

# Ceramic celebration of Canberra plants

## Craft review

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**CATHY FRANZI: *Seven mountains and a lake*. Beaver Galleries. On until September 15.**

Cathy Franzi lives and works in Canberra. She brings a fresh eye and an innovative approach to the art of depicting our native plants. It is her ability to find the quiet beauty in seemingly insignificant plants and to provide them with a setting that highlights their importance to our Canberra environment that makes her work unique.

Franzi has both a Bachelor of Science degree from Sydney University as well as a PhD in Visual Arts from the Australian National University. She is able to bring both these academic disciplines together in her art practice.

In 2013 Franzi had a solo exhibition, *Painting the Hills of Canberra*, at Craft ACT. She was inspired by Marion Mahony Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin's early-20th-century visionary but rather impractical idea of landscaping the hills around Canberra with single-colour plantings of mostly Australian natives. Franzi arranged groupings of her ceramics, decorated with designs of native plants, to echo this idea.

In the current exhibition at Beaver Galleries, Franzi has returned to the theme of the mountains and hills of Canberra to explore, study and record the plants that are found there.

The artist has chosen seven peaks from which a view of Lake Burley Griffin is visible - Mount Majura, Mount Ainslie, Mount Jerrabomberra, Red Hill, Booroomba Peak, Mount Painter and Black Mountain. Each peak is represented by a group of three vessels - a large cylindrical vessel and two smaller vessels related to it. Each large vessel has a predominant plant from the area depicted on it with a landscape of the mountains forming a band around its base.

This landscape suggests the contextual eco-environment of the specific plants from the area that decorate all the related vessels



Cathy Franzi, Red Hill Bottlebrush, left, and Mt Ainslie Drooping Sheoak, right, in *Seven mountains and a lake* at Beaver Galleries.

Pictures: Supplied

## Franzi's work provides an invitation to engage with it on many levels

in each group. The plants on the ceramic vessels are drawn with botanical accuracy but also with an artist's eye for aesthetics.

Using wheel-thrown porcelain, Franzi gently alters the thrown shapes and covers their surface with engobes (clay slips) and underglaze. She then uses a sgraffito

technique of cutting back into the layers of coloured slips to reveal the image outlined against a white textured background. The drawings of plants are taken from collected specimens and Franzi depicts each plant's natural growth structure which is indicative of how it grows in its natural setting.

A restricted palette of black, white and green is offset by subtly coloured interior glazes and small areas of local colour denoting nuts, seeds or flowers. One such group is collected around the large key work *Mt. Ainslie Drooping Sheoak*. The black lines of the Sheoak's branchlets form delicate but striking patterns on the white porcelain background highlighted by small pinpoint

of colour that she uses on cones and seeds.

In one of the small works, *Yam Daisy*, a network of leaves is punctuated by a yellow flower at the vessel's neck. In *Red Hill Bottlebrush*, it is the red of the bottlebrush that is highlighted while, in *Blue Veronica*, the vivid blue of the flower provides a contrast to the plant's dense pattern of leaves.

Franzi's work provides an invitation to engage with it on many levels. It is not only an attractive collection of ceramics that celebrate the beauty of our native plants. It is also a record of the artist's valuable research in recording the diversity and individuality of each environment and locating their flora within a specific time and place.