

A Place for Plants

by Meredith Hinchliffe

Below:

Seed collecting with the
National Seed Bank staff
Namadgi National Park
ACT, 2017

Photo: Cathy Franzi

Opposite:

Cathy Franzi, *Flora*

*Survey: Reclaimed
Boboyan Pine Plantation*
2017, wheelthrown
porcelain, handbuilt
stoneware, 1260°C
h.10.5cm, w.36cm
d.31cm

Photo: Andrew Sikorski
Art Atelier

Dr Cathy Franzi is an artist with a scientific background that informs the botanical and environmental approach she takes to create artwork about place.

"I am particularly interested in exploring, through contemporary ceramics, how Australian flora and the environment are understood scientifically and culturally in this time of environmental uncertainty.

"Plants belong in ecosystems, and I have learnt through spending time with botanical researchers, that this is highly specific to each location. In preparation for making I go into the field to observe the flora and to gain a feel for the environment and landscape, and follow this up with archival research to understand the environmental and cultural history of the area. This in-depth exploration not only informs my work conceptually, but influences techniques, materials and processes in the studio."

In 2016 Franzi undertook an artist-in-residency coordinated by Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre, and ACT Parks and Conservation Service at Gudgenby Ready-Cut Cottage, which is located in Namadgi National Park approximately 50 km from Canberra. The environmental history of this area includes Aboriginal management, clearing and changed land use by European settlers including the impact of introduced plants and animals, fire, flood and, in 1984, the establishment of a national park.





Every day Franzı walked throughout the extensive valley identifying plants and noting the nuances in the changes to vegetation across the landscape from highly altered areas, such as former pine plantations and grazing land, through to relatively intact vegetation deeper in the gullies and higher up the slopes. “To have the opportunity to stay in a remote location day and night for two weeks gave me a chance to gain an insight impossible to obtain during day trips,” she said.

Franzi selected three areas that she felt exemplified the valley’s environmental history and used the scientific idea of a flora survey, within a defined area or grid, to understand floristic diversity, as the basis for her installation. The first artwork is based on Boboyan Pine Plantation, first cleared and planted in the 1960s and subsequently logged, burnt and its environmental values reconsidered. From 1998 volunteers in the Gudgenby Bush Regeneration Group have restored a remarkable biodiversity. Her ‘plot’ depicts many of the plants making a comeback amongst remnant *Pinus radiata* stumps.

The second artwork developed from an area of grassy woodland at the base of Yankee Hat, a peak to the south west of the valley known for its Indigenous rock art. This site is less impacted by European settlement and contains many species with properties collected for food and cultural practices by the Ngunnawal people. Common and indigenous names are included on each part of the work.

Gudgenby Ready-Cut Cottage was built in the 1920s for landholders who grazed livestock on the rich grassland of the valley. This third area reveals a different story of land use, evidenced by introduced plants, many now weeds. Franzı’s design of *Teaset* – including the tray – invokes European styles of the time, and the decoration is drawn from the cottage garden in which Purple Iris and Broom flourish.

Below:

Silver Banksia, Banksia marginata, Namadgi National Park, ACT, 2017
Photo: Cathy Franzi

Opposite:

Cathy Franzi, *Hairpin Banksia*, 2017, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, 1260°C
h.35cm, w.22.5cm
d.22.3cm
Photo: Andrew Sikorski
Art Atelier

Franzi's solo exhibition, *A Visit to the River* held at Beaver Galleries in Canberra in February 2018, was the culmination of research undertaken during a residency at Bundanon, the former Boyd family property which lies on the Shoalhaven River in NSW. Each work was a response to the landscape and cultural history of the area, "of finding Rock Figs and Rock Lilies in hidden escarpments, my first sighting of rare rainforest Red Cedar, experiencing the quiet of dry ridge Casuarina forest, recognising iconic hillsides of majestic Spotted Gum and seeing ever-changing views across the river to Pulpit Rock." During her residency she had access to the Boyd Homestead with its collection of ceramics, paintings, drawings and sculpture from generations of the family. A large collection of works by Merric Boyd, who is considered to be the first studio potter in Australia, sits alongside earthenware from Arthur Merric Boyd Pottery decorated with landscape, flora and fauna.



One aim of Arthur and Yvonne Boyd in gifting the property of Bundanon to the Australian people was to secure stewardship of the remarkable environment which hosts more than eleven different vegetation communities. Franzi researched this environment using her established methods: walking, identifying plants, taking photographs and sketching, and, where possible, collecting plant specimens. Access to plant material in situ for drawing and working directly into the clay was particularly enriching to her practice. She selected a few plant species from the main vegetation communities to develop into artworks. In the case of the Red Cedar, she experimented with stencils as a way of developing imagery to capture the complex intertwining of palmate leaves.

Arthur Boyd knew the place well and wished others might draw inspiration from it too. To express her experience of landscape and





influenced by Boyd's drawings of the view across the Shoalhaven River, Franzi developed a series of tall cylindrical forms in terracotta, brushed with engobe decoration. The forms were simple, and the surface decoration was calligraphic, seemingly casual in its informality.

In 2017 Franzi received a small grant from artsACT to develop a high-end ceramic giftware range package representing significant Canberra flora. She successfully developed The Canberra Flora Series, a range of 12 carved, porcelain vessels, boxed in four sizes. It is a Canberra-specific, highly-crafted gift packaged range representing endemic, ecologically significant and iconic ACT flora. "This was not as easy as I had imagined. It was an exacting process with many iterations and each decision had to be worked out in precise detail. I worked with a professional designer to develop and design unique packaging, graphics, and an explanatory, folded insert describing Canberra's natural heritage and the significance of each plant to the Canberra region for each gift box." She undertook considerable research, both in the field and using data bases and discussing the project with other experts, carefully choosing the 12 plants. This field and desk research was supported by Franzi's studio research and experimentation as she worked to ensure continuing high standards and repeatable forms, and, of course, resolving surface decoration.

One aim of the project was to create a product that would generate regular income for Franzi's full-time art practice without compromising the standard or her exhibition work. Launched at Beaver



Galleries in November 2017, the response has been positive and she anticipates a regular monthly income will flow from sales. Martin Beaver confirmed the outstanding success of the project and found Franzi's approach very professional.

"My work is predominately formed on the wheel using porcelain, and frequently altered. Imagery is created using a textural approach to mark-making on the ceramic surface. I have developed a range of techniques including ink and underglaze inlay and a relief printmaking approach to sgraffito using a material that gives a vitrified sheen. I explore materials to evoke place, and techniques such as ink inlay developed to evoke botanical line drawing. Series and groupings of vessels suggest ecosystems through creating relationships to each other."

Through her careful and methodical research for each of her bodies of work, Franzi imbues a strong sense of place into each piece of work.

Dr Cathy Franzi is a Canberra-based ceramic artist and is represented by Sabbia Gallery, Sydney and Beaver Galleries, Canberra; www.cathyfranzi.com.

Meredith Hinchliffe is a freelance curator, writer and arts advocate living in Canberra.

Above:

Cathy Franzi, Canberra Flora Series: *Canberra Bells*, 2017, wheelthrown and altered porcelain 1260°C, h.7cm, w.9cm d.8cm

Opposite:

Cathy Franzi, *The River IV*, 2018, wheelthrown terracotta, 1180°C h.52cm, w.14.6cm d.14.3cm

Photos: Andrew Sikorski
Art Atelier



TECHNICAL NOTES

My vessels are usually made using Limoges porcelain (for its soft cream-white colour), wheelthrown and altered. Most commonly, vessels are coated with engobe and then imagery is created using sgraffito, and usually twice-fired in an electric kiln to Cone 8 or 1260°C. **Cathy Franzi**