

SHARNAÉ BEARDSLEY: THE SECRET LIFE OF PLANTS



Slipped (2014), ink, watercolour and gouache on paper,
645 x 445mm, Private Collection

First, you see beauty. Delicate and unnerving, laid down so precisely and with such attention that the flower seems momentarily held against its background of textured paper, rather than stained into it, stroke by stroke. Every detail quivers with life; the purple veins on the coiled pouch, the microscopic hairs fringing the trailing petals, the dark, velvety stem. Then, halfway down, something unexpected: the bleached ribcage of a rabbit, whiter even than the paper. As organic and fragile as the plant it is lashed to, it tempers the implication of support with a trace of menace, rendering this vision no less exquisite, but infinitely more strange.

Unsettling juxtapositions frequently animate the works of Sharnaé Beardsley, a Christchurch artist whose work repurposes the venerable genre of flower painting for a contemporary context. When she entered Christchurch's Design and Arts College, she regarded herself primarily as a photographer, but soon found herself drawn to the delicacy of watercolour. Although it was not an interest shared by many of her peers, her tutor Michael Collins generously provided her with a basic foundation in the medium and while completing her BFA in Auckland at the Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design in 2012 Beardsley continued her learning by poring over books about other artists, including Sydney Parkinson and Walton Ford, and through experimentation in the studio. Notoriously unpredictable, watercolour also appealed to her strong sense of curiosity – instead of covering her preliminary drawings with heavy oil paint, washes of fluid colour exposed and accentuated them, leaving little room for error, but a pleasurable margin for discovery.

Untitled 130114 (2014), ink and watercolour
on paper,
380 x 280mm, Private Collection

Beardsley's practice is underpinned by pointillism, consciously echoing the fine ink-dot drawings of plants and flowers her mother, also an artist, used to make (Beardsley has carried one of these drawings, folded up, from house to house with her for many years). She begins her works in pencil, often using tracing paper to move sections around so that she can refine her composition without compromising the paper's immaculate surface – "I make as few lines as possible,



because although you can rub the pencil out, the marks remain.”¹ Using a pen with a 0.05 mm tip, she builds up images with thousands of tiny dots. Spreading out in seemingly random patterns that initially resemble fungal spores, they gradually coalesce into intricate, cohesive compositions. At that point, she begins to apply the fluid paint. “That’s the fun, scary part – when I have a brush loaded with colour. For me, they’re not really alive until then.” The colour is gradually built up over several days, the tones deepened and amplified. It is a meditative process; time consuming but rewarding. The finished works are presented with as little separating the painting and the viewer as possible, and recently she has chosen slender maple wood frames in a subtle allusion to the solander boxes in which museums often store and display botanical specimens.



Sisters (2015), ink and watercolour on paper,
370 x 280mm, Private Collection

The art history of Canterbury offers an intriguing precedent for Beardsley's practice, not merely through its strong tradition of female flower painters, but because of the success with which many of them co-opted and manipulated this established, but underrated, convention for their

own purposes. Under the socially respectable cover of alpine ‘flower hunting’, Margaret Stoddart (1865 – 1934) gained access to the wild, expansive high country views she would later make her subject, and the acute botanical observations she honed as an early pupil of the Canterbury College lent what James Shelley and Sydney Thompson later described as ‘a sterner reality’ to her famous watercolours of roses and other flowers. The paintings Rita Angus (1908 – 1970) made of iris and aquilegia plants in the 1940s and 50s were rendered with such clarity and intensity that they verged on spiritual meditations, a transcendent effect she also incorporated into paintings like [Goddess of Mercy](#) (1945-47, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu), in which the deity clasps a crocus bloom as a harbinger of rebirth and Spring. After a career of sidestepping limiting expectations about suitable painting subjects, Doris Lusk (1916 – 1990) surprised everyone when in later years she turned her focus to the plants in her garden: “Who paints flowers these days? I say, please yourself. I like it, so I paint them. I don’t do what is in Art New Zealand.”ⁱⁱ Today, while Beardsley’s almost exclusive focus on plants sets her apart from many of her peers, her interest in how nature and humans intersect is shared with several of her contemporaries. Notable local examples include Zina Swanson, whose ephemeral drawings and installations explore imagined plant/human hybrids, and Liv Worsnop, whose guerrilla plantings on sections left bare by the earthquake demolitions challenge established value systems and assumptions about strength and resilience. Like Beardsley, both of these artists subvert the perceived modesty of their subjects, amplifying them with small, but powerful, acts of attention.



Slipping Wasps (2014), ink and watercolour on paper, 735 x 565mm, Private Collection

Beardsley’s art is anchored in an abiding fascination with nature, fostered at an early age by her explorations in the large, backyard glasshouses her father and uncle filled with a wide variety of carnivorous plants. As a child, she responded to the exotic otherness of the strange specimens nurtured by the highly competitive brothers, and to the atmosphere of danger and tension that surrounded them. Later, this led her to consider the history of their discovery, especially how revelations about the behaviour of predatory plants and other ‘problematic’ species led scientists to question the theory of natural theology, which was based on the premise that all creation reflected the power, wisdom and goodness

of God. Perhaps most famously, Charles Darwin found his faith tested by the parasitic wasp, which injects its eggs into an insect along with chemicals that paralyse but do not kill the

involuntary host, enabling it to survive just long enough to incubate the wasp's progeny and provide their first warm meal. In a letter to pioneering botanist Asa Gray in 1860, Darwin wrote:

I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically, but I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars [...]



Fighting Chance (2016), ink and watercolour on paper, 640 x 482mm. Courtesy of the artist

Beardsley deliberately courted these tensions in works that cast 'predatory' wasps and 'cooperative' bees in a romantic moral narrative she characterised as "the race for reproduction versus the struggle for existence". In other paintings, she placed a range of insects – including butterflies and a praying mantis – into increasingly perilous situations, navigating a formidable array of carnivorous floras.

Accentuating the uneasiness such plants provoke in many people, she then combined them with the bleached skeletons of a variety of small

animals, often juxtaposing these with 'cuddlier' elements – fat bumblebees and soft, overblown roses. In later works, she began depicting plants wrapped in string – support structures that suggested both containment and control.



Untitled 310712 (2012), ink and watercolour on paper, 690 x 530mm, Private Collection

To her, these bindings, which have evolved into entwined tendrils in more recent works, represented “the human hand on nature”. “I’m not a scientist” she says, “but I’m drawn to those ideas. I look at them from a different direction; it’s pseudo-science really.” In this sense at least, the painstaking realism of Beardsley’s works is a meticulously laid trap, seductive groundwork that sets us up for a sucker punch. Rather than offering authentic insights into plant behaviour, they provide pointed reflections on our own. Interestingly, Beardsley makes her sketches not from natural specimens, but from her own photographs of plants; a process that allows for an extra layer of translation and slippage in works whose precision is easily mistaken for verisimilitude. “They’re not as honest as they look” she says.



Untitled 190612 (2012), ink and watercolour on paper, 610 x 570mm, Private Collection

Cunningham House, constructed in 1923, is an elegant building of glass and curved steel that houses the tropical plant collection of Christchurch's Botanical Gardens. Beyond its humid jungle of palms and banana plants are two smaller conservatories. In Garrick House, cacti of all shapes and sizes bake in the dry, airless heat before an expansive desert mural. Gilpin House, by contrast, is cloying and muggy, inhabited by a bristling phalanx of carnivorous plants alongside dozens of stunningly complex orchids.



Together (2016), ink and watercolour on paper,
50 x 420mm. Courtesy of the artist

It was here that Beardsley built up a vast photographic image bank, when a friend who worked in the Gardens allowed her unrestricted access to the glasshouses for a day. Over the last two years, orchids have taken centre stage in Beardsley's works, due in large part to their unusually close relationship with humans. Prized and cosseted by collectors, Beardsley describes them as "the world's most pampered plants" and admits she has come to regard those she paints not as representative specimens, but as individual subjects, even protagonists: "They're so full of character; I definitely see them as personalities."



Mimicry I (2014), ink and watercolour on paper,
70 x 280mm Private Collection

Likening the 'look at me' pose of *Mimicry I*, whose petals splay out widely, to the showy, shimmering display of a peacock – “when I look at it, I hear that whirl of tail feathers” – she enjoys the sense of seduction and deception that are part of both their character and their survival, as well as their astonishing diversity (with almost 25,000 species, there are more varieties of orchids on Earth than kinds of birds). Orchids have connected Beardsley not only with a long history of scientific study and botanical art, but with a global network of fanciers. Via Instagram, she engages with growers around the world, including one in Indonesia who has agreed to send her photographs of his most dramatic specimens.



Mimicry II (2014), ink and watercolour on paper,
370 x 280mm. Courtesy of the artist

Recently, a new motif has entered Beardsley's work. In paintings like *Gongora* and *Cynchoches*, single orchids multiply into pairs; mirrored and entwined. In many cultures, twins occupy uncertain territory, regarded as auspicious, sinister and sometimes both.



Gongora (2014), ink and watercolour on paper, 470x390mm framed, Private Collection

Often, as with the Greek story of Castor and Pollux, twins represent two halves of a whole, so strongly connected they cannot exist apart. When Castor died, the legend goes, his brother Pollux gave up half his immortality to be with him, explaining why their constellation, Gemini, is only visible for six months of the year. Beardsley's inclusion of doubled images drew on such mythologies, but also reflected a more personal connection, since twins occur regularly on both sides of her family. Playing up their symmetry, Beardsley stretched perfection to the point of

parody, creating highly charged and oppressive images full of jagged spikes and stifling tangles. This dual, or split morality, and its concurrent suggestion of a beauty fraught with danger, is a further, welcome extension of Beardsley's entrancingly ambiguous artmaking, in which it is always hard to tell the difference between entrapment and embrace.

Felicity Milburn

¹ This and all other quotes from the artist taken from a conversation with the author in July 2016.

² Doris Lusk, Robert McDougall Art Gallery audio interview, 1983. Courtesy of Robert and Barbara Stewart Archive, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

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Cycnoches (2014), ink and watercolour on paper,
470 x 390mm framed, Private Collection

Artist: **Sharnaé Beardsley** lives and works in Christchurch. She received an Advanced Diploma of Fine Arts from the Design & Arts College, Christchurch, in 2011 and graduated from the Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, Auckland in 2012 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. She has exhibited throughout New Zealand and in 2013 won the Viewers' Choice at the Otago Arts Gold Awards. In 2014 she was a finalist in the Molly Morpeth 3D Art Award.

Writer: **Felicity Milburn** is a curator at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, where she is a regular contributor to the Gallery's publications. Most recently, she curated **Doris Lusk: Practical Visionary** and **Great Britten! A Work by Billy Apple** and she is currently working with jeweller Lisa Walker on a solo exhibition scheduled to open later this year.



Satyrium (2014), ink and watercolour on paper, 320x275mm framed, Private Collection