

# Ceramics

## Art + Perception

2019

# #114

USD	\$20
EUR	€18
CAD	\$27
AUD	\$27
GBP	£15



# The Art of Threatened Species

Written by **Cathy Franzi**

**F**loral motifs and plant designs have adorned the ceramic surface for millennia, providing an endless source of shapes and patterns, unthreatening and calming; connecting us to the life force of a tamed nature. The earliest motifs were likely scratched into soft clay and developed throughout culture and time in endless styles, using various techniques. The depiction of whole plants with botanical accuracy emerged from the Chelsea factory in London around 1755, inspired by scientific developments in botanical illustration alongside technological advances in English porcelain and china painting.<sup>1</sup> The famous *2000-piece Flora Danica* made by the Royal Copenhagen factory is an example of this approach, painted from the botanical work *Flora of the Kingdom of Denmark*.

Like those before me, I too am attracted to plants as the subject matter of my ceramic practice. Aware of my surroundings, I depict the local flora near Canberra where I live and work – as well as further afield throughout Australia. My approach comes from a scientific perspective, which reflects my background and interests. This means I am inclined to make

botanically accurate life-size representations of whole plants, not just the flowers, and to do this I need to study the plant itself.

However, there is one problem. When seeing a plant in the wild I am confronted by the fragility of its existence. How can I draw on the beauty and wonder of the plants around me and omit the elephant in the room – that is, the culmination of human impact on nature that now, in the twenty-first century, is causing their decline and the destruction of the ecosystems they inhabit? Unfortunately, this is particularly the case in Australia where we lead the world in extinctions, losing our vast biodiversity before we even know what is really there.

This knowledge shadows the simple joy of using plants as a source of decoration and led to my practice-led research culminating in a PhD from the Australian National University, School of Art and Design.

The basis of my practice is to investigate how I can represent Australian flora on a ceramic surface, as well as express current botanical and environmental knowledge. To do this with integrity I have immersed myself in current science using a cross disciplinary approach to my subject.

*Opposite and following page:*

**In Our Hands (Sandhill Spider Orchid, Oaklands Diuris, Crimson Spider Orchid)** detail, 2019, porcelain, stoneware, 40h x 600w x 30d cm.  
Image credit: Andrew Sikorski.

When seeing a plant in the wild I am confronted by the fragility of its existence.













... this is particularly the case in Australia where we lead the world in extinctions, losing our vast biodiversity before we even know what is really there.

By spending time researching in the field, actively gaining knowledge through participation in plant study groups and interacting with science professionals, I have developed a number of networks through various cross-disciplinary projects and collaborations. This includes botanists at the Australian National University (ANU), the Australian National Botanic Gardens and the National Seedbank where I am a volunteer seed collector. For a year I was also a visiting fellow at the Research School of Biology, ANU engaged with the Nicotra Lab's research on the functional significance of leaf shape. It is my interactions with scientists that keeps me up-to-date with relevant issues, and informs and pushes my knowledge in a field beyond the visual arts.

A cross disciplinary approach feeds my ideas and imagination in the studio, accompanied by experimenting with how to translate botanical knowledge into ceramic visual form. The point of inspiration comes from the interaction between the subject of my work, its method of research, and a knowledge of ceramics through my studio practice. It is crucial for me to seek opportunities to engage with a particular plant environment, ecosystem, scientific research or location when making work for a new exhibition. Because of this, I immerse myself in an

environment, and explore through looking, walking; identifying plants and experiencing place. This is followed up with research on-line to further understand the associated cultural and environmental history. I may also engage with science professionals, or continue research in botanical facilities such as an herbarium.

What I am searching for through this approach to research is a way *into* the subject. This is how my *science brain* would describe it. Put another way, and using my *artist brain* – I am searching for creative inspiration. I never quite know when or how an idea will form that gives me a lead into expressing the connection I feel through visual form. But I do know the ideas come from the visual and emotional experience of being in a place as an artist who has a scientific perspective and nudged by geological features, landscape, a scientific method of observation or specific ecosystem, or perhaps a cultural or historical event.

Two examples of recent projects demonstrate my process to develop a new body of work. The first came out of a residency in Western Australia culminating in the exhibition *Inflorescence* and the second an initiative of the NSW Office of Environment & Heritage, the *Art of Threatened Species* project.

**Banksia coccinea**, 2018,  
porcelain, wheel-thrown  
and altered, sgraffito,  
66.4 x 23.5 x 20.6 cm.  
Image credit:  
Andrew Sikorski.

## This ranged from positive impacts such as land management by the Wiradjuri people as custodians of the land for over 40,000 years...

In 2018 I undertook a residency at Fremantle Arts Centre in Western Australia. Located in an impressive convict-built institution with neo-gothic architecture, the centre has a dedicated ceramics studio, exhibition and retail space and is a community hub of activities. Fremantle itself is fascinating, situated on the coast, south of the city of Perth it has a long sea-faring history.

I was immediately delighted by the local plants which seemed to be bigger, more exaggerated and unusual compared to the east coast. Giant zigzag leaves of *Banksia grandis*, black and green toothbrush flowers of grevilleas, enormous orange flowers of *Banksia menziesii* trees, and bright yellow pom-pom flowering capsules of *Corymbia*.

Prior to my arrival I had made contact with the Threatened Species Seed Centre in Perth offering my services to participate in seed collecting trips. This led to a journey 400 km south, to Albany, and the surrounding natural reserves. Most memorable was Stirling Range National Park, an outcrop of high hills emerging out of flat plains and within sight of the Southern Ocean. Remarkably it contains an outstanding diversity of native plants, 1500 species in all and many found nowhere else in the world. Sarah (the Threatened Species Officer) two students and I clambered up to an eastern summit through waist high prickly shrubs.

I was astonished at every step as extraordinary plants of all shapes continued in every direction, and more permutations of banksias appeared than I could ever have imagined. A particular focus of our collecting trip was to source seeds for research of the rare and highly endangered *Banksia anatona*. We followed this up with a visit to a site where other rare species are being grown to translocate into the wild so as to establish new populations.

I traced leaf shapes and took photos and experimented back in the Fremantle Arts Centre studio, visiting Kings Park in Perth to further study the living collection of regional plants. A day cleaning seeds in the Threatened Species Seed Centre reminded me of the arduous research and human intervention required to assist plants to survive the impact of humans.

Back in my own studio in Canberra, I began work on capturing my experiences and feelings of being in such a precious environment. The prickly, tough and angular leaves and form of the banksias had particularly stuck in my mind and suit my method of sgraffito or carving into the clay surface to represent a plant. The culmination was twelve works based on Western Australian Banksias for the exhibition *Inflorescence* at Sabbia Gallery in Sydney.

**Banksia anatona**, 2018, porcelain, wheel-thrown and altered, sgraffito, 53.2 x 22 x 20.5 cm. Image credit: Andrew Sikorski.









The *Art of Threatened Species*, a touring exhibition, came about through applying for, and being selected as, one of ten artists to participate in a project initiated through the NSW Office of Environment & Heritage and Orana Arts. The aim was to create works based on research with scientists on a specific species, their environments and the impacts they face. I was allocated the Sandhill Spider Orchid, Oaklands Diuris and Crimson Spider Orchid, all three found in the south west of New South Wales. For the two-year project I was aligned with the Senior Threatened Species Officer charged with monitoring these species, giving me time to see the orchids in the wild through two growing seasons. I learnt about their habitat, the impact of two years of drought, efforts to germinate the seeds with their symbiotic mycorrhizal fungi, their translocation into the wild to ensure genetic diversity and, of course, their many threats.

I pondered over how I might express the complexity of all this information, and how I might communicate it to an audience through my work. I wanted to draw them into the beauty of each orchid and began by making wheel-thrown narrow porcelain cylinders en masse. To *draw* the delicate detail of the plant I incised the surface with a sharp blade and filled it with ceramic ink. I also tested glazes to find a colour that would capture each species to use on the inside of the vessels.

For the first time I felt that text would be an important addition to my artwork – an installation of approximately 80 vessels. It would be used to describe human impact, both negative and positive, on the orchids. To carry the text I chose to make cylinders with a speckled clay to reference man-made materials such as concrete. I gathered quotes from early colonial history, newspapers, scientific journals and government reports. It quickly became evident that the decline in orchid numbers had happened gradually since European settlement and I decided to focus

on expressing a chronology of human impact over time. This ranged from positive impacts such as land management by the Wiradjuri people as custodians of the land for over 40,000 years, to the passing of the first law to protect plants – known as the *Wild Flowers and Native Plants Protection Act* of 1927 – to more recent monitoring and scientific research to understand and assist their survival. Earliest threats were land clearing for grazing and agriculture, the European rabbit plague of the 1940s and a lack of knowledge. More recent threats include industrial scale farming, weeds, a decline in insects and prolonged and more frequent drought. But now that we do know what the impacts are, the current extinction crisis is, as Tim Flannery writes, due to

*“... a lack of awareness of the severity of Australia’s environmental problems, and the increasingly divisive, ideologically driven nature of our politics ... our governments are not being held to account for their responsibility to protect our biodiversity.”*<sup>2</sup>

One final quote I have used in this work comes from the late Dr David Featherstone, Professor of Biology and Neuroscience at the University of Illinois, Chicago and perhaps encapsulates what motivates me. He writes:

*“Both science and art are human attempts to understand and describe the world around us. The subjects and methods have different traditions, and the intended audiences are different, but I think the motivations and goals are fundamentally the same.”*<sup>3</sup> ■

#### Endnotes

1. Oliver Mathews, “English Botanical Pottery and Porcelain”, *Antique collector* (July 1977). p72
2. Flannery, Tim. ‘After the Future, Australia’s new extinction crisis.’ *Quarterly Essay*, No. 48, 2012.
3. Featherstone, David. Professor of Biology and Neuroscience, UIC. *Quora*, March 16, 2016.

#### About the Author

Dr Cathy Franzi is a full-time practising artist and President of The Australian Ceramics Association.

#### Further info

*Art of Threatened Species* is a touring exhibition starting at the Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo NSW, Nov 2019 – Feb 2020. Cathy is represented by Beaver Galleries, Canberra and Sabbia Gallery, Sydney. Her next solo exhibition is with Michael Reid Berlin, July 2020.

**Banksia grandis**, 2018, porcelain, wheel-thrown and altered, sgraffito, 44.1 x 23.2 x 21.7 cm. Image credit: Andrew Sikorski.