

Elisabeth Kruger: the art of impermanence

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Botanical illustration, with its distinctive crisp lines depicting the intricate anatomy of plants is a centuries old combination of the scientific and the artistic. From ancient civilisations through to today, the importance of plants as life-giving sources of food, fuel, medicine, fibres and oxygen, has been studied and recorded by scientists and artists alike.ⁱ

While the focus of botanical illustration is on documenting and understanding the various species of flora, the artist is also relied upon to depict the essence of the plant. Historically this process relied on many 'hands': the artist, the printer, the scientist, and the colourist. The culmination of these contributions is a static representation of a particular plant - a scientific document recording the summary of what that plants 'is'.

In this process, artistic license is often involved, but with unusual intent. Helen Hewson, in her book *Australia: 300 Years of Botanical Illustration*, cites examples where, from time to time, botanical illustration has indulged itself by depicting two stages of a plants growth occurring on one branch, or a half-fertile and half-vegetative frond on the one stem.ⁱⁱ This liberty is however more tool of the scientist than the artist, allowing elements of a plant's life to be condensed. While this creates one kind of record, it also seems counter to the very essence of a living thing.

In Elisabeth Kruger's ongoing series of paintings of botanical subjects - including roses, wisteria, irises, chrysanthemums,

apples and grapes - she offers us another view. Elisabeth's depictions of fruit and flowers are not enlarged botanical studies, but rather contemplations on states of being. Her works are considered equations, simultaneously a celebration of the triumph of nature, and a darker esoteric presence. With no aims at scientific description, her paintings are studies of our changing environment.

In *Cirque*, the tangled web of branches verges on dominating the clusters of blue and purple flowers. Surging with energy, the sleek vines rush across the canvas pushing the flowers to the extremities, forcing them to fight for space seemingly before our eyes. Similarly in *Crisscross*, *Mauve* and *Deep Blue*, the wind has swept past the wisteria, pushing the blooms forward or across the canvas, filling the viewers face with their sweet fragrance. As in documentary time lapse photography, such as David Attenborough's *The Private Life of Plants*, where the life cycle of a plant is animated in a matter of secondsⁱⁱⁱ, so too Elisabeth's paintings reveal more than a single moment. The tenuous tendrils of green are hardly visible within the tightly cropped composition, but a sense of life and energy is evoked. The paintings are simultaneously stirring and dynamic, but also meditative.

In *Waft*, *Whisper* and *Being* the mood is far more subdued. Inviting a sense of contemplation beyond that of visual splendour and energy, the focus is less on the physical sensation of experiencing the floral abundance of wisteria, and more on

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the mental state they evoke. *Waft's* flowers are delicately placed at the end of an exposed stem, complete with buds yet to flower. *Whisper's* cascade of blue and purple are perfectly suspended in air, as if by holding our breath they may never fall to the earth. *Being's* new shoots fight for our attention, already pre-empting the demise of the flowering blooms that fill the painting.

In this measured combination of peacefulness, strength and fragility, the works echo Buddhist thoughts on existence. In Buddhism the concept of *anicca* explains that all things are inconstant, unsteady, and dependent on the right conditions for existence.^{iv} Just like humans, plants too rely on soil, sun, rain and other species in order to exist. Our lives are shaped by climatic seasons, and flowers, perhaps more than any other living thing in nature, are a constant illustration of this impermanence, that is the state of coming into being and then ceasing to be. Elisabeth's paintings offer beauty – a joyous celebration of the natural world, amidst a visual feast of abundance and decadence. But in their quiet moments, one sees the falling blooms and the austere vines, and contemplates our own expectations of life, and its inherent impermanence.

Melanie Flynn, July 2008

ⁱ Greek philosopher Theophrastus wrote *On the Causes of Plants* and *On the History of Plants* in around 320 BC. In them he classified hundreds of plants while describing their structure, reproductive process, methods of propagating and uses.

ⁱⁱ Helen Hewson, *Australia: 300 Years of Botanical Illustration*, CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, 1999, p.5.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Attenborough, *The Private Life of Plants*, BBC documentary series, 1995.

^{iv} The three characteristics of all phenomena (other than Nirvana or sankhara) are dukkha

(existence is unsatisfactory), *anicca*, (all existence is impermanent) and *anatta* (there is no permanent self). See Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 91. Also Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Harper Collins, New York, 2002, pp. 34-40.