

EXHIBITION NEWSLETTER

An Education in Light

Recent drawings by *Filomena Coppola*

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c o p p o l a

An Interview with Filomena Coppola – Gary Catalano

The following text is an edited version of an interview conducted at the University of Tasmania's Rosamond McCulloch Studio at the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris on 12 April 1997.

Filomena Coppola was born at Mildura in 1968 and studied at both La Trobe University's Bendigo Campus and the University of Tasmania at Hobart. She staged her first exhibition at Hobart's Entrepot Gallery in 1992 and is represented in a number of public collections throughout Australia.

GC: *When I look at your work in any bulk I get a very strong sense of nature as something lush, verdant, excessive and over-ripe. Now, I'm sure nature is like that for some people, but not, I would have thought for someone who grew up, as you did, in Mildura.*

FC: I have to laugh when I hear that. I understand the flatness and dryness of the area, but the lushness you mention has got a lot to do with my mother's garden. It was fantastic – a sort of Noah's Ark of gardens – and had everything in it. So around our house it was quite verdant and over-ripe. We had acres of land and were surrounded by the green of vineyards and fruit-trees.

GC: *Did you see much of the desert when you were there?*

FC: Only when we traveled. A lot of my family lived in Adelaide, so we'd drive through a bit of it on the way.

GC: *You need to drive north to Broken Hill to see it.*

FC: Yes, there's the Hattah area and the Little Desert to the south, but they're still bushland and scrub.

GC: *They're semi-arid.*

FC: Mildura's really an oasis. When I go back now I tend to fly, and its incredible seeing that line where it changes from greenness to arid desert.



Monument
Pastel on paper
105h x 75w cm
1996

GC: *Have you given much thought to the way in which Mildura may have influenced or shaped your work?*

FC: Only really in terms of that garden. Mum and Dad don't live in that house anymore, but my memory of the plants there is still vivid. I remember the pomegranate which grew at the base of the almond tree: they're the plants I've based these works on. The pomegranate forms, the figs, and the combination of textures in my work all come from my experience of being surrounded by these plants and fruits. I grew up climbing a fig-tree.

GC: *Looking back on it, do you think Mildura was an interesting place in which to grow up?*

FC: Culturally it was interesting because there was a diverse mix of people who came to work in a primary industry. You were always meeting and dealing with people from different cultures from a very early age.

GC: *Do you know any other artist who have come from there?*

FC: I can't think of anyone else, but Danila Vassilieff taught there for a few years. There's a fantastic collection of his watercolours in the Mildura Arts Centre Gallery.



Fluid
Pastel on paper
105h x 75w cm
1997

GC: *How did you become interested in art?*

FC: I think I always did it. There were two staff member at high school who were very supportive and encouraging. When I applied for art school, I didn't know that there was anything else I could go out and do.

GC: *Were your parents encouraging?*

FC: I don't think *any* parents want their child to become an artist. (Laughs)

GC: *Have they been to many of your exhibitions?*

FC: After my first year at Hobart I specifically exhibited at the Arts Centre in Mildura so they could see my work. They appreciated the effort, but they couldn't understand it. I think the whole concept of making things and putting them on a wall is a bit foreign to them.

GC: *So they didn't have any paintings on the wall at home?*

FC: They did when I was growing up. They kept putting up these really bad paintings I'd done at high school which stayed there for a really long time.

GC: *What attracted you so strongly to printmaking?*

FC: I went to art school to be a painter, then got lured into the printmaking and photography department as an undergraduate. But it wasn't until I commenced post-graduate studies that I began working exclusively with printmaking – particularly with etching. Etching's a medium that relies heavily on drawing and the combination of marks and textures produced. It's also a tactile medium – a combination of metal, acid, water, paper and ink – and at its core is drawing. It has a seductive quality that I enjoy working with.

GC: *A lot of your prints contain patterning drawing from Victorian wallpaper. How did you become interested in that?*

FC: Those prints developed in Hobart and were shown in an exhibition called *In the Garden of Eve* at Dick Bett's in 1995. I was using Greco-Roman columns to represent my Italian background, and I

wanted to incorporate a contrasting element which would be immediately recognized as something Anglo-Australian. So I chose Victorian wallpapers. I was using the two elements to create a dialogue. Mixing the columns with the wallpapers gave them an ambiguous sense of space and time. Columns are heavy stone objects, but now they appear to float in an interior wallpapered space: and sometimes they look as though they're being caressed by a sea of acanthus leaves and floral patterning. Although they're quite different in nature, the columns and wallpaper create a harmonious dialogue. That is the point I wanted to assert about cultures. They can be quite separate, but there's an intangible quality that allows them to exist together.

GC: *Was there a great tension between the Italian and the Anglo-Australian worlds in Mildura?*

FC: Yes, I guess what I am trying to get at in the work is this episode that happened in primary school when I was about eight. There's a nice sense of naivety when you're young; you can ask any question you want. A young boy came up and said to me "So are you Italian or Australian?" I remember thinking "Well my parents are Italian but I was born here", but he kept on insisting "So where were you born? Were you born here or in Italy?" Eventually I said I was born here, to which he said "Well, you're Australian then!" and walked off. I was left with an "Am I?" (laughs) "What am I?" That's something I grew up with, and it's part of the work now.

GC: *So you felt in two different places at the one time?*

FC: Yes, I always did. I grew up with parents who'd arrived from Italy and brought me up as they would have if I were born there, but concurrently I was integrating into this other society that was so different.

GC: *It intrigues me that you like to combine two distinct vantage points in your work. You generally have a strong central form that reads from a distance, but then there's a multitude of small-scale marks that can only be distinguished up close. Do you know why you construct works that way?*

FC: It comes from working with oppositions, whether they're about culture, weight or colour. My work's always about oppositions and somehow trying to dissolve them, so it's quite a conscious effort. Somehow opposites are actually the same thing; they rely so much on each other to be opposi-

tions or opposites. What I'm really interested in is the space between them - where one becomes the other, where the notion of masculinity slips into femininity, where the notion of weight becomes weightlessness, and absence/presence.

Also, I don't want to give everything away at once. I want the work to change over the period time that it's being viewed, so from a distance you see one thing, and then you come to it second or two minutes later and the closer you get the more it changes and becomes something different. Part of it is concealing a little bit of information and giving it away slowly and more gently.

GC: *Had you become dissatisfied with printmaking when you started working in pastels?*

FC: I'd done a lot of etchings before I'd worked in pastels, and a lot of really large etchings. I'm not dissatisfied with the medium at all; I actually enjoy the quality that etching gives and the way of working in etching. But at the same time I wanted to get more colour in the work, and I found that was difficult in the scale I was working within etching. So I started working in pastels for that reason. As well as that, because I was editing heavily before I made the pieces and had so many images in my sketchbooks that I hadn't been able to use. In a way, when I started working with pastels I was backtracking and filling in those gaps.



Momentum
Pastel on paper
105h x 75w cm
1997

GC: *You've been at the Cite for almost five months now. Is that long enough for you to formulate your thoughts on how Europe and Australia differ?*

FC: It is .. and it isn't. It sounds like it's quite a long time, but it's actually gone quite quickly. I've learnt a lot from other artists who manage to live off their art. It's so rare in Australia to meet artists in that position, but here it's normal. There's such a market and so many more galleries in each town. That's been a huge, eye-opening experience.

Europe's fantastic to come to. There's so much to see – in art, architecture, in street culture – but at the same time I really love the fact that in Australia we've got so many fantastic artists who don't need all this around them in order to make exceptional art.

GC: *What were your strongest initial impressions of Paris?*

FC: I think the strongest one – and it's not just Paris, it's what I've seen of France – is the light. That's the one thing I hope I'll always remember. When I arrived it was winter and everything was black and white; there were no shadows because the cloud cover was down. I went out and bought all these grey-toned pastels, because everything was so flat and grey. And seeing the light in the south of France was extraordinary. I'm understanding European painting so much better now.

GC: *Are you thinking of any artists in particular?*

FC: When I went to the south I really understood Impressionism for the first time. It was such an awakening to actually see mauve-coloured shadows; I didn't think that they really existed. There's this strange purpleness about the light in the sky. That was really important. It was an enormous re-education going to Aix and understanding Cezanne's painting in terms of the light. Nothing has any solid form because of the way the light falls; it all dissolves.

GC: *How long did it take before you settled down and did some of your own work?*

FC: I did the first piece soon after I came – in order to make a mark and somehow make the studio my own. I think that's important anywhere, to make a mess. I had two drawings on the wall quite quickly, but then I didn't see my studio for about a month after that. I was too busy in and out of galleries. After a while I struck a balance and was able to get on with my work as well as go out into the galleries.

GC: *You've said previously that one of the first things you went to see on your arrival were the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries in the Musee de Cluny. What attracted you to tapestries in general and to those in particular?*

FC: I've had an ongoing interest in tapestries. I find tapestries seductive. There's this incredible tactility to them; they have the hand of the maker there all the time, as well as being a beautiful image.

As you know, the Lady with the Unicorn series incorporates islands of colour and has a relationship between the lady, a unicorn and a lion. I find that combination of elements exciting. There's one tapestry in which the unicorn has lifted the lady's skirt and is resting its hooves on her petticoat. It has this beautiful elegance and this erotic quirkiness all at the same time.

GC: *What have been some of the other great discoveries for you?*

FC: It's been more a case of rediscovery, because I've been looking at people that I've worked from



Seeds of Knowledge
Pastel on paper
92h x 66w cm
1997

in reproduction, like Vermeer and Chardin. It's been such a reassessment of everything I know.

But there's this other side of Paris, and that's the architecture. One of the strongest buildings is the Institut du Monde Arabe. Its façade is a wonderful combination of traditional pattern forms and contemporary technology.¹ I also like I M Pei's glass pyramid in the Louvre. That's Paris for me, this mixture of the traditional and the contemporary.

When I first arrived they were redoing the interior of the St Gervais-St Protais. They'd put up these white sheets along the aisle around the altar, and it could have been an installation in a contemporary gallery. But its serendipitous nature made it even more beautiful.

GC: *At first glance the pastels you've been producing here seem to be continuations of the work you showed at Dick Bett's in 1996 before you left Australia. Do you want to talk about some of the ways in which Paris may have leaked into them?*

FC: Any work you make derives in some way from your previous work. One of the first pieces I made here had a composition similar to the last etching I'd made in Australia. But Paris does leak into them, sometimes in an obvious – and sometimes in an insidious – way. It's often the case that if I'm working on a drawing and go out to see a painting, a little of what I've appreciated in that painting – its colour, its composition, a shadow, a small detail – becomes incorporated in my drawing.

When I left Australia people kept asking me what was going to happen to my work here. I kept saying that I didn't expect to see Paris in my work until about two years time, because it usually takes a bit of time for the influence to filter through. So I'm surprised at how much has infiltrated into the work. I can look at it as say "That came from that sculpture or tapestry", or "I just looked at that painting and that colour was there."

GC: *You've also been making works from feathers, two or three of which are on the wall here. How did you get to do them?*

FC: Well, I've worked with fabrics for a little while, and I was always planning to continue that work in Paris. I assumed that there must be some incredible fabrics available here. I became interested in feathers and fur – things that are tactile, things that you want to touch – and because they seemed to do, both visually and in a tactile way, what I was trying to do with in the drawings just across from them on the other wall. The textures of the feathers and the way they fell were very similar to the shape I was drawing; they seemed to get to that point of surface and tactility immediately.

GC: *Have you seen any shows of contemporary art that have particularly interested you?*

FC: I think the most important discovery was Piero Pizzi Cannella, because of his use of space and paint. Another was Alberola, who's just had a big show at the Musee d'Arte Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and once again what I was responding to was the strong sense of drawing that comes through in the work.

There's also a Japanese artist, Katsuhito Nishikawa, who works with quite a lot of media. He works with glass, paper, wood and with drawings and paintings, but somehow all these things manage to work in one installation. The other ones were not so contemporary – like Sean Scully, whom I've looked at for a long time but never actually seen in the flesh.

GC: *What about the group shows?*

FC: *Dialogues de l'Ombre* was a really good show about what makes photography work in terms of light and shadow. There's another show at Thaddeus Ropac at the moment that I quite enjoyed.



Blue Indigo
Pastel on paper
92h x 66w cm
1997

It's called *Sous le Manteau* and it's about the surface of the skin and what covers the body. It's got forty-three artists in it, so you don't get a strong sense of each artists work as a whole, but some of their pieces are really interesting in their subtlety. It's a big mixed show, with videos, fabrics and glass as well as two dimensional pieces, so it's got everything in it.

*1*Designed by Jean Nouvel, the *Institut du Monde Arabe* is located on the left bank of the Seine, just upriver from the Pont de Sully. It was established in 1980 in order to encourage links between the Islamic world and the West.

Nouvel's building is notable for its south elevation, which contains 1,600 electronically controlled screens which open or close in response to the amount of sunlight falling on them.



Ripe I
Pastel on paper
105h x 75w cm
1997