

Subversive Botanica

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Julie Bartholomew

Subversive Botanica by Dr Patsy Hely

It is a sobering experience to look through the extensive 'List of Threatened Flora' on the Australian Department of Environment's Species Profile and Threats database.[1] The listed plants were only placed within a European taxonomic system after British settlement so some must barely have been given Western names before being declared endangered; so much loss in so little time Julie Bartholomew has drawn from threatened species lists such as this for Subversive Botanica, recording her anguish and making a plea for greater awareness at the same time.

The exhibition gathers together two groups of works, the first a series of container forms, A Natural Experiment, and Rarely Seen, a floor-based installation and containers. The second group includes two series based on weapons, the gun, Subversive Botanica, and the sword. At the heart of the work overall is the idea of paradox, that one thing can hold oppositional meanings or work towards oppositional ends. In A Natural Experiment and Rarely Seen the paradoxes of science are questioned; science saves endangered species but in its development of household and other chemicals, it can hasten their demise. The key paradox at the heart of the weapons-based works, although they allude to science as well, is perhaps contestable, but broadly, the gun and the sword have both been seen as instruments of protection and, more certainly, of destruction. As Bartholomew points out, they could also indicate nature's capacity to fight back, whether wishful thinking or not.[2]

The wall-mounted series giving the exhibition its title, Subversive Botanica, includes five guns, rifles perhaps, some machine gun-like. Molds are taken from glass chemistry apparatus, cast in clay, then assembled to form each gun; triggers, sighting mechanisms and such are made and added in the same way. Each work is named after an endangered or critically endangered species and delicate porcelain models of these are 'planted' in places around the form and in some works can also be seen peeping out from handle or barrel interiors. These latter bring to mind the iconic photograph of a flower being inserted into a National Guardsman's rifle during a 1967 anti-Vietnam war demonstration in Washington.[3] This acted to metaphorically disarm the gun and Bartholomew's endangered flora do something similar here; the gun's protective role comes to the fore.

Like all of the works, the guns are made from porcelain sourced in China with component parts made there then assembled here. Over the last eight years Bartholomew has developed a framework for working in Jingdezhen, the heartland of porcelain production in China. This enables her to work with specialists in the field and gives her access to the excellent materials and expert processes developed there over centuries. In particular, she has worked with highly skilled artisan Tung Ling, learning from her the difficult art of porcelain flower modelling, employing her at times to make especially complex botanical specimens.

Text on each gun names the represented species and describes its situation and endangered status. This text, in combination with the graceful curvilinear shapes of the spigot, bulb and test tube-like additions sets up a delicate tracery suggestive of the finely wrought weapons of 18th C Europe or the American West. The highly decorative and refined exteriors of these almost masked their destructive potential just as fine making skills and witty juxtaposition do in Bartholomew's beautifully wrought objects. But a gun is a gun and in their likeness to the contemporary machine gun the seriousness, desperation even, of Bartholomew's recourse to the gun as signifying device becomes apparent.

Her Sword works are beautifully made as well, each is elegant and precise and has the air of an armorial device, although the contemporary form they most bring to mind is the syringe, another object type where paradox is powerfully at play. The four works, Shy Susan, Blue Top Sun-orchid, Granite Boronia and Davies' Waxflower are embellished, like the guns, with small-scale porcelain versions of each plant. These are named in silver decals on a pale green celadon glaze ground that hints at the glassy origins of the object's component parts. More than the guns do, the Sword works visually allude to science's chemical processes.

In A Natural Experiment and the plinth-based works of Rarely Seen, ambiguity around protection/destruction is engaged with but here it is the common household or commercial spray or pump action bottle on which ideas turn. Each container houses a small collection of endangered plants protected within its confines. This sheltering is suggestive of the way endangered plants are housed under artificial conditions in the laboratory to ensure their survival, but, because of the container shape, it's hard to ignore the reference also to chemicals, whether being used for good or not.

The final work, the installation Rarely Seen, consists of 120 porcelain 'petri dishes', each filled with luscious copper red glaze out of which an endangered species, modelled in porcelain, emerges ghost-like, seemingly drained of blood, almost gone. The rendering of such a large number of individual flora from clay in this work is a tour de force, with each botanically accurate to the finest detail. Rarely Seen is well thought out and beautifully made and in reiterating the conclusions of the other works, that from science springs both hope and despair, it acts as a coda to the exhibition as a whole.

Is this work didactic? I think so. In taking aim at the paradoxes of science it also has us – and our responsibilities as consumers of science's products – in its sights. In urging us to take care of the environment, the care taken in producing these exquisitely made works might be seen as a metaphor for how we might act. In his essay in a 'sustainability' issue of the journal craft + design enquiry, Peter Hughes cites the paradoxical 'maelstrom of destruction and creative potential' of the industrial revolution as being a catalyst in the Arts and Craft Movement's questioning of '...how we – collectively and individually – are to live...'.[4] Through her work in Subversive Botanica, Julie Bartholomew raises this question again, emphatically.

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