

# PLANT/LIFE

ARTS  
PROJECT  
AUSTRALIA

Curated by Kirsty Grant

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It started as a simple idea.

A celebration of the natural world. Flowers and trees. Colour and greenery. Beauty. Vitality.

The experience of the past few years has brought the importance of nature and of being in a natural environment into sharp relief, with many of us locked inside our homes and allowed outdoors for only a limited time each day. For Melburnians, the five-kilometre lockdown limit imposed even more restrictions and we discovered all of the green spaces in our area. Local parks and reserves became places of respite and solace – as well as providing the opportunity to socialise at a safe distance.

On the most basic of levels, plants are essential to life and we seem to know instinctively that they're good to have around, bringing them inside and transforming our domestic spaces into verdant oases. Tending to plants teaches patience and commitment, as well as inspiring awe and creativity. Indeed, as Claude Monet once said, 'My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece.'

Plants are a major source of inspiration for Georgia Szmerling and in this exhibition, her mural-sized wall painting immerses visitors in a dense tracery of vines and leaves. Pastel underdrawing provides the basis for boldly painted lines and the imprint of leaves collected on the way to the gallery punctuates the design. Szmerling's line in particular, which sprouts and creeps, echoes the energy and life force of plants, reminding us of the quiet power and persistence of nature – the way in which a flower can grow, for example, between a crack in a concrete path. In a similar way, the layered linear brushstrokes of Philip Truett's gestural paintings, communicate a sense of the living, growing, moving plant.

We respond to plants with all our senses: the perfume of a rose, the crunch of autumn leaves underfoot, the feel of a gnarled trunk of an ancient tree. Taste is obvious, and the visual diversity of plant life is immense, with seemingly endless variations of colour, shape and scale. The work of Robert Brown reflects a strong sensory response to his subject and his stylised flowers present a joyous riot of pattern and colour, the full range of his palette often appearing in the petals and

leaves of a single stem. In contrast, Lygin Ang's paintings are restrained, using minimal colour against a white background, and drawing attention to the unique structural qualities of each plant with a density of paint that alludes to their smooth, fleshy surfaces. Incising designs into clay, Brigid Hanrahan utilises the textural qualities of her medium (a combination of rough surfaces and smooth glaze) and bold colour, activating the desire to touch as well as look.

Plants and flowers have their own symbolic language – widely understood in earlier times, if now, somewhat arcane – rosemary for remembrance, white lilies for purity and red roses of course, which represent passionate love. We use plants to symbolise emotions and to mark significant occasions. Plants can also be signifiers of place; think of Canada's maple leaf for example, or Victoria's pink heath. From young saplings to towering mature specimens, trees in particular are often used to convey concepts such as strength, resilience, age and wisdom.

Trees feature prominently in the work of Emily Ferretti, but rather than being literal representations, they are subtly anthropomorphic, reflecting human emotions and varied psychological states. There is a palpable sense of movement in her paintings – physical gestures can be traced through form – and their translucent colour seems to emanate light. Painting on a window of the Collingwood Yards gallery for this exhibition, Ferretti takes this one step further, using light as a medium to illuminate the radiating sun and moon above, their cyclical rotation watched over by a sentinel tree.

When making the Mystery of Trees series, Yvonne Kendall connected with the symbolism of trees as markers of stability and permanence – she had recently bought a house and was putting down her own roots. Becoming more aware of the ecosystems that exist within the natural world, and the way that human behaviour was interfering with these systems, she realised that while trees will grow without us, we can't survive without them. Growing out of books (about music, poetry, language and so on), some of these trees grow in fertile, artistic soil.

While the Pop sensibility of Christopher Langton's oversized sunflowers suggests a certain light-heartedness, presented in a field of fifty or more sculptures – as they were initially, when commissioned for the 1996

Melbourne Art Fair – they also engage with environmental politics, making a powerful point about genetically modified crops. The animated sunflowers move as if they are turning their heads to follow the sun, or being blown gently by the wind, but en-masse, they are more like robots, identical, engineered and controllable.

Science and art have always intersected with nature and the early study of plants saw the emergence of the genre of botanical art in which each element of a plant is meticulously documented as a means of aiding understanding and identification. The attention Anthony Romagnano gives to his subjects recalls this focus, although his work is mediated by a clear sense of creative freedom (as opposed to rational science and truth), which is expressed through the intense regularity of his mark-making and use of vivid colour that covers the sheet from edge to edge. In a similar way, Rosie O'Brien describes the varied forms of the plants and flowers she depicts, carefully articulating their structure and growing habits, and outlining them in ink before adding brilliant washes of watercolour. Chris O'Brien also uses artistic licence to great effect in his series of soft sculptures. Comprising mismatched pieces of fabric, like a patchwork quilt, his cacti turn expectations on their head, their soft, tactile nature inviting our touch instead of repelling it as in nature.

So what started as 'plant life' became PLANT/LIFE, with an emphasis on the interconnectedness of all living things. The notion of celebration continued too, but expanded to encompass a celebration of creativity and the way that seeing something through the eyes of artists invites us to see it anew. It's funny how the simple things are often more important (and rewarding) than we imagine.

## **KIRSTY GRANT / 2022**

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