

brush with  
GONDWANA

*WITH BEAUTY AND ACCURACY botanical artists combine in one image all the component parts of a plant — flowers, stem, fruit and seed. Their images complement the written descriptions, making visible details that are otherwise difficult to describe. By isolating the specimen from its habitat, the painted image lends it a clarity and distinction that photographs cannot. And it is not unheard of for an artist who is peering intensely at the subject for long periods to spot a botanical detail that has eluded the botanist.*



Ellen Hickman  
*Eucalyptus stoatei*, 2006 (detail)  
aquarelle, 52.0 x 36.0 cm

# brush with GONDWANA

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THE BOTANICAL ARTISTS GROUP  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

TEXT BY JANDA GOODING  
FOREWORD BY STEPHEN D. HOPPER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
RICA ERICKSON  
PAT DUNDAS  
ELLEN HICKMAN  
PENNY LEECH  
PHILIPPA NIKULINSKY  
MARGARET PIERONI  
KATRINA SYME

 **FREMANTLE PRESS**

DR JANDA GOODING worked as a Curator at the Art Gallery of Western Australia from 1979 to 2005 where she curated many thematic and survey exhibitions as well as retrospectives of Australian artists A.B. Webb and Kathleen O'Connor. It was while working on the 1991 exhibition *Wildflowers in Art* that she met the artists who formed the Botanical Artists Group, Western Australia. In 2005 she moved to Canberra to take up a position as Senior Curator of Art at the Australian War Memorial where she is currently exploring the connections between art, landscape and history for a forthcoming publication on Gallipoli. Beyond this, her current preoccupations are characterised by being at odds with her environment – trying to establish a garden in a drought-stricken region and painting botanical studies of seaweeds in a land-locked capital.

IN 1991 THE ART GALLERY of Western Australia organised a botanical art exhibition, *Wildflowers in Art*, that saw the beginning of a loose association called the Botanical Artists Group. Formed to provide a supportive forum for sharing ideas and resources, the group coalesced around six permanent members: Philippa Nikulinsky, Rica Erickson, Katrina Syme, Pat Dundas, Margaret Pieroni and Penny Leech. In 1995, when Penny temporarily resigned from the group to pursue other career options, Albany artist Ellen Hickman was invited to join. Penny rejoined in 2004 and there are now seven permanent members of the Botanical Artists Group.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book surveys the work of seven botanical artists who are committed to learning about our environment, preserving its diversity and making a contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the value of our natural heritage. The title *Brush with Gondwana* refers to the ancient southern supercontinent that once drifted through the southern hemisphere. The part that we now know as Australia gradually separated about 45 million years ago allowing the flora of the Australian continent to develop its own distinctiveness whilst still retaining commonalities with other Gondwanan species. The title suggests our shared past with other places and our individuality but it also refers to artists making this unique botanical world visible in inspired and thought-provoking ways.

The artists have drawn upon the support and goodwill of a vast number of individuals and sponsoring organisations who have assisted them over the years. A special thank you goes to all the families and friends of the contributors. Their patience and support is most warmly acknowledged. Dr Dorothy Erickson has generously assisted with her mother Rica Erickson's contribution and Jennie Partington has helped collate Penny Leech's input. The Botanical Artists Group (BAG) would also like to thank Richard McCormack for his continued support.

Since forming as a group, the artists have developed a loyal following of exhibition goers and collectors with some having been to every exhibition since 1992. Kings Park and Botanic Garden, Perth, provided a regular exhibition opportunity at the annual Wildflower Festival and their nursery and ground staff have assisted many of the artists on particular projects. Maggie Edmonds was central to the successful promotion of the BAG activities in the 1990s and Pat Dundas at Botanica Gallery, Pemberton, has enabled them to showcase their work in the most spectacular surroundings. Also, gallery owners Stuart and Jan Miller at Kingfisher Gallery, Perth, have made available a beautiful venue for recent exhibitions of the artists' work.

Scientific colleagues have helped identify and locate species; national parks' staff, farmers and station owners have facilitated access to collecting areas; and professional organisations of wildflower societies and flora protection groups have provided a learning environment for discussion and disseminating information. The creative relationship between artists and scientists has always been fruitful and we would like to acknowledge the ongoing generosity of the many botanists who have worked with the artists. For this particular publication, the assistance of Andrew Brown, Alex George, Terry Houston, John Huisman and Tom May is gratefully acknowledged.

Professional relationships often develop into great friendships and Prof. Stephen Hopper, Director of Kings Park and Botanic Garden, Perth from 1992 to 2004 and now the Director of The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, has been a great friend of the Botanical Artists Group since its inception. His ongoing support and enthusiasm for the work of the artists continues from London and it is a great pleasure and honour that he should write the foreword for *Brush with Gondwana*.

When this project was first mooted in late 2005 the fact that the writer was based in Canberra and the artists scattered across the southern part of Western Australia didn't seem to concern the publishers at Fremantle Press. It's a wonder of collective effort, patience and technology that it has been possible to coordinate this publication largely by electronic communication. At the Press, our thanks to Ray Coffey, Clive Newman and all the staff who made it possible. Also to Margaret Whiskin who managed the project in its initial phases and Jane Fraser who took it on toward the end. Thanks also to Robert Grantham at Haymarket pre-press and Gabriela Bruckner at Scott Print for expert image scanning.

Finally, it is entirely appropriate that in the hundredth anniversary year of her birth, that this publication be dedicated to Dr Rica Erickson; artist, botanist, natural historian and author.

Katrina Syme  
*Cortinarius archeri*, Dwellingup, 2002 (detail)  
watercolour over pencil, 17.5 x 24.5 cm

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Margaret Pieroni  
*Gompholobium polymorphum*, 2006 (detail)  
watercolour, 29.7 x 21.0 cm



## FOREWORD

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The Botanical Artists Group continues to play a significant role in the exploration and celebration of Western Australia's globally renowned flora. There are rich rewards for those who take the time to examine their collective works.

This book provides a welcome history of the group. It covers their shared experiences and the diversity of styles and approach that together produce such engaging art.

Like many others, I am in awe of the ability of each artist to paint or draw with such accuracy and yet inspirational composition. There can be little doubt that these are artists who care deeply for their subjects, and apply their skills to help us all better understand and conserve the incomparable natural heritage that still, thankfully, remains within easy reach of most who live in or visit the Australian bush.

There is a fundamental link between botanical art and science, highlighted by the author Janda Gooding in her perceptive text. This art–science link is evident in the paintings before you. Indeed, some members of the Botanical Artists Group have combined art and science in their own careers. Others work with botanists in collaborative expeditions and publications. Yet each artist exhibits her own creativity, helping botanists and others from many walks of life see plants, fungi and animals from fresh perspectives.

I have enjoyed working with the Botanical Artists Group from the time of their inaugural display in 1992 at Kings Park and Botanic Garden's annual Wildflower Festival. As Director of that botanic garden, it was evident to me that here was important new work that would engage and connect with people at many levels.

Since then, through direct collaboration with some members, and an ongoing interaction with all, I continue to be inspired by the body of work that has grown and which gives hope that people do and will care for such a rich botanical legacy.

I encourage the reader to explore this work themselves, and act on the powerful messages and insights raised by the collective endeavours of the Botanical Artists Group.

Professor Stephen D. Hopper FLS  
Director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew



## PAINTING PLACE

### The Botanical Artists Group, Western Australia

With thousands of species and floral abundance that some parts of the world can only jealously admire from afar, the southwest of Western Australia is Australia's only internationally acknowledged biodiversity 'hotspot'. Stretching around the coast from Shark Bay to east of Esperance, this area (generally known as the Southwest Botanical Province) is recognised worldwide for its plant diversity. Bounded by desert and ocean, the flora and fauna of this region have evolved over millions of years, creating immense diversity in plants and animals. In particular the variety of plants is enormous, from the majestic eucalypts — the karri and jarrah — to the tiny and delicate orchids and triggerplants growing in their shade. Nearly 3000 of the 5500 vascular plant species found in the southwest are endemic to the region — and this doesn't even take into account the fungi, most of which haven't yet been named!

The challenges to preserve this environment are many. They include managing land clearing, the insidious disease *Phytophthora* (dieback), feral animals and climate change. There are national, state and local programs to document, preserve and re-establish the environment. Community land care groups across the region spend weekends weeding designated enclaves, planting trees and cleaning waterways. There are also larger organisations: the Gondwana Link Project, for example, is attempting to join up remnant natural ecosystems across the southwest corner.

Scientists and conservationists have been working for decades to document and preserve this unique environment's profusion of endemic and endangered species. The process of discovery and publication of botanical finds has traditionally linked art and science, with artists playing a key role in making images of plants for public distribution. Not surprisingly, the southwest of Western Australia is the home of many contemporary botanical artists who are actively recording the distinctive flora of the region.

Western Australia has a history of botanical art dating back at least to the late seventeenth century, when the first European explorers touched on the western shores of the continent. Engravings of specimens collected from the northwest coast by the English captain William Dampier and reproduced in his *A Voyage to New Holland etc.* [1703–09] are the first known images of Australian



Botanica Gallery, Pemberton 2007



Botanical Artists Group, 2008. Back row from left to right: Ellen Hickman, Katrina Syme, Pat Dundas, Margaret Pieroni. Seated: Penny Leech and Philippa Nikulinsky

Rica Erickson  
*Agonis flexuosa*, Perth, Oct. 1966 (detail)  
watercolour and pencil, 24.0 x 17.0 cm



Botanical Artists Group exhibition at Margaret River Art Galleries, 1994–95



Philippa Nikulinsky at Margaret River, December, 1994

flora. Illustrations resulting from French and British scientific voyages of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the work of artists such as Margaret Forrest, Ellis Rowan, Edgar Dell and Emily Pelloe from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, form the basis of a rich tradition of artists depicting the varied plant life of Western Australia.

In 1991 the Art Gallery of Western Australia organised *Wildflowers in Art*, an exhibition that surveyed the development of botanical art in the state from 1699 onwards, and included the work of contemporary artists using floral motifs in both traditional and non-traditional ways. The exhibition and accompanying publication highlighted the extent to which a surge in scientific investigation and publishing had stimulated the development of a community of contemporary botanical artists producing work for government departments and universities, as well as for environmental and private sponsors. Several of these artists met for the first time at the exhibition opening and decided to continue their discussions the next day at the home of Perth-based artist Philippa Nikulinsky.

Over cups of tea and coffee, conversation ranged across issues that affected them all as artists: their sense of isolation; techniques and mediums used; queries

about botanical details and issues to do with exhibiting and promoting their work. A key theme of the afternoon was how to deal with copyright, commissions and contracts — issues that still affect them all. The discussion was energising, and a loose association called the Botanical Artists Group was formed to provide a supportive forum for sharing ideas and resources. The group coalesced around six permanent members: Philippa Nikulinsky, Rica Erickson, Katrina Syme, Pat Dundas, Margaret Pieroni and Penny Leech. In 1995, when Penny temporarily resigned from the group to pursue other career options, Albany artist Ellen Hickman was invited to join. Penny rejoined in 2004 and there are now seven permanent members of the Botanical Artists Group.

Many of the artists remembered reading Rica's early illustrated books: *Orchids of the West* (1951), *Triggerplants* (1958) and *Plants of Prey in Australia* (1968). These books combined wonderful illustrations, simplicity of expression and good scientific information, and encouraged readers to be inquisitive and to look closely at plants in the Western Australian bush. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Rica contributed articles to magazines such as *Wildlife and Outdoors* and the *Australian Orchid Review*. These were captivating insights into nature made by a keen observer and passionate conservationist. In 1991, even though Rica had undertaken little painting in recent years, her membership and contribution to the Botanical Artists Group were greatly valued. Rica had experience in publishing and extensive botanical knowledge accumulated over decades of committed work as a naturalist. Additionally, her sense of history ensured that notes were taken at meetings and that the public activities of the group were recorded as they happened. Photographs, minutes, correspondence, press clippings and exhibition lists all now form part of the archive of the Botanical Artists Group.

From its beginnings the members were known collectively by their acronym — the BAGs — and at their first meeting they gave themselves nicknames such as Old Bag, Super Bag and Tea Bag. They still sometimes

mischievously introduce these nicknames into conversation to gauge listeners' reactions. From the start they determined that food and fun were as essential as dealing with more serious issues, and this light-hearted and irreverent approach has typified their association.

High on the agenda of the first meeting was pricing their work and looking at how individual artists were dealing with contracts and copyright. Everyone had stories of difficulties with purchasers who assumed that ownership of copyright automatically went with ownership of the work, or licensing arrangements where clients went well beyond the agreed boundaries of a contract. The artists realised that they needed to understand copyright, so they collectively joined the Arts Law Centre in Sydney to become better informed. As copyright is an ongoing problem, the artists now work with an experienced intellectual property rights lawyer who provides advice on contracts, on how to control the use of their images and to protect their interests in commercial negotiations. This practical and collective approach to solving shared problems is also typical of their activities.

Another early topic was how to achieve more exposure for their work. Botanical paintings can take months to complete, and in some cases where specimens are difficult to obtain, have to be worked on over several seasons. Therefore few artists can assemble enough finished work to hold exhibitions by themselves. By sharing the effort and costs of organising an exhibition and gathering work from each artist it became possible to exhibit more regularly.

The Botanical Artists Group showed for the first time at the Western Australian Wildflower Festival held at Kings Park in 1992. They hired a marquee to display their paintings along with greeting cards and posters they had produced. Rica exhibited some of her work and helped in the organisation of the event, along with sales and visitors' enquiries. The exhibition was a great success and the group exhibited at Kings Park on an annual basis until 2003, each year hiring a tent, showcasing their new work and meeting thousands of visitors. This exposure developed a loyal following of collectors who have continued to support their exhibitions, publications and commercial product ranges. In 2002 Pat Dundas opened a gallery in Pemberton that provided a permanent venue for the work of the group until 2008. Called *Botanica*, it presented their original paintings and drawings along with a selection of books, cards and textile works. Other exhibitions are held annually at commercial galleries in Perth, attracting large opening crowds of people who are keen to catch up with the artists and see what new work has been done.

Exhibitions are also an opportunity for the artists to see each other. With five of the seven living outside Perth, regular meetings are not always possible, but the group does organise an annual get-together. These are usually cheerful, and full of animated conversation. They are a chance to meet and discuss what's been happening, and to develop some joint projects. The artists are sensitive to the specialty work that each does, and it is not unusual for someone to redirect a commission or refer work to others in the group. Specimens collected on behalf of another artist might be passed on, contacts and technical information shared and the theme for the next joint exhibition worked out. Food, wine and convivial company are essential components of their meetings, and the vitality of the association has been enriched by this sense of collegiality and friendship.

The Botanical Artists Group has become a social and professional meeting forum for these highly specialised artists, each of whom contributes her own artistic approach, skills, and range of personal interests. This is an amazingly harmonious group of people — there is little tension amongst them. The group has nurtured good friendships and provided the personal and professional support that they all identified in 1991 as something they lacked. But what really keeps them together is the love of what they do.



Kings Park, September, 1995

Their passion for Australian plants in all their varied forms is the glue that binds them, and they share an abiding wonder of the natural world and enthusiasm for sharing this with others.

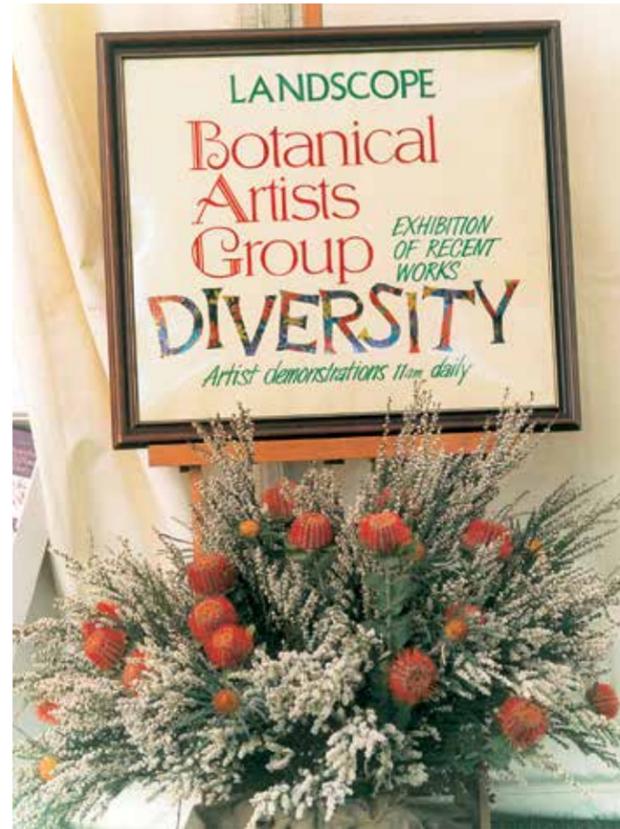
These artists live in an area of immense biological diversity, and their engagement with the environment does not end with their art. Several conduct scientific research and publish in their fields. Most undertake conservation activities and are active members of specialist botanical societies as well as participants in land care and rare flora groups. Some give painting classes to promote an understanding of the relationship between art and science, and others open their studios regularly to the public as part of community awareness programs.

These activities are not ancillary to their botanical painting; they are part of an integrated lifestyle that places great value on art and on the environment. The members of the Botanical Artists Group are absolutely committed to the 'places' they live and work in, and in their wide-ranging activities they engage with the landscape in ways that help us 'non-artists' see it through their eyes. They make visible the elements of nature that many of us might overlook. As human beings, we all interact with the environment around us and are influenced by it and in turn affect it through our actions. But we are not always able to — or even have the time to — study it in the detailed way that artists do.

Our twenty-first century world runs at a dazzling pace. It is a truism to say that we tend to live at speed, not at depth. Our lives are dominated by technology and, it seems, by increasing anxiety about the state of our planet. Global travel, telecommunications and the internet mean that we can be more mobile than people have ever been before, and it is possible to explore parts of the world that were inaccessible even fifty years ago. Tourism is not limited to big cities and monuments; there is an increasing level of eco-tourism as people find ways of connecting to nature, if only temporarily. But while modern technology may bring mobility, it also brings us face to face with what seems an increasingly turbulent world and a natural world in crisis.

Few environments have not been affected by humans, and living in large cities or sprawling suburbia generally distances us from those environments that are relatively undamaged. This separation from nature may well have a deleterious effect on human well-being. Edward O. Wilson in his 1984 book *Biophilia* suggested that human beings need far more from nature than mere food and shelter, that contact with other living things fulfils a basic biological need. Earlier, in *Topophilia* (1974), Yi Fu Tuan had expanded on the way humans build connections to specific landscapes through personal and symbolic attachments that may be very deeply held. These theories have been adapted and expanded by later scholars, who claim that attachments to nature may be personal, but in some instances can also be shared by whole communities. Whether the tendency to create these connections is innate or culturally determined is still being debated, but it is unquestionable that humans have complex relationships to nature and places.

'Places' have a great influence in our lives — the places we love and inhabit help shape our lives and give us all our own personal geography. Each time we move to a new place, we become part of it and it becomes



Kings Park display

part of us, and a new page is added to the personal atlas we carry wherever we go. And it's only when a special place is threatened in some way or we leave somewhere that we are really connected to, that we understand how important it has been in our life and how important it will continue to be even when we are no longer there.

Artists remind us of those places. Some painters depict grand panoramic landscapes; botanical artists see the landscape from the inside. They paint the detail that makes up the panorama. In creative and often emotionally charged images they tease out the essence of particular places. Their perspectives can trigger our memories of a particular lived experience. Most Australians have walked through the bush at least once, and noticed the spring flowers or the dry crackling twigs and leaves on a path. But our physical relationship to that specific place might be only temporary. By focusing on the small elements and presenting them in beautiful and imaginative images, botanical artists can transport us back to our own experience. The complexity and detail of their images also help us slow down and notice the 'micro' components of a place. In this way the artists provide unique windows onto the world and different interpretations of our relationship with it.

The work of the Botanical Artists Group helps us connect to specific environments and to visualise and create a sense of place. When Philippa Nikulinsky paints a spiky, gnarled *Scaevola* collected from the goldfields area, she conjures up in visual form a history of this individual plant and the elemental forces of wind and sun that have shaped it, and so reveals its indomitable survival instinct. Her paintings are based on narratives embedded in the form of the subjects and the environment they inhabit. Her most recent book, *Soul of the Desert* (2005), produced with botanist Stephen Hopper, takes this approach further and exposes in a poetic and gentle way the interrelatedness of the plants and animals of the desert region.

Penny Leech's 'found objects' from the Karri Walk Trail are an account of walking, looking and choosing not only the natural things that are there but also the things that are not natural to the area. A feather fallen from some passing bird and insect-bitten leaves are juxtaposed with part of a soft drink can, posing silent questions about how each object came to be there. And when Katrina Syme paints a magical scene of fungi on the forest floor, it reminds us that the cycle of birth, death and decay connects all living things.

Each of the botanical artists constantly explores different approaches and subject matter, sometimes working more conceptually with their material and at other times producing paintings for scientific or technical purposes. It is too easy to dismiss botanical illustration as simply an exact painted record of a plant specimen. While a key aim may be to accurately record something, an artist applies other considerations to the work that make it far more than a 'replica'. They bring passion and sensitivity and creative ways of looking at the world. Ellen Hickman's graceful images of the multiple stages and parts of a plant are like an unfolding diary of nature. The passing of time is captured as the plant moves from bud to fruit to seed. And her intense interest in structure, such as in *Anigozanthos rufus* (2002), reveals the astonishing microscopic parts that make up the whole.

Botanical artists are intensely focused. They use traditional techniques of watercolour and pencil to investigate their subjects — and it is all about revealing the subject. Their relationship to their work has been described as 'obsessive': they might spend years working on the same plants, becoming specialists in orchids or dryandras, banksias or rushes while producing the paintings or drawings for a major scientific publication. These projects can take more than a decade to complete, requiring a single-minded commitment to pursue the job to the end and paint the entire genus — and, in the process, understand it in all its variations and forms.

The botanical world, like the human world, is replete with immeasurable variety in the species. Not only is there diversity of form: colour too can shift, sometimes almost imperceptibly, and at other times producing a wide range of colour within the same species. Pat Dundas devoted seventeen years to recording the orchids of Western Australia, and decided that it was essential to show the differences that would help people recognise the range of variations. So a single page might show up to five different colour variations of the one orchid species. This forces the viewer to not only 'spot the difference', but to think about the very concept of difference.

Living within a landscape, nurturing and sustaining it, gives a different perspective. Margaret Pieroni walks her bush block at Denmark and observes the flowering cycles of the plants that have become her main subjects. She is painting a catalogue of what grows on her property: orchids, delicate triggerplants that appear in early summer, and various pea-flowered species. Her dedication to the dryandras and verticordias that she spent so many years painting remains, but it has been enriched by a very intimate connection to a particular place. Her current activity is all about what's in her own back yard.

It is this connection to a specific place that enhances the work of the botanical artists. Although many go on extensive field trips (Philippa can spend six weeks at a time out in the desert), Katrina, Penny, Pat and Margaret also intimately know and draw upon their immediate surroundings for their art. They only have to walk out of their homes to be surrounded by potential specimens for painting. Katrina is constantly collecting fungi from the karri forest adjacent to her Denmark property and storing them in the family fridge. Penny's excursions along the Karri Walk Trail keep her informed of what is flowering and at the same time remind her of the impact of human activity on the bush. But being very closely connected to a place can also have its drawbacks. Pat is confronted with the effects of logging and land clearing on the southwest environment. Every day she is witness to the log trucks driving past her gallery on their way to and from the local mill, and she sometimes finds it difficult to maintain the positive approach she needs for painting. For Pat the term 'hotspot' has a double meaning — not only does she live in a biologically diverse region, but she also inhabits the zone where the conservation movement and the timber industry collide. Similarly, Ellen Hickman's work as a consultant botanist in the Albany region reminds her on a daily basis of the damage caused by humans. For her, the studio provides a respite and a positive environment where she can express her love for and deep knowledge of plants.

With the invention of the camera and close-up lenses, many predicted — and many still predict — the end of botanical illustration. Who needs an artist to slave over a detailed painted version of a plant specimen when a camera with a macro lens can capture all that in a millisecond? Yet botanical painting is more popular in the early twenty-first century than it has been for decades. Paradoxically, its revival may have been helped by contemporary dilemmas about classification and climate change. Many of the standard botanical textbooks are being revised as DNA analysis sees species split and re-split, contributing to the shattering of classical Linnaean taxonomy.

The rush to document endangered species and floral habitats in threatened areas has also contributed to a flourishing of the botanical publishing industry. Botanical artists provide the consistency of illustration required for these sorts of publications and academic papers. With beauty and accuracy they combine in one image all the component parts of a plant — flowers, stem, fruit and seed. Their images complement the written descriptions, making visible details that are otherwise difficult to describe. By isolating the specimen from its habitat, the painted image lends it a clarity and distinction that photographs cannot. And it is not unheard of for an artist who is peering intensely at the subject for long periods to spot a botanical detail that has eluded the botanist.

But botanical painting is not purely about documentation. It is also an art form in itself. Within what may seem the rigid discipline of botanical illustration there remains enormous potential for creativity. The choice of the subject and the desire for accurate representation set the scene, but then each artist expresses their individuality through the composition, stylistic approach and the way the media are used. This makes



Botanical Artists Group, Kings Park, 1992. From left to right: Katrina Syme, Penny Leech, Margaret Pieroni, Philippa Nikulinsky, Pat Dundas, Rica Erickson

it possible to distinguish between the work of artists who have well-developed styles. It is apparent in the way specimens have been arranged or the particular application of paint and pencil. Ellen Hickman has reinterpreted the classical style of dissections and component parts that illustrator Ferdinand Bauer used at the start of the nineteenth century. But instead of watercolours she uses a new medium — aquarelle coloured pencils — to create a distinctive luminosity and depth of colour in compositions that are more compressed and intense than Bauer's. Margaret Pieroni also greatly admires Bauer's work, but her compositions are placed centrally, to create an impression of spaciousness. And even in the application of watercolour paint there are differences: Philippa Nikulinsky uses fluid watercolour while Penny Leech has a 'dry brush' technique, applying layer after layer of thin colour to build up her paintings.

Wealthy collectors such as Shirley Sherwood in the United Kingdom have given the art form a new prominence through exhibitions and publications of contemporary botanical art. Museums and botanic gardens around the world have attracted new audiences with regular botanical art displays. The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation in Pittsburgh has developed an extraordinary collection of original artworks and the New York State Museum holds annual exhibitions of international botanical art. Around Australia, almost every state has an annual 'Botanica' type of exhibition, and they attract entries of a high standard and dedicated collectors. The success of the Margaret Flockton Award for Botanical Illustration in Sydney and the Waterhouse Prize for Natural History in Adelaide reflects a growing public interest in botanical and natural history painting. Themed art exhibitions that explore ongoing concerns about environment degradation and climate change are regularly organised by art museums while, more recently, contemporary art spaces have initiated displays that bring artists and scientists together in creative dialogue about ecological issues.

Using art and illustration as a way of understanding the plant world has been a human activity for millennia. Some of the rudimentary printed images of plants in herbals from the early sixteenth century were made in an attempt to understand their forms and properties, and their place in the world. Perhaps little has changed. Contemporary botanical artists draw and paint plants so as to comprehend them, and through their work they make this knowledge available to others.

In the 1980s and 1990s there was a rush to critique colonial art and natural history art forms. They were examined for indicators of power relationships and colonial control over the natural world and its resources. Plant naming was just another aspect of the empire-building process. But while Linnaean taxonomy may have imposed order on a seemingly chaotic array of diversity, today's botanical artists are not about control. The work of the Botanical Artists Group is dedicated to raising awareness and assisting in efforts to conserve the natural heritage of Western Australia. The artists' messages are skilfully delivered through beautiful and apparently benign images that are perhaps a timely reminder of just what we all stand to lose.

Janda Gooding  
Canberra, 2008