

Franzi celebrates Australia's High Country flora

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Cathy Franzi: High Country. Beaver Galleries. Until February 26. beavergalleries.com.au.

Cathy Franzi occupies a unique place in Australian ceramics. Her attractive and distinctive ceramic works depict with verisimilitude the unique qualities of Australian plants while celebrating their decorative characteristics.

Franzi's first university degree, in science, provided the methodology for her continuing study of Australian plants and their environment. An early interest in ceramics and in printmaking as well as her extensive studies at the Ceramics Workshop at the ANU School of Art have also played their parts in developing her art practice.

The use of Australian flora as decorative motifs by art-

ists and designers is surprisingly recent. Early colonial artists recorded Australian flowers more as botanical specimens. They rarely appeared as decorative motifs in domestic interiors or public architecture until the 1890s with the rise of Australian nationalism.

Margaret Preston's strong images of Australian flora in the 1930s and 1940s were considered unusual enough for special comment although with the advent of the studio pottery and craft movement in the 1930s Australian flora became more popular as decorative motifs.

Franzi as an artist is drawn to the decorative possibilities of these plants. However she combines this interest with her scientific research and deftly and sensitively uses each plant's unique characteristics and habitat to govern the nature

of their depiction as decorative motifs in her work.

Franzi has undertaken various artist residencies in research institutions as well as making many field trips to study plants in specific habitats including Bundanon on the Shoalhaven River and The Flinders Chase National Park. In this collection of ceramics the artist depicts plants from the High Country - the alpine peaks of Kosciuszko National Park. In such a rugged terrain the plants are found in fissures in granite outcrops, in boggy streams and rocks, as well as in the Alpine herb fields.

Franzi adapts the form of the pot itself, the technique of portraying each image and even the clay to the characteristics of each species. All the pots are wheel-formed and altered using a creamy porcelain or a dark grey speckled clay. To create her ceramic decora-



Cathy Franzi, Kosciuszko rose. Picture: Supplied

tion the artist uses a sgraffito technique to scratch back into the slip-covered body of the clay, hand-drawn stencils or inlays of coloured clays. The technique is driven by characteristics of the individual plant.

Snow gentian is a delicate little plant. Depicted by the artist in a network of black imagery, its small leaves and star-like flowers appear

to grow vigorously around the pot.

Sky lily and variable eyebright are two plants that also have small, bright delicate flowers and leaves. The artist in this instance has chosen to capture their fragility using hand-drawn stencils to scatter images of their leaves and flowers over the body of the pot. And to portray the delicate

leaves and pinwheel flowers of the bidgee widgee, Franzi has chosen coloured inlays. Kosciuszko rose and Kosciuszko grevillea are plants with a more robust foliage so Franzi depicts them in a more dramatic fashion. On each pot their dark leaves form a silhouette against the white background with their red or rose flowers providing a spotlight of colour.

Pottery forms are also chosen with care. Tall ceramic forms are used to emphasise plants like shiny-leaf billy buttons and the Tasmanian flax plant that grows tall and has a strong leafy structure.

It is this sensitive attention to detail that makes Cathy Franzi's exhibition so rewarding - not only because of the pleasure of the visual experience but also because it is a very special introduction to the flora of the High Country of Australia.