

Early specimen paintings reworked in new context

Nicola Dickson, *Voyagers' Tales*:
Ferdinand Bauer. Beaver Galleries,
81 Denison Street, Deakin.
Until September 22.
Reviewer: **Sasha Grishin**

When the British feared that the French were becoming too active in the Pacific, they dispatched Lieutenant Matthew Flinders in HMS Investigator to chart the coastline of southern Australia. Flinders circumnavigated Australia in 1802-03, conclusively demonstrating it to be one continent with Tasmania a separate island. This was when the Europeans were obsessed with collecting and recording specimens from new lands as part of a process of knowing, ordering, naming and owning the world.

On board the Investigator was the natural history painter Ferdinand Bauer, who accompanied the naturalist Robert Brown. Austrian-born Bauer was one of the great botanical artists of all time, and returned from the voyage with more than 2000 drawings, about 1750 of plants, the rest of animals.

He had his own method of working; he made detailed pencil drawings on the spot, accompanied with very exacting coded colour notations that enabled him to capture subtle colour gradations with great accuracy when working on the finished drawings back in London. Bauer's drawings are exquisite not only for their accuracy and chromatic brilliance, but also in their Durer-like quality of tactility.

The Canberra-based artist Nicola Dickson takes the drawings of Ferdinand Bauer as her point of departure. She copies some of the Bauer images with acrylic and oil paints on linen and then recontextualises these visual quotations by placing them against grids and other patterns.

I assume that the idea is to explore 19th-century notions of the exotic by juxtaposing different forms of visualisation, the civilised one, represented by systems of classification and measurement, and the exotic one, represented by the flora and fauna. Despite Marlene Norst's study on Bauer, he is an artist who needs further investigation and I wonder to what extent he found antipodean plants and animals bizarre and weird in the way in which Dickson imagines, or was it simply raw data that needed to be recorded and preserved? This series of works is only partially successful, mainly because of the difficulty of copying Bauer, a draughtsman of



Bauer Brocade - King Parrots by Nicola Dickson in *Voyagers' Tales: Ferdinand Bauer* at Beaver Galleries.



Bauer Brocade - Hooded Parrot, Port Lincoln Parrot, Rainbow Lorikeet by Nicola Dickson.

genius and of miniaturist precision, particularly when attempting to do this in such an unsympathetic medium as acrylics and oils. Dickson's king parrots, hooded parrots, rainbow lorikeets, northern rosellas and water rats lack Bauer's sense of vibrancy, while the surfaces have nothing of his tactile preciousness.

Some of Dickson's other works that I have encountered, playing with images derived from Wedgwood, Raper and Gould,

appear more successful.

Dickson has a very attractive and detailed technique of drawing and copying images and creating patterns for backgrounds, and although this may not be her most successful series, it will undoubtedly prove popular with parts of the art community.

■ **Sasha Grishin's review of Mandy Martin's *A change in the weather* at Beaver Galleries will be published in Monday's Times 2.**