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Gina Kalabishis

Nostalgic Mementos of the Natural World

CHANNELLING A LOVE OF NATURE AND DEEP ECOLOGY THROUGH HER ART PRACTICE, MELBOURNE PAINTER GINA KALABISHIS'S DELICATE AND IMMERSIVE PAINTINGS PRESENT A FRAGILE ECOSYSTEM IN NEED OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION.

Shoalhaven Regional Gallery, Nowra
Preview **VICTORIA HYNES**

The term “biophilia” was first coined by psychologist Erich Fromm in 1964 to describe “a passionate love of life and all that is alive.” Human beings have a profound drive to connect with the natural world which seems ingrained in our DNA to survive as a species. While most people recognise that being in nature is beneficial to their wellbeing, Melbourne painter Gina Kalabishis has made this a central tenet of her artistic practice. For Kalabishis, our relationship with the environment, and its flora and fauna, should be nurtured in the same way as our human relationships. Both deserve our attention, tender care, and respect. The artist manifests her deep love of the landscape and its inhabitants through her ethereal paintings, a selection of which will be on display at Shoalhaven Regional Gallery in Nowra.

Kalabishis's compositions operate on two levels – the background plane renders loosely painted romantic landscapes, often hazy and softly focused. On the frontal plane are intricately detailed still life ensembles of native botanical specimens. Drawn to collecting flowers, leaves, blossoms, and branches during her walks around the environs of her Melbourne home, or during her residencies in regional New South Wales, she creates floral bundles that are tied together and hung in her studio to be photographed and later painted onto linen or paper. Her

painstakingly painted specimens and keenly observed native wildlife are the central features of these compositions, competing for attention in the foreground.

Three years in the making, the works draw on the extensive periods she has spent in the Shoalhaven region and in particular her three artist residencies at Bundanon, Arthur Boyd's estate along the Shoalhaven River. Stalled from completing her last residency due to Covid lockdowns, her imagery has the emotive response of a half-forgotten dream, remembered loosely as an undulating river system flowing between monolithic gum forests.

Using oils, inks, and gouache paints, she deliberately challenges art historical traditions of the male “plein air” landscape artist versus the interior female “still life” painter. By placing her still life images in clear, sharp focus – front and centre in the artwork – and the landscape as a blurry, obscured background, she is giving the so-called “female” imagery predominance in her compositions.

Growing up in central Melbourne, over the years Kalabishis developed a connection not only to the Australian landscape, but its depictions in Australian art history. Her first encounter with the artworld was as a teenager viewing the Heidelberg School's *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond* exhibition at the National Gallery

of Victoria in 1985. Her earlier landscapes drew on these grand colonial artworks, by the likes of Von Guerard and Streeton, yet this series is looser, more utopian and dream-like, not unlike a Chinese or Japanese painted screen.

Kalabishis studied art and design at Footscray TAFE before completing a BFA and Post-Graduate Diploma at the Victorian College of the Arts in the 1990s. She worked as a teacher and Gallery Director at Victoria University for fifteen years before focussing full-time on her art practice over the past decade. The artist is represented by Flinders Lane Gallery in Melbourne and her paintings are held in major public collections such as the National Gallery of Australia, the Victoria University Art Collection, the Art Gallery of Ballarat, Gippsland Art Gallery, and the Bundanon Trust Art Collection.

The painter claims that it was an earlier time teaching at the Aboriginal Community Elders Services near her home on the Merri Creek that has had the greatest impact on her perspective. One of the woman elders commented that: “Do you know, we come from this land, but you were born on this land, you are doing things with it. It's your land. You are part of this land.” As a child of Greek immigrants, it was the first time this artist felt connected in a genuine way to the country that she grew up in.

Among the stars of this show are several loving depictions of a cheeky pair of gang-gang cockatoos that made regular appearances outside her house during a residency at Tapitallee, on the outskirts of Nowra. Carefully painted with such attention to detail, they are almost humanised and rendered as idiosyncratic portraits rather than anatomical illustrations.

Other animals that feature in her compositions include sulphur-crested cockatoos, kangaroos, pelicans, and wombats, all set among arrangements of Australian botanicals – gum leaves, ferns, banksias, and blossoms, as well as shells found beachcombing along the

Shoalhaven Heads, all presented like ikebana sculptures in the foreground. This artifice adds to the hyperreal aspect of Kalabishis's work, so that the viewer is not lulled into perceiving the paintings just as gentle pastoral idylls. Whilst aesthetically picturesque, don't be mistaken in thinking of her artworks as just pretty pictures.

Underlying all these compositions is a subconscious ecological message. In the face of natural disasters such as bushfires and floods, as well as deforestation and encroaching urban development, some of these natural specimens are becoming less commonly sighted, to the extent where perhaps they will one day only be viewed as constructed images or sculptures in a museum-like environment. Just as ikebana was developed in Japan to reflect the culture's reverence for nature and the impermanence of life, the delicate beauty of the subjects only adds to their sense of fragility and the painful sense of loss if such creatures became endangered like so many other species.

Ultimately then, Gina Kalabishis's paintings are a plea for environmental preservation. Our natural habitat deserves to be nurtured and cared for just like a growing child. Arthur Boyd purchased the land of this deep valley in Shoalhaven, not only to live and work, but also to help promote environmental awareness and protection. He would be honoured that such a poignant, intimate, and uplifting suite of artworks was inspired by the ecosystem on his Shoalhaven River estate on the South Coast of New South Wales. ■

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EXHIBITION

Memento – Pictures of You
1 October – 26 November 2022
Shoalhaven Regional Gallery, Nowra

01 *Madame Butterfly* (after Malcolm McLaren), 2019, oil on linen, 153 x 122 cm

02 *I'll stand by you* (after Pretenders), 2002, oil on linen, 198 x 137 cm

03 *Everywhere* (after Fleetwood Mac), 2002, oil on linen, 198 x 137 cm

Courtesy the artist and Shoalhaven Regional Gallery, Nowra



01



02



03