



Jess Dare, *Conceptual flowering plant series 2013*, Lampwork Glass

# ART, NATURE AND MEMORY

BY STEPHEN FORBES

In the northeast corner of the Santos Museum of Economic Botany is a glass cabinet dedicated to a forest of mushrooms and toadstools. For a little kid these are at eye height and looking through the stems the shapes, textures and colours are enthralling – even for an adult looking down through the cabinet the scene is captivating. These botanically accurate models are made from papier-mâché and are hand coloured. The scholarship and technique that delivered these models from Germany to Adelaide in the 19th century deserve notice. The apples, pears and plums in the glass cabinets in the southeast corner of the museum share the same scholarship and technique. These botanical models, originally developed as standards and for education, are one of the few remaining anywhere in the world.

The most celebrated botanical models in the world are the fabled Blaschka glass flowers in the Harvard Botanical Museum. The Blaschka's reputation as natural history model makers working in glass was well established when Harvard commissioned botanical models from their works in Dresden. Eventually the museum, through the support of generous donors, commissioned Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka to dedicate their entire output to the production of glass flowers for Harvard. The result was over 3000 models of 847 plant species delivered between 1887 and 1936.

The precision is such that the mechanism of pollination for *Pinguicula* (butterworts - carnivorous plant with leaves that act as flypaper) is apparent in the models that show one bee entering a flower and another lifting the stigma apron as it exits. Botanist Donald Schnell believed he'd been the first to elucidate the pollination mechanism in the late 20th century – until he visited the Harvard Botanical Museum and saw Blaschka's exposition of the pollination process.

Visitors to the Blaschka glass flowers find the experience both exhilarating and disquieting. The quality of the craftsmanship is difficult to comprehend and the beauty of both the detail and each composition is overwhelming. The glass flowers won't translate into an image and the experience is difficult to communicate.

Our journey as a species has necessarily been about our relationship with plants as much as about our relationships with each other and with our God. The miracle that plants perform is in transforming light into life. Plants trap sunlight and use air and water to provide the fuel that enables our hearts to beat. The transformation of light into life by plants and its subsequent slow decay is the basis for the continuing narrative of harvest for life on Earth. The ethereal nature of plants, floating in air where they harvest light and

“  
Our journey as a species has necessarily been about our relationship with plants as much as about our relationships with each other and with our God.”

carbon – as much as in the ground to harvest water and nutrients – is more than a matter for wonder. Plants provide the integrating narrative to connect culture, society, economy and environment. Plants have always been the basis of our story as a species by providing food for people and for grazing animals, and as the source of medicines, oils, resins and adhesives, dyes, fibre for clothing and sails, wood for construction and weapons and providing both fossil and biofuels.

The process of capturing plants in particular or nature in general in art, whether on paper, in papier-mâché or in glass is a rich vein. In Adelaide, glass artist Jess Dare at Gray Street Studio is traversing some of this terrain through her work and her recent exhibition *The Nature of Memory*. Jess' choice of this most challenging of materials for her first solo show is incredibly audacious. Fortunately Jess' commitment to hothousing the development of her skills as a jeweller and glass lamp worker is extraordinary. Jess has taken inspiration and instruction from the leading exponents in her field both past (check out the Blaschka's glass flowers on-line) and present (check out one of Jess' teachers, Loren Stump's murrine *Madonna of the Rocks*, [stumpchuck.com](http://stumpchuck.com)) and has accelerated her learning to pull off an exceptional exhibition that addresses the fragility of nature, the fragility of memory and the fragility of materials.

Leopold Blaschka observed, “The only way to become a glass modeller of skill ... is to get a good great-grandfather who loved glass; then he is to have a son with like taste; he is to be your grandfather. He in turn will have a son who must, as your father, be passionately fond of glass.” In a sense there is a truth resident here - for Jess' impetus for her exhibition was the sad passing of her grandfather in 2011. Jess' grandfather was a passionate and dedicated gardener who inspired the rest of the family to nurture and grow things... in Jess' case the legacy of her grandfather is preserved in her glass garden.

Jess' work and exhibition won the Eran Svigos award for best visual art at this year's Adelaide Fringe Awards. Following its inaugural showing at Gray Street Workshop Gallery in Adelaide *The Nature of Memory* will tour to Gallery 20/17 in Sydney at the beginning of this month and to Gallery Bilk in Canberra at the end of May.

» Stephen Forbes is the Director of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide