

# Ceramic evocation of a coastal region

## CRAFT REVIEW

### A VISIT TO THE RIVER

Ceramics. By Cathy Franzi. Beaver Galleries. Until March 4

REVIEWED BY Kerry-Anne Cousins

*Painting the hills of Canberra* at Craft ACT in 2013 was the first exhibition where I encountered the ceramics of Cathy Franzi. It was memorable because of the artist's innovative approach to the use of native flora as decorative motifs.

In this exhibition entitled *A Visit to the River*, inspiration comes from the artist's recent residency at Bundanon on the Shoalhaven River. This is a magical place, once home to Arthur and Yvonne Boyd who gave the property to the nation. Franzi's designs are based on plants such as banksias, rock orchids, hop bush, wattle, flax lilies, kangaroo apple and she-oaks that are found in the river's environs.

Franzi's doctorate (awarded in 2015) was based on the intriguing history of the use of native flora as design elements in Australia. The use of Australian fauna and flora in design surprisingly did not really become prevalent until about 100 years after European settlement when it reached its popularity about the time of Federation in the 1890s.

Yet Franzi's work is not defined by history. It is just one strand of the complex contextualisation against which her work can be appreciated and its historical origins understood.

Franzi is not so much interested in the creation of a wide range of ceramic forms but more in their decoration.

Her vessels in this exhibition are simple – either altered open elongated bowls or cylindrical vessels in Limoges porcelain or terracotta. A slight twist to a cylindrical

form, an uneven lip, a curved edge to the foot of a bowl or the glimpse of an interior coloured glaze all testify to the artist's eye and her innate sense of design.

Franzi's strength is her ability to create a strong graphic image. Her depiction of plants informed by her botanical studies and her background in science is botanically correct and instantly recognisable.

Yet they are not botanical illustrations but rather artfully stylised and manipulated designs to complement the form of each ceramic vessel.

The use of a black line to define and outline the image is particularly effective and serves to reinforce the strong graphic design.

Each vessel is devoted to one species of plant and designed so that there is no

*Franzi's strength is her ability to create a strong graphic image.*

obvious viewpoint as the image encompasses the whole form.

There are strong dramatic images of banksias (*Saw Banksia I & II*) that wind their spiny serrated leaves around two cylindrical forms. In another pair of vessels, the softer needle-like foliage of the black she-oak (*Black She-oak (male and female)*) provides an intertwined play of black and white patterns with keynotes provided by the red male flowers.

In a series of smaller cylindrical vases delicate orchids are drawn in black ink inlays against pale surfaces highlighted with the splash of colour provided by an interior glaze. These smaller, more delicate vessels are arranged in groups of two and three and are accompanied by terracotta vessels inscribed with simple designs of wallaby and kangaroo grasses.



Cathy Franzi's *The River IV* features in *A Visit to the River* at Beaver Galleries.

Elongated, open-mouthed vessels are hosts to more climbing plant species such as the twining guinea flower and the rusty fig that wind their way around each form. In contrast to the decorative style of these works that have been characteristic of Franzi's ceramic practice to date, the exhibition holds some surprises in the form of five tall cylindrical vessels in terracotta clay (*The River series I-V*). They refer to the river at the heart of Bundanon.

On the surface of these tall vessels the artist has inscribed, with minimal and economical brush strokes, the Bundanon landscape. The marks brushed onto the

terracotta surface of the vessels in black engobe are not in the calligraphic style of Chinese landscapes but are more home-grown. They bring to mind Fred Williams' insightful repertoire of marks that capture the scrubby untidiness of the Australian bush. These five vessels summon up the coastal scrub and provide the environmental context for the other accompanying vessels.

The exhibition provides, through Cathy Franzi's assured and confident hands, a graphic but also an experiential evocation of the plants and the coastal environment around the Shoalhaven River.



Cathy Franzi's *Broad-leaf Hop-Bush*.