

Out in October!

STRANGE BLOOMS

GINA KALABISHIS

ARTIST

Melbourne artist Gina Kalabishis celebrates the form and beauty of Australian plants in stylised arrangements of flowers and bones. Her otherworldly combinations of wildflowers and eerie landscapes are, however, altogether different from classic botanical art: unorthodox and sensual, luminous and uncanny. Assisted by computer-graphics techniques, Gina focuses on plant forms and details, digitally manipulating her subjects before capturing them in oil on linen or pastel on velour paper. Composed as sensual ikebana, her work subverts the idiosyncrasies of both the still-life and landscape genres. While some of her paintings function as environmental memento mori, others are a means of exploring place, myth and Gina's identity as an Australian of Greek heritage.

Like the surreal offspring of May Gibbs and Georgia O'Keefe, Gina's native flowers emerge from within bone vessels against backgrounds of pure colour. Christmas bells (*Blandfordia nobilis*), Geraldton wax (*Chamaelaucium uncinatum*) or red-capped gum (*Eucalyptus erythrocorys*) spring from pelvises; bottlebrushes and kangaroo paws from vertebrae; and *E. leucoxylon* 'Rosea' blooms are contained by a wishbone; while the foliage and flowers of bushy yate (*E. lehmannii*) wrap around a giant set of teeth. Far from their bushland context, frozen in blooming perfection, these luscious blossoms celebrate growth and fecundity while at the same time their props suggest death and decay.

Gina's encounter with the ikebana of Melbourne-born master Norman Sparrow (1913-95) rekindled her interest in the ornamental and decorative value of native flowers. She believes that the true form of native flowers can be hard to appreciate in their wild bush context, but when removed from their vegetative and terrestrial background, the sophistication, beautiful

curves and intricate nature of the stems and blooms are really revealed.

Gina not only explores the aesthetic possibilities of native plants, she attempts to capture their 'human qualities' - the plants in her work, she explains, 'are metaphorically humans acting in a narrative within'. Australian flora is at the centre of an 'imagined heartland': 'Native plants help form and shape my Australian cultural identity. I feel more deeply rooted in this country when I embrace, nurture and interpret them in my art, my studio, my home and backyard. Making art from them is also to share them for future generations. Native plants have a great tolerance, hardiness, a distinct individualism, extraordinary diversity in appearance and can be fiercely adaptive and transformative in various dramatic climates. For me, in making art, this is a metaphor or allegory for the modern Australian person in the present.'

The fact that, for non-Indigenous Australians, our flora is virtually free from symbolism, has essentially given Gina the freedom to create her own florigraphy or language of flowers. One series of paintings features ikebana arrangements of wildflowers, foliage and bones entwined with girlish hair. Inspired by Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, this series evokes the loss, mystery and ambiguity at the heart of that narrative. Iconic paintings by artists of the Heidelberg School, as well as late-colonial landscape works, have also proved rich sources of local mythology, which Gina references in a number of monochrome paintings.

Species or hybrid, wild-grown or cultivated, indigenous or nursery-bred - every native taxon is a potential subject for Gina. Local parks and gardens, including her own garden in urban Melbourne, and the vegetation of Merri Creek and the

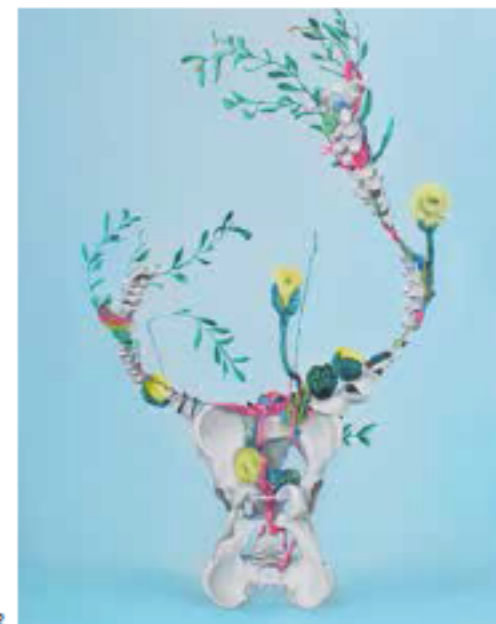
Mornington Peninsula in particular, provide her with most of her plant material. In their west-facing front garden, Gina's husband, Hamish Coates, a landscape architect, was keen to create a sense of design and formality. Together they have developed interesting plantings with an emphasis on foliage textures and colours, using cascading heights and repeat groupings. There is a quirky palette of species: silver banksia (*Banksia marginata*), bell-fruited mallee (*Eucalyptus prettsiana*), *Corymbia* 'Summer Red', *Grevillea* 'Moonlight', woolly bush (*Adenanthos sericeus*) and slender velvet bush (*Lasioptalum baueri*) are mixed with non-natives: kalanchoe, fan aloe (*Aloe plicatilis*), bougainvillea, leucadendron and cordyline.

On the nature strip, a pincushion hakea (*Hakea laurina*) is underplanted with indigenous species: flax lily (*Dianella longifolia*), climbing saltbush (*Chenopodium nutans*) and tufted bluebell (*Wahlenbergia communis*). Inside the front fence, Gina is particularly fond of the coral-coloured pea flowers and glaucous foliage of cockles' tongues (*Templetonia retusa*), the zigzag cladodes (flattened stems looking like leaves) of the small-'leaved' form of clay wattle (*Acacia glaucoptera*), the bleeding heart tree (*Omalanthus populifolius*), and the Queensland bottle tree (*Brachychiton rupestris*) she planted as tubestock. Other favourite plants include Geraldton wax, mulla mulla (*Ptilotus* sp.), kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos* sp.), grevilleas and correas.

Gina is often surprised by how well so many native species adapt to growing in our modern cities and yet 'still breathe out the very feel of Ancient Australia'. 'Thrilling', 'stimulating' and 'magnetic' are words not often used to describe Australian flowers, but for Gina Kalabishis our native flora is a source of inspiration and wonder.



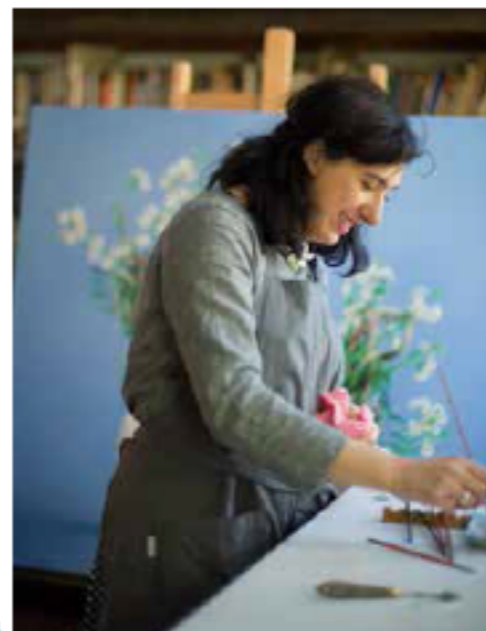
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- 1 *Melbourne Meadow* (2014, oil on linen) features a section of spinal column with *Acacia glaucoptera* and river yate (*Eucalyptus macrandra*).
- 2 *Offshoot* (2011, oil on linen). Acacia and gum, spine and pelvis.
- 3 *Nativity* (2012, oil on linen) with Christmas bells (*Blandfordia grandiflora*).
- 4 Gina at work in her studio.
- 5 *Agony* (2012, oil on linen). The foliage, flowers and knobby fruit clusters of Bald Island marlock (*Eucalyptus conferruminata*) wrap around a section of jawbone.
- 6 *Miranda* (2013, oil on linen), with the extraordinary buds and blooms of red-capped gum (*Eucalyptus erythrocorys*).
- 7 *The Natives Are All Sorts* (2014, pastel on velour paper).