



## ARTIST PROFILE:

# Sharnaé Beardsley

[ ARTICLE BY MELISSA C. REIMER ]

CHRISTCHURCH-BASED ARTIST SHARNAÉ BEARDSLEY CELEBRATES THE BEAUTY OF NATURAL FORMS WITHIN HER PAINTERLY PRACTICE.

Beardsley graduated from the Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, Auckland in 2012 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

She has exhibited in Christchurch, Wellington, Nelson and Southland and, in 2013, was a Finalist in the Waikato Society of Arts (WSA) National Youth Art Awards. She also won the Viewers' Choice at the 2013 Otago Arts Gold Award. She works from her studio in Brighton and manages Chambers 241 on Moorhouse Avenue, a gallery established post-quake to represent the work and interests of Christchurch artists, in the absence of a more permanent arts infrastructure in the inner city.

Her work is fresh and contemporary and yet her subject matter has ancient origins with the earliest surviving botanical illustration dated 512 A.D. Original specimen drawings were, of course, intended to assist identification of a species, usually for medicinal purposes. Fast-forward a millennium and then some; more recent historical precedents include Carl Linnaeus (1707-78) and Sydney Parkinson (c. 1745-1771), the latter of whom was appointed by Joseph Banks and painted aboard Cook's first voyage into the Pacific in 1768. Like Parkinson before her, Beardsley's 'painted drawings' are based on close observation of botanical specimens. Beardsley's work also includes found small animal remains. However, unlike the scientifically-correct images produced by the famed botanical illustrators whose work grace the pages of historical tomes, Beardsley's painstakingly-rendered, ink and watercolour works bear testament to a rich and unbridled imagination.

Plants, insects and animals exist in a new light. Roses and foxgloves hang suspended, chandelier-like, from the skull of a small bird (Untitled 151012, 2012). A spindly length of spine is bound to a flower specimen; the root system, drawn in minute detail, revealing a striking similarity to the skeletal form of the animal (Untitled 310712, 2012). These works subtly point to the interconnectedness – and interdependence – of all living things. They are, then, primarily a commentary on the fragility of human existence. Beardsley's images of bees in particular, are a reminder of a current global issue – the dramatic decline of honeybee populations.

Beardsley's works are also suggestive of humankind's desire to control and cultivate nature and remind me of Monet's taming of Spring growth when it jeopardised a work in progress: "I'm overjoyed, having unexpectedly been granted



permission to remove the leaves from my fine oak tree! It was quite a business bringing sufficiently long ladders into the ravine. Anyway, it's done now, two men having worked on it since yesterday. Isn't it the final straw to be finishing a winter landscape at this time of the year..."<sup>1</sup>.

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At first glance, one of Beardsley's paintings might pass for a well-preserved nineteenth-century print. But they're more difficult to dismiss. And odd detail will draw you in and unusual features demand closer inspection. These works hold you, force you to squint, reassess and then step back. This is what art is supposed to do – make us stop, look, question, wonder; and, in this case, marvel at the artist's sure and steady hand.

Beardsley's works reveal a little about the artist and a little about the viewer, and thus society. They reflect the increasing interest in changes occurring in the natural world and the integral role of organic specimen in the maintenance of healthy ecosystems. They also play into long-standing discourse around women and nature (addressed in works by writers as diverse as Jung, Freud and Shakespeare), and invite contemplation on an academic level, notably in works where the bones of small birds are depicted rapped in the bulbous forms of a Venus fly trap *Dionaea muscipula*. There is also that

subtle nod to the Garden of Eden and the notion of original sin.

Artists have always sought to be innovative and modern within their practice, even when tasked with biblical and historical narratives. Neo-classicist Jacques-Louis David (1748-1925) realised new heights in history painting in works such as *The Oath of Horatti* (1784), ennobling his works with a grandeur and intensity his predecessors had failed to achieve (Poussin, for example, privileged sentimentality in his own rendition of the subject). In the 1870s and 80s the Impressionists opted for unconventional vantage points, fractured compositions and impasto over the sublime idealisation of Neoclassicism. They also turned their back on accepted subject matter and well-established genres, instead favouring everyday experiences, painting scenes from the street and café. In all cases, these artists strove to be of their time.

Beardsley, it appears, is also attempting to address modern concerns but via a more traditional and conventional technique. She is neither aiming for the grandeur of David nor the extreme innovation demonstrated by Manet, Monet, Cassatt and Morisot. Her medium – watercolour and ink – is humble, as is the scale of her work. Thematically, her work reveals itself to be current and yet references ideas which have inspired literature and painting since time immemorial. Her paintings are simultaneously old and new. And above all, they're quite simply exquisite.

**To see more from the artist, visit her website at [www.sharnaebardsley.com](http://www.sharnaebardsley.com), or visit the Chambers 241 gallery at [chambers241.wordpress.com](http://chambers241.wordpress.com).**

<sup>1</sup> Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 9 May 1889 in Richard Kendall (ed.) *Monet by Himself: Paintings, Drawings, Pastels, Letters*. London: Macdonald Orbis, 1989, p.96