

# BOTANICA 2007

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Late March was **Botanica** exhibition time again at **Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens**, so I took myself and my daughter along to the Lion Gate Lodge off Mrs Macquarie's Road for a morning's meander around over 100 illustrations and paintings produced by a total of 58 botanical artists based in NSW and the ACT.



*Mahonia lomariifolia* by Elaine Musgrave (above)  
*Banksia* by Kyoko Katayama (left)

The Botanica exhibition is an annual event that is presented by the **Friends of the Gardens** in support of the Botanic Gardens Trust. This year it was entitled 'Botanica 2007... Celebrating the Four Seasons' and as always, it was of an extremely high standard. The works were quite simply superb.

Each artwork is chosen for display by adherence to a certain selection criteria. Paintings needed to accurately represent characteristics of the species along with the correct form and botany of the subject; they also needed to be identified and named accurately, and were to be a balanced and artistically pleasing work of art.

Many of the artists that have exhibited at Botanica over the last few years were again represented at this year's exhibit, but there were several standout new additions to the botanical illustration fold too.

From the outset, **Beverly Allen** must be mentioned for her exquisite works. A botanical artist since 1998 and with a background in graphic design, she well deserves her Royal Horticulture Society Gold Medal from the London Botanical Art Show for her series of *Epiphyllum* paintings. Two of those works now reside in the Kew Gardens Collections and The Society purchased another for their Lindley Library. These works are

incredibly lifelike, with Allen achieving amazing colour matches, not to mention wonderful tone and texture in all of her plant parts.

One of my favourite botanical artists, **David Mackay**, was also represented at this exhibition, but disappointingly, with only 2 pieces of work. Mackay is a true master of botanical art, having worked in the field for over 32 years, 16 of those as a botanical illustrator at the Royal Botanic Gardens. He achieves such precision in his work that each and every painting could easily be mistaken for a photograph – even with my nose about an inch off the paper, I can't tell the difference. His colours are radiant and light is captured perfectly. Proof of that is apparent with *Gevuina bleasdalei* (Blush Silky Oak), one of the 2 pieces that represented David Mackay in this collection.

Another of my favourite botanical artists is **Deidre Bean**. Her *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem' was a standout at this year's exhibition. Like David Mackay, Deirdre Bean manages to produce paintings with a great deal of realism. The colours are precise and she captures the significant parts of plants including stems, front and back of leaves, and flower parts with near perfection. The leaves of her *Beta vulgaris*, a watercolour on paper, almost look better than the real thing.



*Epiphyllum* by Bererley Allen (top left)  
*Grevillea robusta* by Mary Ann Mein (top right)  
*Gevuina bleasdalei* by David Mackay (right)

The watercolours of **Leonie Norton** included a *Dracaena sanderiana* (Chinese Bamboo) and a *Banksia serrata*, both of which were luminous. Her subtle use of colour and mastery of light creates depth within each painting. The olive greens of the *Banksia serrata* leaves and the greenish yellow of the flowers brought the plant to life, evoking thoughts of the beautiful Australian bush.

This year, in fact, a whole room of the Lion Gate Lodge was devoted to works of Australian Natives and I spent a considerable amount of my time at the exhibition, in this space. Another of Leonie Norton's watercolours was displayed in this room. Simply entitled Eucalyptus Leaves, it was a simplistic, but effective study of several Eucalyptus leaves in varying states of life and decay.

**Mary Ann Mein's** *Grevillea robusta* displays an enormous amount of skill. It shows upper and lower leaf sides, intricate

flower parts and seed pods in beautiful colour and manages to appeal to both the scientific mind and the art lover. **Kyoko Katamaya** has produced an elegant study of *Banksia*, including *Banksia integrifolia*, *B. ericifolia*, *B. seminuda*, *B. speciosa*, *B. serrata*, *B. spinulosa*, in watercolour and pencil. It's a more traditional type of rendering for a botanical subject, but its beauty lies in the very subtle use of colour and the slight differences between each species.

Three paintings that were hanging within inches of each other to wonderful effect were of 3 different flowering gums – my favourite Australian natives. **Helen Fitzgerald's** watercolour of a *Corymbia ptychocarpa* (Bloodwood) sat alongside both **Susan Hedges** watercolour of a *Eucalyptus youngiana* (Large-fruited Mallee) and **Sara-Jane Kelsey's** *Eucalyptus macrocarpa* (Mottlecah) rendered in coloured pencil. The olive greens of the leaves and

the range of pinks in the flowers, along with the slight differences in approach drew the eye in for a closer examination.

One of the larger paintings in the Natives room was one with a slightly unorthodox approach to its subject. In adhering to the title of the exhibition, 'Celebrating the Four Seasons', **Rosalyn Earp**, from Newcastle, captured the decaying beauty of a spent *Doryanthes excelsa* flower. Painted in watercolours, the usual brilliant red of this flower is nowhere to be seen. Replacing that vibrancy is a beautiful study that ranges in tone from deep charcoals to dark browns to warmer reddish brown hues. One last mention from the Native selections must be **Annie Hughes** *Telopea speciosissima* 'Wirrimbirra White' or White Waratah. This watercolour is exquisite. The colours are precise, the tone and texture of the leaves spot on, and overall the effect is breathtaking. Although from Santiago in Chile, Annie Hughes has exhibited extensively here in Australia, and has won several prizes for her work.

Another artist that must be mentioned is **Elaine Musgrave**. Trained at East Sydney Art College, Musgrave's work has been widely exhibited in Australia, the UK, and the USA. Along the way she has received many accolades and awards. In this exhibition, it was her watercolour and graphite works that were standouts. *Mahonia lomariifolia* is a study of near perfection, with the most delicate of mauve hues used to give life to the flowers, and an understated hint of more in the use of just graphite lines. Similarly, her four effective translations of *Acanthus*, *Hosta*, *Arum* and *Fatsia* were elegant in their simplicity. Each leaf is drawn in close-up, coloured in the same shades of green, and then repeated in graphite behind, almost as a watermark.

Finally, I must highlight the fact that **Bill (William) Cooper** was this year's Guest Artist. Born in Newcastle, he worked in the 1960s as a landscape artist before turning his attentions to painting Australian birds, illustrating 'A Portfolio of Australian Birds'. This work consolidated his reputation as an ornithological painter, and several books on botanical art also featured his work. At this time he began to exhibit his art around the world, was a guest lecturer at Newcastle University for several years and was the subject of a documentary by David Attenborough. In 1992 he was awarded the Academy of Natural Sciences (USA) Gold Medal for distinction in Natural History Art, and in 1994 was awarded an AO (Order of Australia) for his contribution to art and ornithology.

In this exhibition, Bill Cooper's two beautiful watercolours, *Thunbergia grandiflora* (Bengal Clock Vine) and *Dillenia alata* (Red Beech) are reminiscent of old English art; soft colours, with almost a spotlight of brightness to illuminate the page. His precision and perfection is even more noteworthy because of the difficulties presented by the species he has chosen to reproduce.

As you could well imagine, I've only been able to rhapsodise about a very small number of the works on show at this year's Botanical exhibition. Obviously, in no way does that reflect on any of the works I haven't mentioned here. Generally, every single artwork on show was excellent and of such a high standard that I should never get the

*Corymbia ptychocarpa* (Bloodwood) by Helen Fitzgerald (below)  
*Magnolia Grandiflora* 'Little Gem' by Deirdre Bean (bottom)



watercolours out again. I simply don't make the grade. I attended Newcastle University, and studied for a Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts). I knew many students that were studying Illustration at the time, and I admired them for their patience. For patience is what you need to produce the type of stunning illustrations that Botanica showcases every year.

If you still haven't made the effort to get there, try to make it next

year. It's a great day out. I still have to manage my three year old, but an old fashioned lemon mix-up cordial and an Anzac biscuit from the little cafe the Friends of the Gardens had setup outside the Lion Gate Lodge did the trick. I got enough time to whiz around the exhibition, and then, she and I had a lovely long stroll around the Gardens, before heading home for lunch.



*Telopea speciosissima* 'Wirrimbirra White'  
by Annie Hughes (left)  
*Banksia serrata* by Leonie Norton (below)

