



FLORA

Cruthers Collection of Women's Art

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

10 February — 21 April 2018

Does a flower grow or is it made?

In a scene from the 2006 documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, Slovenian philosopher and media critic Slavoj Žižek gestures aggressively at a garden bed with a running hose: 'I think that flowers are something inherently disgusting ... I think flowers should be forbidden to children.'¹ Žižek's is a moral panic: flowers are the 'genitals' of plants and represent an 'open invitation' to intercourse. He compares the tulip to a *vagina dentata*, referring to floral motifs in the cinema of David Lynch, where beauty and seduction are forever entangled with nightmarish malaise.

His performance is fraught with weird fault lines – *why should reproduction be inherently disgusting? Why water them if you hate them?* – but it illustrates the tension between flowers as a physical, functional entity and the layers of meaning, often contradictory and changeable, they support: compare the red poppy of Gallipoli to the Pencil Yam of Alhalkere, to the Tudor Rose or a bouquet of 12 red ones. Flowers have stood for purity, corruption, love, grief, death, blood, birth, rebirth, romance, loyalty, strength, frailty, country, all depending on year, continent and variety. The Victorian era of the British Empire produced a formal 'floriography' and in Japan there is *Hanakotoba*, both formal languages of flowers. And beneath the weight of all of this cultural meaning lies the role flowers play in the agriculture that supports us, and the ecosystems we are part of – reproduction.

Despite this essential function, and despite Žižek's contrarian disgust, images of flowers in Western art have been generally understood as avatars of a beauty often qualified with a seemingly spiteful adjective: useless. Then-eminent art critic Lionel Lindsay used this particular description in a 1925 issue of *Art & Australia*, discussing flower paintings by Hans Heysen, more famously known for his bucolic landscapes. Following Lindsay and a host of other cultural commentators – including Oscar Wilde and Elvis Costello – Ann Elias, Associate Professor at Sydney College of the Arts, has used the term as the ironic title of a recent book positing an alternative Australian art history understood through the floral motif. *Useless beauty: Flowers and Australian Art* expands the locus of discussion beyond the usual focus points – modernist women and flowers in the home. It considers works by Heysen, Heidelberg notables Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton and the Angry Penguins, among others,

connecting these to the work of contemporary artists such as Daine Mellor and Christian Thompson, in which flowers are used to explore the arc of colonisation and attitudes towards Aboriginal cultures.

Elias identifies an undeniable floral omnipresence in Australian art but notes that historical hierarchies of genre imported from Britain and the European continent, as well as a home-grown preference for bush-based heroism, have often occluded serious consideration of these images. In writing on Australian art in the early twentieth century, floral painting was used regularly as a scapegoat – described as vulgar, superficial, decorative or worse, modern – by critics such as Lindsay and Sydney Ure Smith in order to highlight the high-minded appropriateness of their preferred subjects and styles, although this attitude varied depending on the artist discussed and the purpose of the critique. Lindsay's 1925 evocation of 'useless beauty' was, for example, actually part of a screed of praise for Heysen implying that his 'special temperament', 'able hand' and 'sensitive mind' recommended him as the superior painter of something so splendid and fleeting – an effort to favourably contrast Heysen's paintings with the streamlined flowers of a then-burgeoning modernism, and to restore the artist's reputation following several critiques made during the First World War.²

Such fluctuations of favour towards genre and style invariably follow divisions of gender. Elias acknowledges many male artists who have taken flowers as their subject matter, but notes that critical praise for doing so is more often lavished upon them than their female peers, and that these works remain coloured in other ways by the inherent association of flowers with femininity. In discussing the paintings of Roberts and Streeton – mostly favouring velvety roses washed in soft light – Elias argues that the subject matter does not necessarily represent an expression of a 'feminine' interiority by the painters but instead reflects a moral position on the qualities in women they admired and desired, 'a way for men to re-enforce conventional notions of femininity in an age of the "New Woman", in which clear gender separations were threatened'.³ She draws from Streeton's letters to illustrate the metaphor, as well as his distaste for changing social norms. In 1890, to Roberts: '...sarsaparilla twisting her purple strength around everything: she is most amorous and sheds her colour like blue tears if you pluck her

roughly.⁴ And later, in 1937, to Ure Smith: 'Times change and standards are lowered all along the line – I'm not an ardent Feminist... I think that women with the athletic sports and abbreviated dress lose all their charm.'⁵

Women artists turning to flowers as a subject, however, tend to produce the inverse interpretation – that their works spring not from an *attraction to* but an *affinity with* flowers – as though men looking at flowers are looking at women, but women looking at flowers are looking at some aspect of themselves.⁶ In *Labours Of Love: Women's Labour As The Culture Sector's Invisible Dark Matter*, Macushla Robinson builds on Simone de Beauvoir's influential 1954 text, *The Second Sex*, to connect ingrained associations between femininity and natural phenomena, and conversely between masculinity, rationality and culture, to the marginalisation of women's labour as both artists and arts workers. Women's work is 'naturalised' in terms of a perceived affinity with nature as well as the understanding of particular subjects or modes of work as being innately, 'naturally' gendered, rather than as the product of specific social and political conditions. As though a 'natural resource', it becomes categorised as a 'labour of love' rather than professional cultural production: amateur or offered freely, in support, a product of compulsion rather than decision. Positions for and against such categorisations, for Robinson, reflect distinct and often oppositional positions on feminism, '...broadly, the anti-essentialist feminism that follows de Beauvoir's insistence that "One is not born but becomes a woman" and a counter-position that endorses the understanding of men and women as fundamentally different and frames this difference as a source of potential power.' Strategies of either 'leaning in' and of resisting the 'essential' each require their own sacrifices, a challenge Robinson describes as 'double-edged', citing the 1975 Wages Against Housework campaign and contemporary theories of eco-feminism as prominent arenas of debate.

But if there is broad social support for the symbolic connection between the floral and feminine, the functional flower is much less straightforward. Flowers might be the reproductive organs of plants, but their morphology is enormously varied. Some flowers have only carpels (containing ova), some have only stamens (producing pollen, plant sperm). Some plants produce only one type of these flowers, some produce both on the same plant,

others can alternate between them, depending. Others, like the rose, lily or apple, have both stamens and carpels on the same flower. The word used by biologists for this last and very common kind of flower – functionally unisexual and bisexual, simultaneously – is 'perfect': proof, if of nothing else, that human language is forever producing hierarchies of value. Such diversity might also suggest that another of the terms that does this for us, 'mother nature', excludes a whole spectrum of behaviours, participants in reproduction and in pleasure, too.

The lesson of the flower, and of its imagery, might simply be that it is never purely one thing: male, female, beautiful, disgusting, useless, essential. But then, what is?

1. This scene has since been cut into a discrete Youtube clip titled *Slavoj Zizek on the Horror of Tulips*. At the time of writing it has roughly 152 000 views.
2. Anne Elias, 2015, *Useless Beauty: Flowers in Australian Art*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK, pg 24.
3. *ibid.* pg 45.
4. Streeton, cited in Elias, pg 49.
5. Streeton, cited in Elias, pg 51.
6. It is interesting to note that both of these subjects – flowers and self-portraits – are prominent in the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. Self-portraiture remains the subject the collection is most known for, with just over 90 of a total of 700 works in the collection being examples of the genre, but there is a competitive number - roughly 60 works - in the collection in which flowers and plants appear as subject or motif. But while self-portraiture was chosen by the Cruthers family as a key theme for development, no explicit decision appears to have been made by the family to collect works depicting plants and flowers, and while still life is listed in the CCWA Acquisition Policy as a key collection theme, still lifes *featuring* flowers account for only a third of the total 'floral' holdings.



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LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY
10 FEBRUARY — 21 APRIL 2018

Angela Stewart, *Salutation*, 1990, oil on canvas, 191 x 149cm, CCWA 577.
Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia.
© Courtesy the artist.

The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art (CCWA) is the only public collection focused specifically on women's art in Australia. The foundation of the CCWA was a substantial gift of artworks made to the University of Western Australia in 2007 by Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers. The Cruthers family began collecting women's art in the 1970s, focusing primarily on portraiture and self-portraiture and isolating key areas such as still life, abstraction, early post-modernism and second-wave feminism. The CCWA includes works from the 1890s to the present day in a variety of media and continues to expand through focused acquisition and generous donation, aiming to contribute to and challenge dialogues about Australian women's art through exhibition, teaching, research and publication.

Campus Partner: Plant Energy Biology ARC Centre of Excellence at UWA

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Cover image:

Mary Moore, *Xanthorrhoea Preissii - Grass Tree Flower Spike*, 2005, oil on MDF, 137 x 40cm, CCWA 836, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia.
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CRUTHERS COLLECTION OF WOMEN'S ART

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