

art of the quince AND OTHER BOTANICALS

"...THE COMPOSITION OF CARAVAGGIO AND THE MUSCLES
AND MOVEMENT OF RUBENS ..."



Beverly Allen *Cydonia oblonga*, Quinces 2001. Watercolour 42 x 36cm. © Beverly Allen

After viewing the work of internationally renowned artists such as David Mackay, Susannah Blaxill, Elizabeth Sherras Clark, Beverly Allen and Marion Westmacott, you may never look at a mushroom, creeper, quince or blade of grass in quite the same way again. With a mixture of passion and perseverance, these botanical artists manage to bring to life waratahs, proteas, violets and roses, and even make beautiful some of the most mundane and ugly plants and vegetables.

The art of painting plants, flowers and fruit is currently undergoing a worldwide

renaissance and Australian artists are at the forefront of this interest. Beverly Allen, for instance, was amongst only a handful of overseas artists selected for the highly regarded American Society of Botanical Artists exhibition in New York, and David Mackay recently exhibited at *The Renaissance of Botanical Art* exhibition in London.

Allen, Mackay, Blaxill, Westmacott and Sherras Clark are among 34 botanical artists who will be exhibiting in Sydney at the Royal Botanic Gardens exhibition, *Botanica 2002 - The Art of the Plant*. According to the show's curator, Robyn

Macintosh, the resurgence of botanical art has coincided with people's greater awareness of the environment and environmental problems.

In the so-called golden age of botanical art in the 18th and 19th centuries, many artists were painting plants that were new discoveries. Now the opposite is true. Many botanical artists are painting plants that are endangered.

"Because of the green issue, everybody is thinking about the botanical world around us, which is disappearing," says Macintosh. "We are much more sensitive to the environment and towards plants. I

think it is critical that we paint endangered things and bring these to people's notice. For instance, Hilda Bryzenski paints endangered creepers, ground covers, which just look grey and boring. But she blows them up and you get a myriad of colour in them, and that has made people much more interested in this little creeper that is endangered and is actually a magnificent plant."

Beverly Allen, who has a degree in Fine Arts from Sydney University and a background in graphic design, was inspired to begin painting four years ago when she saw a book on botanical art by Dr Shirley Sherwood, considered the world's most influential private collector. As a nice twist, when Sherwood was visiting Sydney in March 2000 she asked several artists, whose work she liked, to lunch. Beverly Allen was one of them.

Allen is also popular with New York collectors. One collector, who is keen on botanical art, described Allen's painting of some quinces, which he bought, as having "the composition of Caravaggio and the muscles and movement of Rubens". Allen says of them: "Quinces are lovely fruit, they have such character. I love drawing them because they are wonderful in terms of light and shade, that traditional thing of life drawing."

The way Allen speaks about plants, it is obvious she sees things most people would not notice. For example, she describes how a particular mushroom looks like it had cinnamon dusted on it, or points out the purple streaky veins under a water lily leaf. She is always on the lookout for things to paint "I found a strelitzia nicolai down the garden," she says. "It was a big purple one, about 18 inches long and I thought, 'Oh God, I've got to do it', which I did. That one actually sold to London. I can't keep up; there is so much to do. I'd like to do a series of big leaves and fruits and seeds."

She believes that people are often interested in botanical art because a

David Mackay *Telopea aspera*, Gibraltar Range Waratah 2001. Acrylic, 105 x 76cm. © David Mackay.



Marion Westmacott *Ficus rubiginosa*, Port Jackson Fig, 2001. Watercolour and pencil, 60 x 68cm. © Marion Westmacott

many other forms of art because the painting has to be scientifically accurate. It is a rigorous, time consuming and fairly painstaking art. Artists, such as David Mackay, may take months to produce a painting. For instance, he is currently working on a waratah series. Initially Mackay, who lives at Armidale, will sketch the plant, record the correct colours, take photographs for reference and then, before it starts to wilt, press the plant so he has a specimen to refer to. He then dissects the flowers and using the microscope, draws the various parts. He does all this before he starts painting.

Critics will often refer to botanical art as little more than illustration but, according to Mackay, there is a distinct difference between the two. Mackay worked as a botanical illustrator for 10 years at Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens but now concentrates fulltime on his art.

"Botanical illustrations are bit more static and a bit flatter because the main thing is to show the botanical features with much clarity so you can illustrate books and scientific papers," says Mackay. "When you do a painting to hang on the wall and to exhibit you try to give it more life and make it more three dimensional. With painting, one of the main things is to have aesthetic appeal and I will try to do something that is fairly bold, something that grabs your attention.

"I get great satisfaction out of botanical art. In a way, I think it is celebrating the natural world. It is celebrating something that I love. In the same way that people say mimicry is the greatest form of flattery, I'm celebrating it by trying to put down on paper an accurate representation of these plants. I'm trying to show off its character and capture the essence of that plant."

BRONWYN WATSON

Botanica 2002 – The Art of the Plant is at the Lion Gate Lodge, Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, from March 2 to 17. Free admission.

