



CATHY FRANZI

On the Edge / Am Rande

Cathy Franzi writes about her ideas and research informing her solo exhibition in Berlin held during Berlin Design Week 2023.



Stirling Range National Park is a global biodiversity hotspot. Its towering, jagged ranges overlook the Southern Ocean on the edge of Australia, an extraordinary island of diversity surrounded by a monoculture of cleared wheat fields. The contrast between Berlin and the south-west of Western Australia (WA) couldn't be greater. I experienced each only a month apart through postponed artist-in-residencies in late 2022 and early 2023. Berlin's layered urban history, made colourful by graffiti and extraordinary cultural depth, reveals centuries of humans changing and rebuilding the environment. Albany in Western Australia speaks of ancient natural landscapes, a remarkable flora evolved through isolation and long geological stability and First Nations Peoples' stewardship of land only recently impacted by European settlement. My second solo exhibition in Berlin is inspired by the plants in one location near Albany, on the edge of Australia's vast continent.

My interest in plants as a subject for my art

Synaphea, 2023, porcelain, sgraffito,
h 21.1 cm x w 17.3 cm x ø 17.1 cm

practice stems from childhood, a passion developed throughout my life exploring the wilderness near my home in Canberra, a small capital city surrounded by bushland. Australia has a bountiful flora, from Temperate Grasslands, Grassy Woodlands and Subalpine Montane Forests nearby, to Tropical Rainforest, Desert Shrublands and Mulga Heath further afield. The endemic Eucalyptus occurs across all vegetation zones of this immense continent, from twisted Alpine Snow Gums and arid multi-stemmed Mallee, to Swamp Gums, the largest flowering tree in the world. In Australia many plants occur in ecosystems specific to only one location, even to one mountainside, and this is particularly so in Stirling Range National Park, with over 1500 different species in an area only a little larger than Berlin.

The opportunity to immerse myself in the flora of Western Australia was a plant-lover's dream. There was no better way to arrive than to drive five days from Canberra on the east coast to my artist residency at Vancouver Arts Centre in Albany in the far west. In the 3,700 km between, I experienced the changing vegetation and landscape across this beautiful, old continent. Nights camping on the Nullarbor Plain are most memorable with the Milky Way outshining even the environment. Then there was the Great Western Woodland, the largest remaining intact semi-arid woodland on Earth, at 16 million hectares. And wild, endless coastline of turquoise blue, with fish and birds and dolphins and whales.

Scientific botanical exploration by Europeans of the striking flora of south-west Western Australia began in earnest in the early 19th century and despite it being a British colony, German Dr Johann August Ludwig Preiss was the first professional botanist to collect systematically. He brought 200,000 plant specimens back to Europe and published the first major reference book on WA flora (*Plantae Preissianae 1844-1847*)¹. Exploration was key to colonial expansion. In the early years Mokare, a highly respected Indigenous man, played a pivotal role in peaceful coexistence between early European settlers and the local Noongar People before tensions became fraught as more land was taken.

Red Kangaroo Paw, 2023, porcelain, sgraffito,
h 44 cm x w 17.8 cm x ø 17 cm





Stirling Range Coneflower, 2023, porcelain, sgraffito
h 29,5 cm x w 18 cm x ø 16.8 cm

Corky Net-bush, 2023, porcelain, sgraffito, h 20.1 cm x w 17.6 cm x ø 14.8 cm



Banksia gardneri, 2023, porcelain, sgraffito
h 29 cm x w 22.8 cm x ø 19.7 cm



To have a glimpse into First Nations knowledge I spent a fascinating day on a cultural tour, gaining insight and respect into a very different way of understanding plants and country.

Science is the lens through which I approach the subject of my art practice. After studying a Bachelor of Science at university I promptly entered a pathway in ceramics, learning on the job in production potteries, through travel and working with potters. In time I went to Art School, completing a Master of Visual Arts and then a practice-led research degree in Ceramics at the Australian National University School of Art & Design, where I began to connect my science background with my arts practice, engaging with current botanical research to inform my ideas. For example, I volunteer time in summer with the National Seed Bank participating in seed collection trips for research and conservation. I have participated in many science-art projects, such as with the Research School of Biology at the ANU where I had a one-year residency in a laboratory that studied the form and function of leaf shape. This cross disciplinary approach allows me to express plants with integrity and to understand the threats and environmental issues surrounding them.

Artist residencies give me the opportunity to spend



Prickly Banksia, 2022, porcelain, sgraffito, h 36 cm x w 18 x ø 16.5 cm
 Photos - Andrew Sikorski-Art Atelier

time in a new environment and Vancouver Arts Centre, an initiative of the City of Albany was a perfect fit. From there it is a short drive to Stirling Range where I could observe, sketch and photograph plants and the surrounding landscape. Climbing Bluff Knoll, the highest peak in the south-west, I took in magnificent views across the range and experienced changing plant communities with elevation. Importantly, I joined fieldtrips with Threatened Species Officer Dr Sarah Barrett, to gain firsthand experience of current projects and action. While I rushed from one extraordinary plant to another with mouth agape, I attempted to be useful as we gathered specimens, monitored threatened species and collected seeds and soil samples. Besides climate change threats such as increased fire and heat, the main risk to many of the plants in Stirling Range is Dieback, caused by *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, an invasive soil-borne pathogen that turns the green living plant into a dead silver-grey ghost. I learnt about translocation projects as a backup plan to keep species in more than a few sites and about attempts to find resistance to Dieback and resilience to increasing temperatures.

It is an astonishing flora. Red Kangaroo Paw and Crimson Banksias, tall Kingias and Pink Isopogons intermingle in a magnificent wildflower garden. Geometric leaves, of zigzags, fans, helix and diamond shapes abound. Bold and complex flowers in pinks and yellows, reds and orange create a glorious palette. All crammed together in exceptional diversity. It was exhilarating, even with my knowledge of plants, I couldn't believe my eyes.

In the studio I take all the experience in the field to develop a new body of ceramic work. Vessels are wheel-thrown using porcelain and then altered, giving movement to their form. I use a graphic approach to representation,

Dr Cathy Franzi is an Australian ceramic artist and lecturer at the Australian National University in Canberra. In 2015 she was awarded a Doctorate in Visual Arts (Ceramics) from the Australian National University School of Art & Design. Her doctoral research investigated scientific and cultural values attributed to plant species, including a study of historical ceramics, prints and botanical illustrations in museums and galleries around the world. Through her art practice she explores how Australian plants and environmental knowledge might be expressed in ceramic form and surface.

CATHY FRANZI

www.cathyfranzi.com

T: +61 435 010109

E: cathy@cathyfranzi.com

I: [cathy_franzi](https://www.instagram.com/cathy_franzi)

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

"On the Edge / Am Rande" was on

at Michael Reid Berlin

from 8 -17 May 2023

Michael Reid Berlin

Ackerstrasse 163, 10115 Berlin

T: +49 30 94404719

tomaustin@michaelreid.com.au

www.michaelreid.com.au

adapting aspects of printmaking methods and composition to the ceramic medium. I create my own materials, tools and processes in which my final work evokes relief, intaglio or block printmaking. A plant's form and character are captured using sgraffito, incising or hand-drawn stencils, and flower colour using different materials and glazes. The surface imagery responding to undulations and movement in the vessel shape.

In May 2023 I held my second solo exhibition in Germany at Michael Reid Berlin to coincide with Berlin Design Week with its theme #resilience. This idea is central to my experience of south-west WA, where my delight in studying plants on location is tempered by the fragility of their existence due to human impact. The remarkable flora of Stirling Range National Park has evolved over millennia to survive a harsh environment, the question is, can their resilience adapt to new global conditions?

¹ *Negotiating Botanical Collections*, Anna Haebich, 2020. *Griffith Review* 69 <https://griffithreview.com>