁴ Fieldtrip with ANBG, Tinderry Range, NSW, 12 February, 2013.



Fig. 104. *The Ephemeral Dampiera Fusca: Tinderry Range* (2013)

Conclusion

I began this phase of my research with the aim of gaining botanical and environmental knowledge of my local area, in the field with experts, and through institutions. This process was very fruitful and, as a result, I learnt where, with whom and how to access information, and gained greater knowledge of plants, their environment and their inter-relationships. I realised botanical research and stewardship is fundamentally connected to a specific location. While in the field, I learnt the environment is an ever-changing natural system, and as botanist Michael Mulvaney says, “it is really important not to treat or think of everywhere the same, that each place has a different everything.”⁴⁵

Likewise, through studio research I developed conceptual, theoretical, material and aesthetic knowledge, including testing and formulating ceramic materials,

⁴⁵ Conversation with Michael Mulvaney, Rare Plant Survey, Mount Majura Nature Reserve, 3 November 2013.

experimenting with process and form, and developing new tools and techniques. Through a combination of both of these research areas, the botanical and the studio, and through the investigation of ways other artists engage with the natural environment, I clarified a visual arts methodology specific to my own research. My observations and documentation in the field were informed by my newfound botanical knowledge and experience, but were specific to the knowledge and questions I was developing through studio research. The two research areas were intrinsically interconnected, requiring tacit knowledge in both.

Rather than searching for universal statements in my work, my research was directing me to investigate ways to express a particular and individual response to a botanical and environmental moment, in a specific place. This moment, then, was part of a current Australian botanical narrative and, by expressing something of it, I would, in effect, be expressing my interpretation of current environmental culture. More specifically, this might be communicated through the visual arts language of title, subject, context, materials, imagery, form and colour. In this way, ceramic objects might articulate ideas about the environment.

I was curious now to explore further the way form might express ideas in ways other than through a reference to function, such as drawing upon ideas from environmental science. In Chapter Four I discuss the final part of my research as I investigated the possibilities of form contributing to the expression of environmental culture through relationships with each other, such as in groupings and through installation.

Chapter Four

Form and Placement in Expression

Perhaps, the greatest problem facing modern ceramic artists today is how to create work which conveys or comments somehow on the complexities of modern life. For a ceramic artist's work to be relevant today it somehow must find its meaning in the issues that surround and confront humans daily.¹

Introduction

The meaning signified by form in historical ceramics decorated with Australian flora, such as plates and vases for use or decorative display, is primarily situated within the conventions of domestic crafted objects. In Flora Landells' *Teapot with Sturt Desert Pea* or Louis Bilton's large display vases, the classical forms signify function or commemoration, and the surface provides a canvas for the imagery. The botanical and cultural value inherent in the subject of the decoration, along with the context and artist's biographical details, could be said to provide clues to the environmental culture of the time. But what role can ceramic form contribute to expressing environmental culture in contemporary ceramic work? Ceramic form has a historical vocabulary, as Howard Risatti and Philip Rawson analyse. It is through Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of mimesis, or framework of recognition, that Risatti attributes craft's cognitive meaning.² Meaning is given to form, as Risatti says, "at an essential, elemental level"³ within a system of historical conventions, thus allowing the viewer to read or recognise form and understand it, through an established vocabulary. Therefore, how might contemporary ceramic form, specifically the non-utilitarian vessel, stay within this framework and 'make sense', and yet contain other meaning or analogy? As part of a contemporary ceramic

¹ Rob Barnard, "Alternatives to the 'New'," in *Breaking the Mould: New Approaches to Ceramics*, ed. Cigalle Hanaor (London: Black Dog, 2007). 24.

² Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). 8.

³ Ibid. 10.

artwork, how can it express, as Rob Barnard advises “meaning in the issues that surround and confront humans daily?”⁴

In this chapter, I discuss the final part of my practice-led research, where I examine the role of form and placement in conveying botanical and environmental meaning. Craft theorists Howard Risatti, Philip Rawson and Emmanuel Cooper provide a theoretical framework to analyse form and the possibilities and the boundaries necessary for its reading or meaning. Natasha Daintry, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott and Edmund de Waal are relevant to my research, as contemporary artists examining form in this way, bringing the importance of display and framing to the reading and meaning of ceramic artwork. They are artists who are focused on “a contemporary exploration of craft’s particular sensibilities and concerns,”⁵ where material identity, process and technique are not only paramount to the creating of artworks, but integral to expressing meaning. I discuss these final stages of my investigation, firstly, through three examples of research each undertaken in specific environments, Canberra, North Head Sanctuary in Sydney, and the Tanami and southeast Kimberley desert region. I then discuss the conclusion to my research project, a body of ceramic artwork based on Canberra Nature Park.

Form and Meaning

Function, as implicit to the meaning or purpose of ceramic form, began to be questioned by ceramic practitioners from the mid-twentieth century.⁶ The vessel form, the elemental container, without a specified function began to be explored in unconventional ways, and has remained a powerful presence in contemporary crafted objects since. Vessels might retain the connection to historical ceramic conventions through such characteristics as human scale, materials and processes, and vocabulary of form. The presence of an inside and an outside creates a space for containing, thus retaining a metaphorical idea of function. Philip Rawson argues the idea of containing is essential to the language of ceramic form:

We still need, I feel, to adhere to the traditional character of ceramics as implying the image of the containing. So our pots lose if they do not have this double aspect: first, of containing and isolating a realm of space, maybe

⁴ Barnard, "Alternatives to the 'New'." 24.

⁵ Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression*. 288.

⁶ Ibid. 284.

even sanctifying it; and second, of exhibiting outward forms, which define the container as a special kind of presence in the world, no mere inert object. ... We are profoundly aware of inner volume which we understand by an inner sympathy as being centred, as we are centred, we know it to have an affinity with our own sense of being but to be, at the same time, as “over there”, over against us, so that we can address it as if it were another.⁷

Writer and maker Emmanuel Cooper, like Rawson, points out how the vessel’s connection to function, “however loose... is a vital link to the broadly perceived but significant association of clay with its humanist history.”⁸ This however is not its primary purpose or only meaning. A key purpose in contemporary ceramic art is to express ideas, and the meaning may come from a combination of subject matter and the history and tradition of ceramic materials and processes.

Contemporary ceramic artists might use the historical vocabulary of form primarily as a backdrop to the expression of ideas through decoration. British artist Grayson Perry deliberately uses the classical vase or urn-like form in his work because of this recognisable vocabulary, as he says, “the shape has to be classical invisible: then you’ve got a base that people can understand.”⁹ This allows the surface treatment or decoration to become the focal point with its own meaning and, in Perry’s case, to subvert the expectation of the purely decorative.

In contemporary art, the use of multiple ceramic vessels to express ideas has gained prominence through the work of Natasha Daintry, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott and Edmund de Waal, either through the use of similar form or through relationships between different forms. In her work *Ocean*, Daintry engages the neutral form of the cylinder to communicate the dynamism of a wave, its foam and mysterious depths (Fig. 105). She achieves this through the use of a thousand slip-cast cylinders, the qualities of coloured glaze and placement. This is a departure from the way meaning has been signified in ceramic objects historically, and lies, as I investigate in the next stage of my research, in the use of vessel multiples, the relationship between them and the role of placement in determining meaning.

⁷ Philip Rawson, "Analogy and Metaphor in Ceramic Art," in *Ceramic Millennium: Critical Writings on Ceramic History, Theory and Art*, ed. Garth Clark (Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981). 38.

⁸ Emmanuel Cooper, *Contemporary Ceramics* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009). 59.

⁹ CeramicsNow, "Grayson Perry," www.ceramicsnow.org/graysonperry (accessed 15 January 2015).



Fig. 105. Natasha Daintry, *Ocean* (2009)

As my research progressed, I began to see the power of metaphor and analogy in the establishment of meaning. This could be thought of in three ways; the making process and the vessel having connections to natural form; the wheel-thrown vessel having similar characteristics to each other yet each unique; and multiples and groupings of vessels carrying associations of ecology. Perhaps, form, the vessel, could be a metaphor for containing the essence or idea of nature or the plant, just as the origins of the ceramic vessel itself come from nature. As Risatti suggests, “craft objects still carry within them the visual memory of their generating natural forms and the human overcoming of nature in the creation of a world of human expression.”¹⁰ In this way, vessels might readily convey ideas about nature. Further, wheel-formed vessels, even when thrown to replicate one another, are never the same. This is evident between makers, for example, as shown in production potteries, where each maker has a distinct, albeit subtle, personal style, and is also evident between vessels made by an individual. An analogy can be made with flora, where, within one species, plants share characteristic features, but exhibit natural variation in form and structure.

Multiples of form, where the individual vessel is in relationship to others in a grouping, could then carry associations of ecology, and the key to communicating this is the role of display and installation. The making of multiple forms is also

¹⁰ Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression*. 65.

embedded in ceramic process, particularly the wheel. Likewise ceramic vessels are often made up of interdependent parts, for instance the cup and saucer, or gathered into collections where each has a role to play, for example the dinner set. Given this, the interactions and relationships between forms could thus be used to signify and reflect the relationships and co-dependency between plants in a habitat.

Gwyn Hanssen Pigott explores the relationships between wheel-thrown forms by deliberately positioning domestic vessels into groupings, thereby shifting the subject of her work from the functional to still life, in reference to Italian painter Giorgio Morandi (Fig. 106). An alternative reading of the forms is invited through display and title without compromising the materiality and tradition of ceramics. Her use of porcelain, the subtlety of glaze colour, the classicism of the wheel-thrown form, and the beauty of the wood-fired surface are integral to expressing meaning.

The display, therefore, is crucial to expressing meaning in groupings of ceramic objects. This deliberate arrangement of ceramic objects in order to carry conceptual meaning, particularly in a gallery space, can be described as installation, a term that Emmanuel Cooper says covers a wide range of artworks, but where “it directs as much attention to the staging as to the objects it includes.”¹¹ In contemporary art, the term installation may be broadly applied; for example, site-specific artwork or performance-based work. I use the term in this project to encompass the deliberate



Fig. 106. Gwyn Pigott, *Pale Still Life with Teapot* (2002)

¹¹ Cooper, *Contemporary Ceramics*. 224.

arrangement of ceramic objects within a space, sometimes a constructed space, to suggest a particular reading and meaning. Art reviewer and curator Peter Haynes writes:

The best installation art constructs an environment within the gallery space that both situates and involves the viewer in dialogue with the parts and the whole of that environment. As much as this is a physical experience it must also be an intellectual and emotional one.¹²

Edmund de Waal is similarly concerned with the way ceramic vessels can be reframed, through placement and installation, to signify other meaning. He writes of the work *breathturn, 1*: "I've been thinking about new ways to make pauses, spaces and silences, where breath is held inside and between each vessel, between the objects and the vitrines, the vitrines and the room."¹³ In this work, he positions wheel-thrown cylinders in spaces and groupings along rows of shelves to express ideas about breath and poetry (Fig. 107). The display, the groupings and spaces, the title and intention, and the relationship of the work to the installation space are all considered together to realise the work's meaning.



Fig. 107. Edmund de Waal, *breathturn, 1* (2013).

¹² Peter Haynes, "Exotic Fires Light Vision," *The Canberra Times* 8 May 2014. 8.

¹³ Gagosian Gallery, "Edmund De Waal: Atemwende," Gagosian Gallery, <http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/edmund-de-waal--september-12-2013>. (accessed 12 October 2014).

Painting the Hills of Canberra (2013)

To test out ideas around form and placement as ways to express ideas of nature and environmental culture, I needed to work on a larger scale, and so I began research which culminated in a body of work, *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (Fig.108).¹⁴ My starting point was a less well-known aspect of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin's plan for the design of Canberra. Their grand vision was to revegetate or 'paint' the hills of Canberra each in a single colour of flowering plants, predominately Australian flora.¹⁵ My idea in researching this subject was to investigate the environmental and botanical history of the Canberra area through archival material, and to connect this knowledge to the botanical research and resources I had been developing.



Fig. 108. *Painting the Hills of Canberra*, installation view (2013)

¹⁴ *Painting the Hills of Canberra*, (1 November-14 December 2013) CraftACT: Craft and Design Centre, Canberra.

¹⁵ Eric Sparke and ACT Administration (Australia). Central Office., *Canberra 1954-1980* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1988). 256.

The scope of this research introduced me to the range of archival and resource material that might be useful when researching environmental culture through the environmental history of a location. The Griffin's vision was in response to previous land use, in which extensive clearing had degraded Canberra's hills. As botanist Alan Cunningham had imagined ninety years earlier: "the boundary hills... [had indeed furnished] ... the necessary timber for the construction of huts and sheep yards of magnitude".¹⁶ The Griffin's reverence for nature and appreciation of conservation informed their plan, thus Canberra was to be "a city designed to suit the landscape"¹⁷ and where they sought to "unite nature and culture."¹⁸ Central to the plan were the land and water axes linking and uniting the five prominent hills and the highest peak in the ACT, Mount Bimberi. I studied archival material in the National Library of Australia collections, the Australian National Archives to view Marion Mahony Griffin's original renderings of the design, and Archives ACT for evidence of plantings. Fieldwork was undertaken to all locations, to research plants in the field, and was followed up with research from plant data sources.

In 1913, when Walter Griffin arrived in Canberra "he quickly grew enchanted with the country's landscape and flora"¹⁹ as did his wife, upon her arrival. At the time, information about Australian plants was limited, and so Marion Mahony Griffin compiled her own lists, colour coded into botanical notebooks as a basis for the plantings.²⁰ Their idea was to name each hill with the colour of flowering plants, thus Rosy Hill (Black Mountain) planted with pink and white flowers, Golden Hill (Mt Ainslie) with yellow flora, White Hill (Mt Mugga Mugga) with white flowers and silver foliage, Purple Hill (Mt Pleasant) with purple flowers and Red Hill with red flowers.²¹ I studied her notebooks in the National Library of Australia and compared the intended list of flora for each hill with current species lists.²² From

¹⁶ Sarah Ryan, "History of Canberra Nature Park: Report for the Act Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment," (Canberra: Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, April 2011). 4.

¹⁷ David Frickler, "A Vision Splendid: How the Griffins Imagined Australia's Capital," ed. National Archives of Australia. (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 2013). 3.

¹⁸ Christopher Vernon, "Vision of the Century: How the Griffins Pictured Australia's Capital," in *A Vision Splendid: How the Griffins Imagined Australia's Capital*, ed. National Archives of Australia. (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 2013). 5

¹⁹ Ibid. 19.

²⁰ Papers of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony collected by Eric Nicholls, 1900-1947. National Library of Australia, Canberra.

²¹ Sparke and ACT Administration (Australia). Central Office., *Canberra 1954-1980*. 256.

²² Plant Lists, Wednesday Walkers, Australian Native Plant Society Canberra Region.

http://phyla.com.au/anps_canberra/index.php/wednesday-walks/wednesday-walks-plant-lists

this research I compiled my own list of Australian plants for each hill, including plants that were planned or are growing now. Not all came to fruition, and only partial plantings were achieved on Red Hill, when *Callistemon lanceolatus* was planted in 1917, and Mt Mugga Mugga, with *Eucalyptus cinerea*, *E. pulverulenta* and *E. albens*.

As I researched the history of the planned plantings and botanised on each hill, I formed a vision of how to express their plan in the ceramic medium. Large vessels were to signify the five hills to be planted, and surrounding these were smaller vessels, each with imagery of an Australian plant species flowering in the matching colour. Rather than use forms with specific functional reference, I used non-specific vessel forms. The rims were deliberately thrown to undulate, or be uneven, suggesting hill profiles or organic natural shapes. I developed a different colour engobe for four of the hill vessels, based on the leaf colour of the native plants - for example a silvery green/blue for the eucalypts of Mt White - and for Rosy Hill I used black engobe to reference its current name, Black Mountain. Inside each vessel was a glaze developed to refer to the intended colour of the plantings, echoing the flower colour on the outside of each vessel and drawing attention to colour as visually significant in the Griffin's concept (Figs. 109-112).



Fig. 109. *Golden Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013)



Fig. 110. *Red Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013)



Fig. 111. *Golden Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013)



Fig. 112. *Red Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013).

Mount Bimberri was important in the original plan because it is the highest peak in the ACT, and thus part of the alignment of the axis on which the city was designed. Mt Bimberri is in a designated wilderness area and so I approached this hill in a different way to the others. I decided a wall panel would indicate through form that it was not part of the constructed plantings. To signify its wilderness values and its biodiversity I used all five colours of engobe and flower colours of the planned hills, based on my field research of the plants currently growing there. The panel was made of flat clay slabs, the shapes based on hill contours and plant forms. The spaces between each piece were important in the installation, so as to create a similar effect to the spaces of white carving between the positive relief of the sgraffito imagery on the surface of both the panel pieces and the vessels (Fig. 113).

Cultural and historical material was a source not just for ideas, but also for exploration in ceramic materials and imagery. For example, I was drawn to Marion Griffin's original drawings in section, beautiful artworks in themselves, and prepared before she had seen the physical site of Canberra. She drew, in black ink, a horizon line for each axis, creating a silhouette of the planned and natural features of



Fig. 113. *Mt Bimberi*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013)

the landscape. In reference to this, I carved a line around each hill vessel as a silhouette of the planned or existing skyline of each hill surrounds. To capture her effect of a slightly wavering line, I carved the clay when dry, thus breaking the edges of the mark. Then, by filling the lines with ceramic ink and sanding them after firing, I could gain the quality of line I sought (Fig. 114). Likewise, I experimented with gold lustre on the hill vessels to reference the panel strips of gold on Marion Mahony Griffin's drawings.

The staging of the ceramic work was vital to the meaning of *Painting the Hills of Canberra*. The groups of vessels signifying each hill and its plantings were positioned in a way to represent the hills in the original design plan. They were displayed on glass or white plinths and shelves in separate groupings, carefully spaced and aligned according to the two axes. The land and water axes were subtly denoted with thin gold tape on the floor connecting the groupings with the Mt Bimberi wall panel, on the furthest point of the axis. I designed the room list to reflect Marion Mahony Griffin's botanical notebooks, as an imagining of what could have been, listing each of the 65 plant species by botanical name in the same format



Fig. 114. *White Hill*, detail from *Painting the Hills of Canberra* (2013).

and typewriter font she used in her notebooks. Each grouping represented Australian flora in a distinct location and environment, and connected materially, technically and conceptually with each other to express an overall relationship of historical and contemporary botanical significance.

This work was a significant breakthrough in my research because I had found, through placement and installation, the final aspect through which to express ideas about environmental culture. The research further clarified my understanding that the subject of my work, the representation of Australian flora and environmental culture, required an in-depth knowledge of both a specific location and the human interaction with the plants and the environment. Each place has a unique botanical and environmental history and culture, in other words, its own Australian botanical narrative. I was ready to examine these ideas in completely different locations, and so I took the opportunities presented to me to do fieldwork in two distinct environments, North Head Sanctuary, Sydney and the southeast Kimberley in Western Australia.

The Sanctuary (2014)

North Head Sanctuary in Manly was particularly interesting, because it contains an endangered ecosystem, a situation I had not investigated previously. The remarkable 'Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub' ecosystem is distinctive, because it has evolved on nutrient-poor sand deposits on the Sydney sandstone cliff tops. Only 1% of the original ecosystem currently exists, in the form of a number of remnants, North Head being the largest.²³ It comprises iconic Sydney flora such as Coastal Banksias, Flannel Flowers, Mountain Devils and Spider Grevilleas and includes a hanging swamp and heath fields. The headland is protected from encroaching suburbia owing to its environmental status, and the natural vegetation has been safeguarded since British settlement by a history of military and quarantine stations. I drew upon the methodology I had established by investigating the conservation values and characteristic flora, threats, and environmental history. This was followed by a field trip to draw, photograph, identify and list species, noting ones in flower, growth form and heights of plants, and recording historical and cultural landmarks.

My research methodology enabled me to be more aware while I was in the field, of the ideas and possible avenues for my creative response, and to take note of the ways landform, flower shape and colour amongst other characteristics, might be interpreted through the ceramic medium as an installation or grouping. Central to my consideration was also an awareness of where and how I would display the work and the limitations or possibilities affecting its framing. I wrote ideas down as they came to mind; for example, early thoughts were to make cylinders to represent each plant, denting them while soft in order to fit together, or making reference to the cultural history of military and quarantine bases through inlaid lines depicting maps or building plans. The containment and restriction of the geographical environment, the cliffs and boundary line from suburbia, led me to consider a form that would contain the flora or ecosystem, either as a tray or a shelf.

²³ NSW Scientific Committee, "Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub in the Sydney Basin Bioregion - Endangered Ecological Community Listing," NSW Environment and Heritage, <http://www/environment.nsw.gov.au> (6 January 2014).

In the studio I experimented with clays, form and materials to express my ideas from the field. I hand built a form based on the headland shape and cliffs, using rough coloured clay and reduction firing, to evoke the colour and texture of the famous Sydney sandstone. Ten significant plants from the ecosystem were chosen and a vessel made for each to represent the plant species. The forms were loosely cylindrical, to allow a clustering to fit into the restricted space, and varying in height and shape, to allude to the different structures and variation of each plant. This work continued to establish my ideas around the vessel form acting as a metaphor for a plant. In Philip Rawson's word: "The essence of the metaphor is that the suggestions conveyed by the pot's inflections and forms are communicated as allusions, while the pot retains its existential identity, visibly and tactually, as what in fact it is."²⁴ The final work expressed ideas of individual plants within an ecosystem, not just through representation on the surface, but through shape, material, colour and texture, and, with an imaginative leap from the literal, as I experimented with the positioning of a tray form to contain the plants, by turning it over to become a shelf (Figs. 115-116).



Fig. 115. *The Sanctuary* (2014)

²⁴ Philip S. Rawson, *Ceramics, The Appreciation of the Arts* ; 6. (1971). 189.



Fig. 116. *The Sanctuary*, detail (2014).

***The Arid Zone* (2014)**

In July 2014 I joined a group of artists from the ANU to accompany writer and artist Kim Mahood to the Paruku Indigenous Protected area in the southeast Kimberley, Western Australia. I saw this as an opportunity to examine, for the first time, the arid zone flora and environment, and, through involvement with the local community of Mulan, gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal, in this case

Walmajarri, culture. It would fill a gap in my research to put both the east coast environment in perspective within Australia as a whole, and to gain some insight into the connection that Aboriginal people have to the flora and environment of their country. With my research focus being on a scientific approach to botanical and environmental knowledge, I was particularly interested in a recent project undertaken by the community and scientists to share and publish biocultural knowledge of the area.²⁵

I immersed myself in the flora and the environment, seeking to gain some understanding through a western botanical approach and observing a Walmajarri approach. I became familiar with the flora through field guides and ecological reports, the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens in Alice Springs, and through fieldtrips with Aboriginal elders, Shirley Yoomarie and Evelyn Clancy from Mulan.²⁶ I made drawings and plant collections, and undertook clay experiments, materials exploration, photography, and I walked. I was fascinated by the extraordinary flora, the variation in ecosystems, and the importance of the flora and country as an embedded part of Aboriginal history, their past and present culture, and for food and other uses. I glimpsed the vast difference between Aboriginal connection to land and that of white settlers and how historically, as Libby Robin states:

Traditional Aboriginal understandings of 'country', and their idea that nature and culture are inseparable, fitted so poorly into institutions of settler society that the Aboriginal people were treated as 'outside' society.²⁷

The contrast I observed between my western approach to the environment and the Walmajarri one was profound, reinforcing the way different cultural systems of understanding put different values on the environment. It became clearer that my understanding and expression of environmental culture in my research was subjective, and, as I was keenly aware, based on my own cultural background.

²⁵ Bessie Doonday, Charmia Samuels, Evelyn Clancy et al., *Walmajarri Plants and Animals: Biocultural Knowledge from the Paruku Indigenous Protected Area, Southern Kimberley, Australia* (Broome: Paruku IPA, WWF-Australia, Dept. of Land Resource Management, 2013).

²⁶ Department of Environment and Conservation, "Resource Condition Report for a Significant Western Australian Wetland: Lake Gregory (Paruku) System," (Perth: Department of Environment and Conservation, 2009).

²⁷ Libby Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007). 7.



Fig. 117. *Tanami Desert with Silver-leaf Grevillea* (2014)

The expression of Aboriginal connection to land through artwork is well documented. Although the Mulan Community did not have a history of ceramic making, I had seen artists from the Aboriginal community of Ernabella use sgraffito on vessel forms during their visits to the ANU. I remember the moment of comprehension, when I saw the pared back geometric symbols and patterns, as representations of a deep and intimate connection to place. It was an Australian place, of a particular land and ecosystem and spoke of personal and community relationships across time, in other words an expression of an Australian botanical narrative and environmental culture. In many ways it expressed what I was trying to do and at the same time I recognised that I could not use this symbolism. I had to find my own visual language from my European ancestry and culture.

In the resulting studio research, *Tanami Desert with Silver-leaf Grevillea* and *Paruku Lakes with Bush Potato* (Figs. 117-118), I explored the relationship of ceramic vessel forms to each other, through the contemporary reframing of objects, the ceramic still life. The ceramic still life commonly contains objects of everyday use, for example bottles, bowls and cups, as in the work of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott. Edmund de Waal writes it is because of this familiarity that the still life has its impact, “where unassuming pots are defamiliarized and become special objects of contemplation.”²⁸ In still life, a number of aspects are taken into account: the overall grouping; the commonalities and subtle differences between vessels, through form and surface treatment; the spaces between the vessels and their relationship to each

²⁸ Edmund De Waal, *Twentieth Century Ceramics*, World of Art. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003). 193.



Fig. 118. *Paraku Lakes with Bush Potato* (2014).

other. I saw a parallel between these ideas and the way I was observing plants in the arid zone; for example, the spaces between plants are significant, owing to scarcity of water and nutrients, and striking because of the red sand. This had the effect of framing each plant, so the commonalities and subtle differences between form, colour and structure became a point of reflection. This prompted me to consider the resulting ceramic work as a metaphor for the botanical and environmental features of the desert, where the plant (as pot) rather than the pot (as pot) was an object of contemplation. Author Jeffrey Jones observes in Gwyn Hanssen Pigott's work that the still life, "remind[s] us of the quiet existence of things, especially those categories of things that are taken for granted and overlooked."²⁹ In *The Arid Zone*, therefore, meaning was derived in part from this idea; to be reminded of a particular plant that may be taken for granted and overlooked.

In the two environments studied, the red colour of the sandy earth and the termite nests is fundamental to each environment, and part of the reason for each species adaptation for survival. This materiality I, therefore, made inherent to the work, testing materials to develop a slip with this colour and texture to use in the composition of my surface imagery. Vessels were made in porcelain to represent the flora and in red clay to symbolise termite nests. In the desert I noticed the vertical coatings of stems and branches with termite nests and using this idea I poured red textured slip over rims and inside forms in the series *Tanami Desert with Silver-Leafed Grevillea*.

²⁹ Jeffrey Jones, "Keeping Quiet and Finding a Voice: Ceramics and the Art of Silence," *Interpreting Ceramics*, no. 5 (2004). Section 2.



Fig. 119. *Paraku Lakes with Bush Potato*, detail (2014)



Fig. 120. *Tanami Desert with Silver-leaf Grevillea*, detail (2014).

The expression of a sense of place was dominant in this work, using botanical and ceramic references. The vessel form was inherent to my idea of using the still life, where each was a metaphor for flora in a distinctive ecosystem. In each form, a plant was evoked through the materiality of clay, shape, colour and imagery, but the properties of the vessel were retained (Figs. 119-120). Continuing the reference to ceramic still life through title, I used the location and a specific and notable plant, rather than referring, conventionally, to a notable form in the grouping.

Islands & Corridors (2015)

The culmination of my research findings comprises an installation of ceramic work titled *Islands & Corridors*, based on the remnant natural environment of the thirty-three reserves that comprise Canberra Nature Park. This location had become important to me as my primary site for botanical research with experts and advocates, in institutions and in the field. My research had encompassed its environmental history and I was familiar with its cultural and botanical significance. I knew the names of plants, understood the specificity of its ecosystems, had memories of sighting rare species, and appreciated the dedication and wins and losses felt by those who took responsibility for stewardship. Canberra Nature Park is representative of wider environmental issues, both scientifically and culturally,

and has a range of environmental values. The ongoing research, advocacy and maintenance required to preserve these reserves into the future are indicative of the relationship of humans to nature in the 21st century. Therefore, Canberra Nature Park, with its legislative protection, recognised value for conservation of threatened species and ecosystems, its appreciation for recreation, and the threats it is challenged by, is representative of current environmental culture.

A recent development in biodiversity conservation is the recognition that identifying and maintaining the ecological integrity of urban and other (pastoral and agricultural) landscapes is important for maintaining as much biodiversity as possible.³⁰ As more is understood about the increasing pressure placed on species for their survival, from population growth, weeds, clearing and climate change, to name a few, the wilderness reserve, as Libby Robin writes, “is now considered only part of the answer.”³¹ Preserving remnant bush, in small urban reserves such as Canberra Nature Park, in effect provides islands and corridors for species.³² These ideas propelled the resulting installation of ceramic works, *Islands & Corridors*.

My understanding of an Australian botanical narrative and environmental culture, as specific to a particular site, time, species and environment, prompted new investigations. Therefore, further botanical research was undertaken in the field, in research facilities, and using databases and archival material. Ceramic materials, processes and forms were developed for this work, either as new research or based on previous research. My knowledge of historical and current botanical methodology informed ceramic processes in the studio research. Out of this research, I developed an installation consisting of six bodies of work to reflect, individually and as groups, botanical, environmental and culturally significant aspects of Canberra Nature Park. Images are not included in this section due to the work being in progress and the limitations of photographing the work before it is installed.

³⁰ Conservation Partners Program, “Protecting Remnant Bush,” Conservation Management Note 11-2003. (Hurstville, NSW: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003).

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/nature/Factsheet11ProtectingRemnants.pdf> (accessed 2 October 2014).

³¹ Robin. 175.

³² Environment ACT, “Canberra Nature Park Management Plan,” (Canberra: Department of Urban Services, 1999). 17.

Herbarium dishes: There are seven endangered species in the ACT and in this work I made ceramic and glass vessels representative of petri dishes, in order to underscore the role of botanical science in my research and as a form of knowledge within environmental culture. Each species was studied in the Australian National Herbarium under a microscope, magnifying the plant ten fold. In this way, I could pay close attention to the detail and subtle beauty of plants that may exist only on a specimen sheet in the future. Further, I looked through the collecting notes on each herbarium sheet, and noticed the location of each specimen, and, in many cases there have been no recent sightings or the values of the land have subsequently changed, for example for road infrastructure. The ceramic processes I explored to represent each plant were informed by the method of studying the plant on its sheet, and my experience in the field of collecting and arranging herbarium specimens. I tested new materials and techniques to represent Australian flora texturally through pressed and layered coloured porcelain clay.

Drooping She-oak habitat: The Drooping She-oak, *Allocasuarina verticillata*, is endemic to the ACT and a prime food source for the endangered Glossy Black Cockatoo. Contributing to the pockets of Drooping She-oak in Canberra's nature parks has been the project K2C, the planting of *A. verticillata* to provide food corridors from Kosciuszko through Canberra to the coast.³³ Again this project and others recognise the value of connectivity between bush areas in various types of landholdings to retain biodiversity. The tall vase-shaped vessels were an exploration of the morphology of the Drooping She-oak, drawing upon studio research undertaken into the way form might echo surface imagery. I developed a way to work with porcelain for larger forms, by throwing a wall in sections, joining on the wheel, re-throwing and then adding another. In using porcelain, the drawn mark through the black engobe revealed the pure white of the body, creating shapes and spaces on each form and across forms. The red glaze on the inside adheres to the convention of sealing the inside of a vessel, and references the colour of the flower and heartwood of the She-oak, and the hidden flash of red in the black tail feathers of the Glossy Black Cockatoo.

³³ Kosciuszko 2 Coast, "K2c Glossy Black-Cockatoo Project," <http://k2c.org.au/node/1082> (accessed 28 October 2014).

Black mountain orchids: Here I made a vessel form for each of the more than sixty species of orchid inhabiting Black Mountain, referring to the remarkable biodiversity present in an island of bushland surrounded by roads in the centre of the city, and to acknowledge the successful regeneration that has taken place. Australian orchid expert David L. Jones states: “Orchids provide an excellent gauge of the health of a plant community,”³⁴ as they are vulnerable to all sorts of human induced threats including climate change. The ACT is orchid rich and Black Mountain especially so, including many threatened species. I participated in walks with local orchid experts, and despite many exciting encounters, I was aware I would be unable to view let alone draw each species from a live plant specimen, and therefore resorted to photos from the ACT Orchid Study Group and plant databases.³⁵

In my historical research of an Australian botanical narrative, drawings such as Ferdinand Bauer’s orchids had impressed me with their delicacy and varying weight of line (Figs. 121-122). In the resulting ceramic work I extended an approach that I had already experimented with during the project to create a drawn line. This referenced the importance of this botanical identification tool, as noted by botanical artist Rosemary Wise: that “for showing details of plant structure, whether in a field guide or botanical monograph, line drawings are essential.”³⁶ Likewise a version of this technique was one I had examined through the work of Hannah Barlow, where marks, as academic Moira Vincentelli describes, are “incised in the unfired clay with colour rubbed in to pick out the lines.”³⁷ On each cylindrical vessel a different orchid was drawn into the surface using newly sourced tools ranging from fine scalpel blades to sharp metal points. The delicacy of the orchids required a new investigation of mark making, such as razor thin incisions and stippling. The marks were then filled with black ceramic pigment and refined by sanding after firing.

³⁴ David L. Jones, (Jean Egan and Tony Wood), *Field Guide to the Orchids of the Australian Capital Territory* (Canberra: National Parks Association of the ACT, 2008). 22.

³⁵ Orchidgroupact@anu.edu.au

³⁶ Rosemary Wise, "Drawing Plants: Ten Pointers to Botanical Illustration," *Plant talk* 17(April 1999). 29.

³⁷ Moira Vincentelli, *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). 90.

To make each vessel metaphorically become the orchid it represents, I developed a range of coloured glazes, based on each flower colour to use on the inside of the vessel. The fine edge of the rim would be translucent, showing the glow of the glaze colour and the surface of the vessel polished and white like fine paper or vellum, with a textured print-like quality to the carved and inlaid line.

Natural Temperate Lowland Grasslands: Canberra Nature Park also contains significant remnants of one of the most endangered ecosystems in Australia, the Natural Temperate Lowland Grasslands.³⁸ Perennial tussock grasses, such as Kangaroo and Wallaby grass, dominate, with a rich variety of small flowering forbs. Through my research I was aware of the etchings of grasses in the original publication of *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen* (Figs 123-124).³⁹ This was the resulting documentation of French botanist Jacques-Julien Houtou de Labillardiere's botanical exploration on the Bruni d'Entrecasteaux's expedition in 1791, and the first serious attempt at a description of Australia's flora as it was then known.⁴⁰ I was particularly taken with the way the etchings of grasses revealed how they were placed on the herbarium sheet. The convention is that the grass is folded as many times as needed to fit the allocated space. This source, and my experience of collecting and placing herbarium specimens, informed my ideas for representation.

For this work I made vessel forms in which to depict local grasses, surrounded by smaller forms in porcelain with sgraffito imagery of the colourful flowering forbs that are so much a feature of the grassland ecosystems. I used a range of mixed dark coloured clays, to refer to the shades of soil type found in the grasslands and as a textured surface for carving and inlaying porcelain to represent the grasses. This created lines and marks in white, to suggest the aura of a bleached stem. White was echoed inside the wildflower vessels, with varying shades of green engobe as a background for the representational imagery on the outside surface.

³⁸ ACT Government, "A Vision Splendid of the Grassy Plains Extended: Act Lowland Native Grasslands Conservation Strategy," (Canberra: Arts, Heritage and Environment, 2005). 3.

³⁹ Jacques-Julien Houtou de La Billardiere, *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen* (Paris: Typographia Dominae Huzard, 1804-1806).

⁴⁰ Australian Dictionary of Biography, "La Billardiere, Jacques-Julien Houtou De (1755 - 1834)," National Center of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/la-billardiere-jacques-julien-houtou-de-2316/text3007> (accessed 3 February 2015).

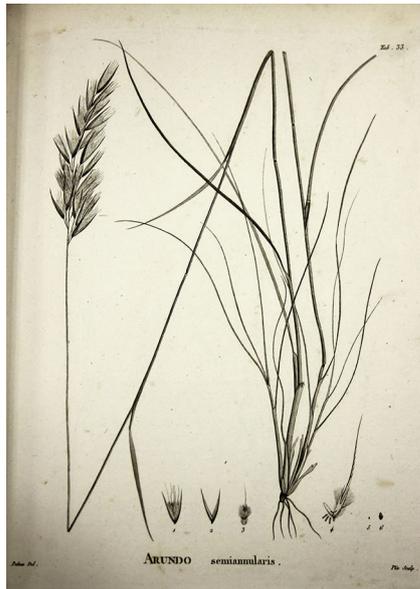


Fig. 123. *Arundo semiannularis*

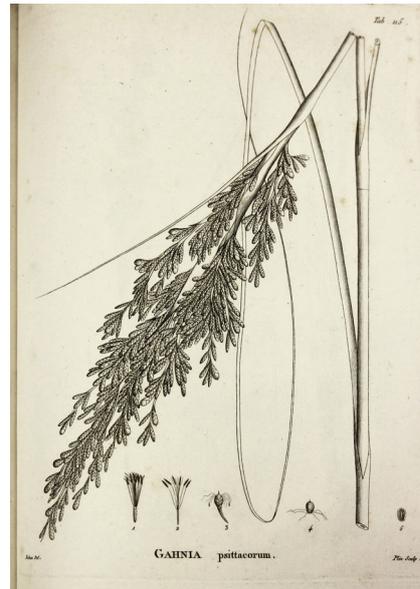


Fig. 124. *Gahnia psittacorum*

Jacques-Julien Houtou de Labillardiere, *Novae Hollandiae Plantarum Specimen* (1804)

Distinct Species in the Canberra Nature Park: This is work where I investigated surface imagery and botanical detail on a larger scale, as individual species with particular structural features conducive to textural representation or with cultural or botanical significance to the Canberra area. This work references a relief printmaking approach to sgraffito developed in part from an investigation of ceramics by Gladys Reynell and prints by Margaret Preston and refined through studio research.

Seed Jars: The final grouping again references the scientific approach I used for my research and alludes to the act of preserving. My involvement with the National Seed Bank to collect seeds was a major part of my fieldwork research. Seed banks are considered a way of ensuring the future of biodiversity and “hold the potential for our future.”⁴¹ Seed banks are initiatives that recognise the value plants hold in human survival, for food, medicine and for possibilities as yet unknown. The largest, Kew’s Millennium Seed Bank, aims by 2020 “to secure the safe storage of seed from 25% of the world’s bankable plants” as an urgent priority, when “today – between

⁴¹ Kew Royal Botanic Gardens, "About the Millennium Seed Bank," <http://www.kew.org/science-conservation/collections/millennium-seed-bank/about-millennium-seed-bank> (accessed 3 February 2015).

60,000 to 100,000 species of plant are faced with the threat of extinction – roughly a quarter of all plant species.”⁴² The focus of this grouping of work was the endangered Yellow Box-Red Gum ecosystem, a major part of Canberra Nature Park’s environment.

Conclusion

In this final part of my research project, my investigation focused on the role of display and placement in expressing environmental culture. I found commonalities conceptually between ceramic processes and conventions, and botanical knowledge. Vessels, being rooted in natural form, and the hand-made process of wheel-throwing, in which no two are the same, have similar qualities to plants, where each is an individual expression of common characteristics. In this way metaphor and analogy became part of the establishment of meaning. This extended into groupings or installation of form, referencing ecologies comprising interdependent elements. In the installation *Islands & Corridors*, these ideas are explored further and on a larger scale, based on my perspective of an Australian botanical narrative, in an environment that I had come to know well.

⁴² Ibid.

Conclusion

Must this narrative be emplotted as tragedy, or is there an alternative ending?¹

This practice-led research was initiated by my curiosity about the way the occurrence of Australian flora in ceramic history might reflect settler society's growing understanding and valuing of Australia's exceptional environment. Together with current concern for the survival of species, the primary focus of the research was to investigate how environmental culture might be expressed through representations of Australian flora and the vessel form in contemporary ceramic art.

To conceptualise and connect natural and cultural histories, I constructed a project-specific 'Australian botanical narrative', a framework utilising theoretical and practical approaches to understanding flora and the environment. This framework proved useful to encompass the broad scope of acquired scientific and cultural knowledge of Australian plants across the time span from British settlement to today, relevant to ceramic objects. Establishing this interdisciplinary approach proved crucial to my research project. It provided context and subject knowledge as background to my investigation of historical ceramic objects, informed ways of researching contemporary botanical and environmental science and provided a rich resource of scientific and cultural documentation for material, technical and conceptual ideas in the studio.

The project began with an investigation of connections between historical ceramics decorated with Australian flora and an Australian botanical narrative. I found richly intertwined relationships between artists using Australian flora in ceramic imagery and experts or advocates of botanical knowledge, including amateur botanisers, collectors, botanists, curators, illustrators and conservationists. Environmental attitudes, and botanical knowledge in particular, contributed to the use of Australian flora throughout this ceramic history.

¹ Peter Burke, "Afterword," in *Nature's End: History and the Environment*, ed. Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde (Houndmills, Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). 356.

In the early colonial period, the degree of interest in Australian flora was gauged by their absence, though the fledgling industry possibly valued functional attributes more than decorative. The perceived aberrance of Australia's new (flora) and fauna was expressed in the *Kangaroo Mug* in 1793, but from the 1880s a new pride in Australia's plants, for example the Waratah, was evident in its popularity for decoration. It was a culmination of many influences that led to the extraordinary flourishing of Australian flora from the 1880s into the 1930s. These included decorative styles receptive to plant forms, and techniques such as china painting eminently suited to botanical representation. National pride and patriotism increased their popularity with first the Centenary, then Federation and the First World War. In part, the popularity of Australian flora in ceramic decoration included the esteem botany held and a growing understanding and valuing of the Australian environment more broadly, as indicated by the establishment of national parks and reserves, and legislation protecting forests and flora. After this period, studio artists reflected environmental culture in a variety of ways, motivated by a personal engagement with Australian flora and the environment. As I found, these historical objects exhibited environmental culture through an expression of botanical knowledge, including title, the subject of and variety of plant species, context, and biographical details and botanical interest of the artist.

Botanical knowledge and the rich resource of natural history documentation was relevant to many of these artists' work and, as I found, to my own. Botanical illustration is closely linked to representations of Australian flora in botanical ceramics, both historically and currently, and formed a key aspect in my own approach to representation. I explored composition by working directly from plant specimens using botanical illustration practice, and mark-making techniques through an investigation of work by artists in a range of media. A key finding was the establishment of meaning through metaphor when form and imagery were conceived of together. Ceramic materials, tools and techniques were tested and formulated to develop a colour and textural palette to reflect characteristics of Australian plants.

Historical research also provided clues to an investigation of a current Australian botanical narrative. I learnt the importance of location to botanical research as I engaged in fieldwork both with locally based botanical groups and research

institutions, and in a number of diverse ecosystems. From this, and through investigating the working methods of other artists, a visual arts methodology was formed, as a way of researching in the field and in archives, specific to the conceptual, theoretical and practical approach I was developing in the studio. In this way, an Australian botanical narrative became a way to build connections from the past to the present through studio research. This research clarified my understanding that the expression of environmental culture is specific to a place, time and cultural perspective, including a scientific one, in an ever-changing natural system.

By engaging deeply with botanical and environmental knowledge, I saw its potential for informing the making process, where studio research might embody botanical research. My exploration of wheel-thrown form began with the individual vessel, and, as my project developed, the meaning of form became important for expressing ideas about an environment. A reference to function directly expresses the relationship of plants to ceramic culture, such as the vase, or to science, as in a petri dish. If, conceptually, the non-functional vessel symbolises an individual plant, then, when placed together, vessel groupings indicate ecosystems, becoming a metaphorical space for the environment. The process of making forms on the wheel aligned with these ideas, in that each vessel, though exhibiting similar characteristics, is individual, in the same way plants are within a species. In this way, ceramic form and botanical references were interconnected.

The expansive term 'environmental culture' was useful for corralling ideas around values attributed to the environment, allowing room to explore its many facets and complexities. My approach focused on the way scientific knowledge contributes to understanding the environment; for example, through studying biodiversity, relationships between species, and mitigating threats through conservation research. The resourcing of science depends on the values and attitudes that society has with respect to maintaining or protecting its natural resources, or environmental culture. For example, legislation around threatened grassland species equates to funding for research into seed collection and propagation. In acknowledging current environmental culture in the representation of Australian flora on the ceramic vessel, my research extends the responsibility of stewardship into other spheres, including ceramic art.

Ceramic objects might express environmental culture in a number of ways, including those used historically, such as title, subject matter and context. Theoretical understandings of the vessel in contemporary ceramic art, extend the establishment of meaning through the use of multiples, placement and staging of artwork. By exploring the vessel in this way, and by working with the commonalities between ceramic and botanical references, my research establishes, that ideas of environmental culture can be expressed through title, subject matter and context, and through metaphor, materiality, form, colour, texture, placement and installation.

Through this research, I have drawn upon the historical use of Australian flora in ceramic objects to develop a current approach to their use, finding parallels between botanical and environmental knowledge and ceramic culture. This research contributes to the contemporary art practice discourse on the nature of society's relationship to flora and the environment in Australia.

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