



JUDY ROGERS
HYBRID
EXHIBITION 2—31 OCTOBER 2021

Linton and Kay Galleries Mandoon Estate. 10 Harris Rd, Caversham, WA 6055

Open: Friday -Sunday and public holidays by appointment, 10am-4pm

Artist Talk: Sunday 3 October 11am

Further information: pandj@myplace.net.au **Mobile:** 0431 917 303



“To give us nature,
such as we see it,
is well and deserving
of praise; to give us nature,
such as we have never seen,
but have often wished
to see it, is better, and
deserving of higher praise”

William Hazlitt



Richard Read¹

‘the fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates space’

William Carlos Williams

Judy Rogers’ current show consists of three series of images, Botanic Bestiary (insects made of plants), Attractions (pollinating bees) and Hybrids 3D (intersecting banksia and hakea cards or ‘build a plant’).

Botanic Bestiary, showing elegant icons of insects composed out of the vegetation they eat, puts paid to the adage ‘we are what we eat,’ for our shock of recognition at these hymenoptera (bees, ants, wasps, flies) and coleoptera (beetles and weevils) comes with another shock at how unlike insects are from the wispy, pliable, colourful plant fibres they digest to harden their brittle antennae, pincers, wings and carapaces. Here those darting and scurrying bodies are arrested and disarticulated back into their original food sources. Likewise, the hyperreality of bursting colour and vibrant texture in the Attractions series has something unscientific about it. Pistils and stamens seem to carry an electrical charge that high lights them against petals that glow against flaring backgrounds of acid yellow, verdigris or magenta that are unlike any sky that human eyes have seen.

The artist whimsically refers to ‘bees’ bums’ upturned amongst the petals, yet as we riotously feed on art instead of nectar, they serve as our surrogates. Like the human figures who turn their backs against us in Caspar David Friedrich’s Romantic paintings of mountain tops and forests, they are apian *rückenfigurs* who block the view they invite us to consume. As creatures across the globe enlarge their extremities to disperse the extra heat from global warming, Rogers’ departures from strict botanical illustration are themselves a case of metamorphosis as careful observation turns into passionate identification with what a bee might feel, as maddened by the dopamine from the scents, colours and tastes released by plants for that purpose, they are tricked into brushing their bodies against the (male) pollen-laden anthers to fertilize the (female) stamens of the same or other flowers they feed on.

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel wrote a famous essay called ‘What is It Like to Be a Bat?’, which concludes that we cannot know the answer: our sensory systems are so different that we have no subjective understanding of what being a bat is *like*. But this hasn’t stopped other scientists from using human analogies to discover what a badger or a forest or a spread of fungus is like.² We do not look through compound eyes or know what consciousness without an amygdala (brain cortex) is like, but scientists who watch the curling and uncurling of tapered mouths and twitching antennae of bees feeding in the belly of a flower suppose we are watching dopamine-inspired pleasure such as we feel too.³ Judy Rogers grafts these imagined pleasure onto our love of nature: ‘where the bee sups, there lurk I’.



¹Emeritus Professor and Honorary Senior Research Fellow, UWA School of Design, University of Western Australia.

²Charles Foster, *Being a Beast: Adventures Across the Species Divide* (London: Metropolitan Books 2016); Colin Tudge, *The Secret Life of Trees: How They Live and Why They Matter* (London: Penguin, 2006); Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2016).

³Cwyn Solvi et al., ‘Unexpected rewards induce dopamine-dependent positive emotion-like state changes in bumblebees,’ *Science*, 353: 6307 (2016), 1529-1531.

Images from the top:

Botanical Bestiary No5, watercolour on paper, 49x68cm, 2021

Botanical Bestiary No2, watercolour on paper, 68x88cm, 2021

Attraction No 1, watercolour on paper, 81x81cm, 2021

Nature and machines have not always been enemies, nor art and nature always friends. For Isaac Newtonian, nature was a vast, well-regulated clock.

Eighteenth-century artists usually sought to avoid what they condemned as the accidental defects and blemishes of nature in favour of general forms: 'the poet does not number the streaks of the tulip', wrote Samuel Johnson. Depictions of nature should conform with the artistic conventions of the Sublime, the Beautiful or the Picturesque rather than the laws of nature. This meant that ecologically crucial terrains such as wetlands or mangroves were neglected, but throughout the nineteenth-century a reaction set in that led to the aesthetic appreciation of nature on its own terms. 'The idea is that scientific knowledge about nature can reveal the actual aesthetic qualities of natural objects and environments in the way in which knowledge about art history and art criticism can for works of art.'⁴ As a result the public constituencies for art and science amongst the rising middle classes began to fuse, so that landscape paintings were more informed by geology and, as the Darwinian revolution in the life sciences began to take hold, scientific educators such as Thomas Huxley began to treat the great outdoors like an art gallery in which a knowledge of natural history was substituted for the exhibition catalogue.

*To a person uninstructed in natural history, his country or sea-side stroll is a walk through a gallery filled with wonderful works of art, nine-tenths of which have their faces turned to the wall. Teach him something of natural history, and you place in his hands a catalogue of those which are worth turning round.*⁵

The idea that 'nature loves to hide' goes back to Heraclitus⁶, but here the scientific amateur is encouraged to approach nature with the knowing swagger of an art connoisseur.

This dry, knowing, scientific rigour is not what is going on in this exhibition. Rogers does not try to identify the species she paints and knows that botanists will always 'find her out.' Here aim is to pursue what excited her in the spontaneous arrangement of snippings from the garden and reserve of a specific habitat at Dwellingup during an artist's residence there, developing them in fantasy and wit to the point of inventing new species. Like the Romantic art critic William Hazlitt, she wants her 'Romantic Botanical Bestiary Attraction' series 'to show the world in its first naked glory, with the hues of fancy spread over it'⁷. In this respect it helps that Rogers comes to the Australian bush from an unfamiliar European background against which, as I can attest as another migrant, everything in nature still seems fresh, new and exciting because so different from the nature we grew up amongst.

She approaches Australian flora and fauna, therefore, not with the necessary detachment of the scientist, but in an older scientific spirit of passionate wonder bordering on hallucination, perhaps the kind of delirium that bees experience



when they feed. Yet in other respects Rogers is no stranger to science. She trained as an engineer in her native Hungary to become a paper merchant in the pre-production of commercial photography during the 1980s, making large posters of scenery and other subjects that required knowledge of metallurgy and off-set printing and skills in the handling of machines and chemicals that continue to inspire her creations. Her paintings reflect a sculptural dimension because she likes to know and show how things work and invent new ways they might work.

Images from the top:

Botanical Bestiary No3, watercolour on paper, 68x88cm, 2021

Botanical Bestiary No6, watercolour on paper, 49x68cm, 2021

Banksia 1, mixed media on board, 8 panels, installation, size varies, 2021

Attraction No 1, watercolour on paper, 81x81cm, 2021



⁴Allen Carlson, 'Environmental Aesthetics,' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed 9 September 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/environmental-aesthetics>.

⁵Thomas Henry Huxley, 'On the Educational Value of the Natural History Sciences' (1854), in *Science and Education: Essays by Thomas H. Huxley* (London: Macmillan, 1925), p. 63.

⁶Ian Hacking, 'Almost Zero, review of Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: an Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chas (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), *London Review of Books*, 29: 9 (2007), p. 29.

⁷William Hazlitt, 'On a Painting by Nicholas Poussin' (1821), in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1930-34), vol. 8, p 169.

Ten years ago, when Judy's children were growing up, I wrote about the 'serious sentimentality' of her family portraits and how informed they were by canons of classical beauty absorbed in Europe.⁸ That classically informed sentiment was probably the reason for the artist's wide popularity. While those qualities persist in her work, I recently noticed something new, perhaps less obviously popular, but to me more challenging. In a show called 'For the Asking' at the Tresillian Art Centre last year, she exhibited exquisitely detailed paintings of molluscs and crustaceans arranged in elegant patterns befitting a kitchen display, but whose grey-blue brittle shells, squamous textures and monstrous, bright orange, predatory claws irresistibly suggested the inscrutable former life of those marine creatures. Their distinctive appearances posed two related questions. What is it like to be a lobster (etc.)? And what is it like to be dead? Of course, this macabre element conveyed *memento mori* overtones from the Dutch still life tradition, but also a structural engineer's interest in showing how hollow, tubular, three-dimensional structures might have moved and had their being. They reflect changes in the artist's own habitat too. Her children had grown up, an illness had made her more aware of the fragility of life, and the need to care for an elderly relative had reduced her workspace, and the consequent size of her paintings, to a kitchen table, on which seafood was often prepared.



Image: *Body Mess 7*, acrylics on board, 30x30cm, 2019

The present exhibition takes place beside the kitchen garden of the early Australian explorer John Septimus Roe. Sculptural interest is witnessed by the Hybrid 3D series that invites us to 'build a plant.' It exploits the 1950s technology of Charles and Ray Eames's House of

Cards, a creative toy produced by the American Playing Card Company for Tigrett Enterprises in the 1950s consisting of a 'picture deck' of playing cards bearing photographs of diverse subjects with six slits allowing children and adults to construct them into infinitely varied assemblies. Here the cards bear images of two species, which the spectator is invited to hybridize and so participate in nature's process as they ponder the ingenuity by which plants attract the winged visitors necessary for their survival. The cards themselves are already endowed with sculptural solidity by the bestowal of dappled light solidifying stalks and leaves that can be flown around, just as the compounded creatures of the Botanical Bestiary are rendered in shallow relief by the soft fall of glutinous shadows that accentuate the comic life they acquire from swishing, swaying and bending like plants instead of twitching, buckling and lurching like insects.

In these respects, Judy Rogers' current exhibition demonstrates a double movement between art and science that accords with its location near the kitchen garden of a great explorer who was no doubt keen to graft the plant life of his old country onto the new. In a tour de force of early Australian history, Bernard Smith argued how colonial art genres came to permeate the European mainstream by replacing the classical naturalism of human stories with the scientific naturalism of botanical illustration, so that, in famous paintings such as Edouard Manet's *Concert in the Tuileries*, 'humankind is no longer presented acting out some heroic or sacred tale or raising monuments to its pride but is seen as if it were so many frigate birds flying as best they can upon life's ocean.'⁹ In the Attractions series that naturalism aspires to consciousness of other creatures, not just what they look like. At the same time the composition of insects out of the plants they eat in the Botanic Bestiary series consciously reverts, as many of us will recognize, to the royal portraits that the sixteenth-century, Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo produced for the courts of the Holy Roman Emperors at Prague and Vienna. Partly for political propaganda, partly to amuse and partly in pursuit of the intellectual currents of his day, Archimboldo painted heads of sitters such as Emperor Rudolph II out of a heap of fruits and vegetables, with peapod eyelids, a gourd for a forehead and ears made out of corn, a crop originating from the "New World" that showcased the wealth, luxury and reach of his power. In making insects out of plants instead of human heads out of fruit and vegetables, Rogers has moved the visual pun to a lower echelon of the food chain, where in a miniature parody of the far-flung places from which the marvelous objects of the elite's *Wunderkammer* or Cabinet of Curiosities were brought into unexpected relation, the strict division between scientific fact and human wonder are suspended at the cost of knowingness and in the cause of pleasure. As the French philosopher and historian of science, Gaston Bachelard, once declared: 'Les faits sont faits' (Facts are made).¹⁰

⁸Richard Read, 'New Works by Judy Roger', New Works Exhibition: Judy Rogers, exhibition catalogue (Melville, WA: Nyisztor Studio, 2011), pp. 1-13.

⁹Bernard Smith, *Art as Information: Reflection on the Art from Captain Cook's Voyages* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1979), p. 22.

¹⁰Gaston Bachelard, quoted in Mary Baine Campbell, *Wonder & Science: Imagining Words in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 6.