

Art review Peter Haynes

Using science and art to open eyes

TREAD CAREFULLY.

By Julie Bartholomew. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until June 4.

Tread carefully is essentially a didactic exhibition. Its thematic premise is concerned with environmental issues such as the loss of biodiversity and particularly with the possible extinction of (named) Australian flora.

The language Julie Bartholomew uses to transmit her message is a ceramic one and her choice of porcelain is especially apposite. Porcelain is prized for its ostensible delicacy and translucence but it is also a hard material with a concomitant longevity. Its elision of opposites sits perfectly with Bartholomew's subtle yet intrusively insistent message about our environment and the dialogues she establishes between material and ideas.

As one reads through the catalogue list the morphology of the forms she uses - funnel, flask, petri dish, beaker - inserts the objective world of scientific research into the gallery space.

The forms, though, are not the metal or glass of the laboratory but rather beautifully modulated pastel (or white) moulded and slip cast porcelain translations of the scientist's tools. The forms represent an objective and data-fuelled world that the artist cleverly subverts through the insertion of carefully modelled and beautifully rendered examples of endangered Australian flora.

These adept juxtapositions clothed variously in seductively embracing pastels (yellow, pink, pale blue/green) and white posit a number of questions and this interrogative stance is quietly appealing.

Bartholomew's exquisite plants are paired

with equally exquisitely made scientific apparatus. Each is also overlaid with a beautifully crafted calligraphy naming the plants and pointing to their fragile environmental status. The overwhelming impact of each work and of the exhibition as a whole is of softness and warmth - a sort of visual ease that is delicately overturned as one takes in each object with more care. As one realises the intertwining of the scientific and the natural is a clear statement of the power of the former to destroy the latter, an air redolent of the sinister and insidious comes into play. In a number of works (for example,

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Cats 3, 14, 16, 17, 18, 25 and 26) the artist cuts a whole into the body of the form thus inviting intimate and close inspection, and in that intimacy inculcating the oppressive impact of science on the natural world.

The exhibition has a number of wall pieces. Some of these (Cats 19-21) present as almost quasi-religious objects. Bartholomew's clever play of contrasts and ambiguous thematic and formal relationships comes to the fore in these and is especially evident in the swirling organicism of the floral motifs combined with the hard(er) edges of the mechanical forms on which they sit.

This a clever exhibition that uses the beauty of porcelain allied with the shapes of scientific research to comment not only on our environment but also on the power of art as a means to change the way we see our world.

Julie Bartholomew, *Rarely Seen, Scented Acronychia (Acronychia littoralis)*, in *Tread Carefully*.

