

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

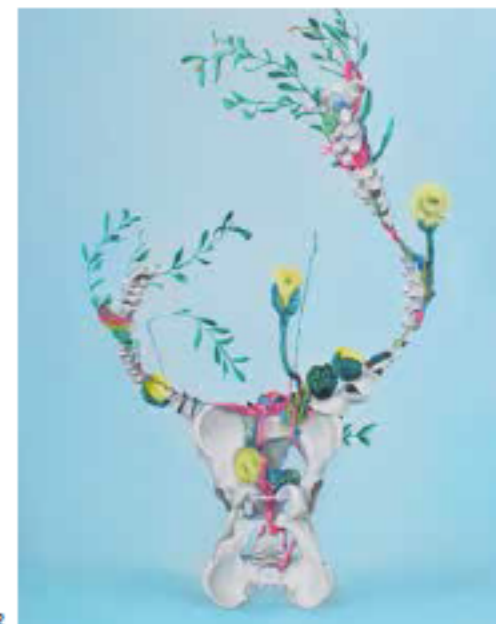
Mornington Peninsula in particular, provide her with most of her plant material. In their west-facing front garden, Gina's husband, Hamish Coates, a landscape architect, was keen to create a sense of design and formality. Together they have developed interesting plantings with an emphasis on foliage textures and colours, using cascading heights and repeat groupings. There is a quirky palette of species: silver banksia (*Banksia marginata*), bell-fruited mallee (*Eucalyptus preissiana*), *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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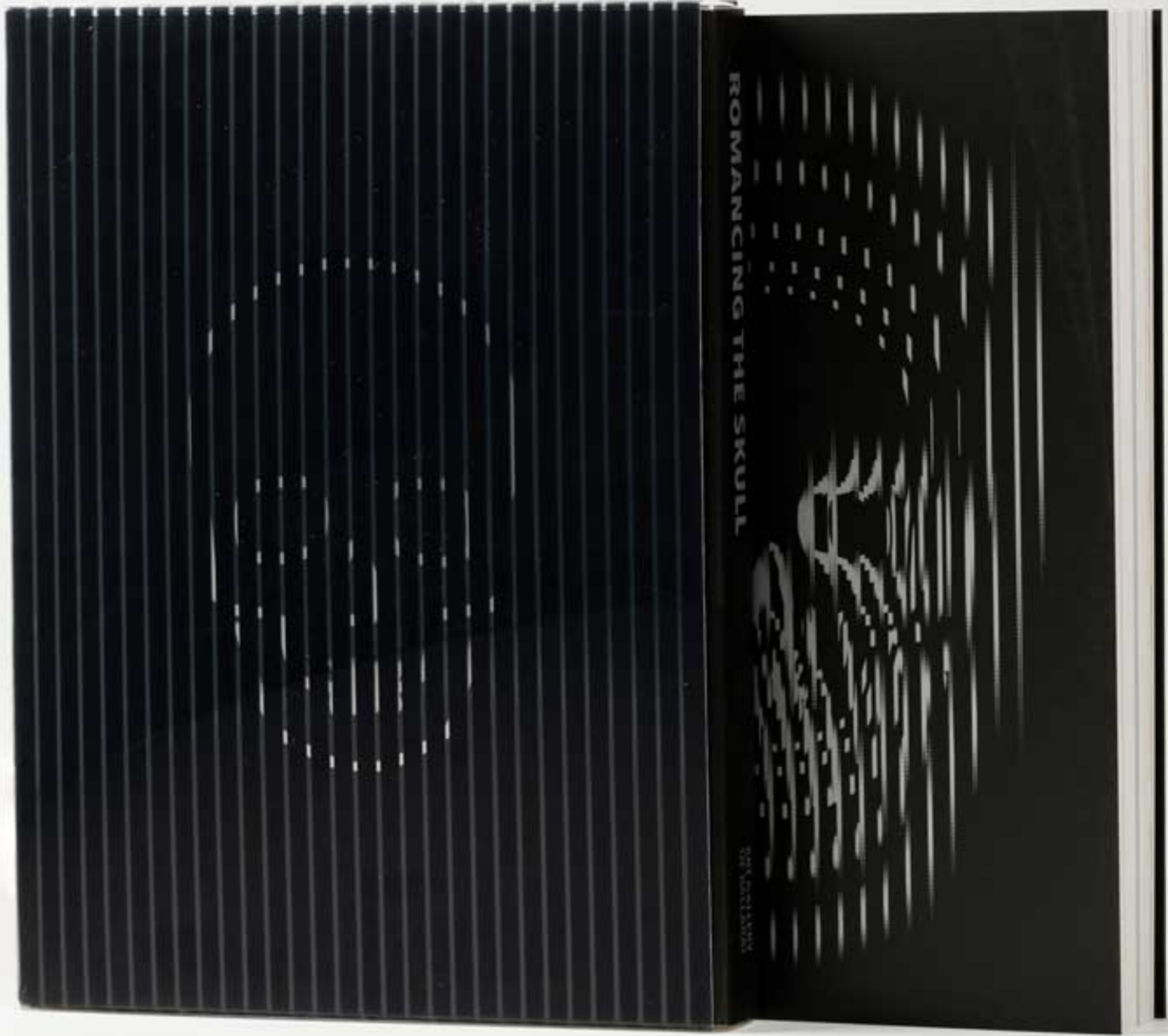


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- 1 *Melbourne Meadow* (2014, oil on linen) features a section of spinal column with *Acacia glaucoptera* and river yate (*Eucalyptus macrandra*).
- 2 *Offshoot* (2011, oil on linen). Acacia and gum, spine and pelvis.
- 3 *Nativity* (2012, oil on linen) 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).







# INSIDE US ALL

e McLaren

There is something both intriguing and repellent about human bones. Their representation in anatomical publications range from the scientific to the downright bizarre. An image from eighteenth-century Germany titled *Homo ex humo* (Man from dust) incorporates a curious combination of anatomy and religion to show the creation of Man in the Garden of Eden and the development of the foetus. The image recalls elaborate 'cabinets of curiosity', *Wunderkammer*, which were created by the wealthy in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, filled with natural and man-made curiosities.

Dissection of the body after death was generally regarded as 'beyond the pale' of accepted morality because the body and soul were believed to be inextricably linked. *The reward of cruelty* 1751, from English artist William Hogarth's series *The four stages of cruelty*, a moral instruction against the cruelty of animals, shows protagonist Tom Nero's progression from an unchecked child being cruel to a dog to an adult beating up his lover. The final stage shows his brutal dissection by surgeons, while his entrails are eaten by a dog as his final 'reward' for a life of cruelty. The dissected remains of criminals were generally refused Christian burial: as a reminder, the skeletons of two recently hanged criminals are seen in the niches on either side of the dissection theatre.

The birth of modern anatomy arguably took place in 1543 with the publication of *De humani corporis fabrica* (On

the fabric of the human body) by Flemish anatomist Andrea Vesalius. This was the most comprehensive study undertaken of the human body to that date, the first to contain accurate depictions and descriptions of human organs. The flayed and posed figures in Vesalius's text set a precedent for the depiction of human anatomy for the following centuries. His figures were often classically posed and cadavers were selected for exemplifying classical ideals of human proportion, a concept established by fellow investigative anatomist Leonardo da Vinci, who dissected approximately thirty cadavers in his lifetime.

Anatomist Siegfried Albinus, who was preoccupied with the idea of *homo perfectus* — the perfect human specimen — continued the tradition of classically posed figures. In 1747, he published *Tabulae Sceleti e Musculorum Corporis Humani* (Tables of the skeleton and muscles of the human body), illustrated with images drawn and engraved by Jan Wanderlaar. The images were meditations on nature and mortality: cadavers stripped of flesh down to the muscles or skeleton were posed in the landscape or in front of monuments. Most famously, some images featured a human skeleton posing with a privately owned Indian rhinoceros named Clara, a popular public attraction in the city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

Comparative anatomy arose from a desire to form a better understanding of evolution and establish links between humans and animals. Skulls were often compared for size, shape and capacity in order to determine intelligence and behavioural characteristics, ultimately resulting in illustrations in Volume One of the *Transactions of the Zoological Society of London*, which compared different species of orangutans and included depictions of the profile and underside of the skull of a 'human idiot' as a comparison. These were accompanied by an explanation that the skull was sourced 'by the liberal permission of Edward Stanley, Esq. F. R. S. from the specimen in his Museum of Human and Pathological Anatomy at St Bartholomew's Hospital'.

Out of comparative anatomy came the pseudoscience of phrenology, developed in the early nineteenth century from the theories of German physician Franz Joseph Gall. At the height of the craze, employers would send potential new employees to their local phrenologist to be tested for good character and a strong work ethic by measuring the skull and assessing the lumps and bumps