

Launch of Filomena Coppola's *Earthly Tales* at Gallery 152, York

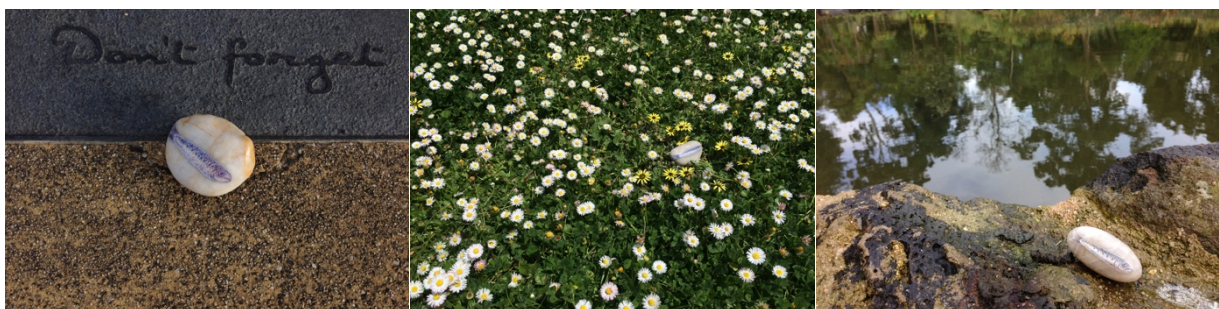
by John Kinsella

This is an exhibition of the tactile — you'll want to touch, but you can't, and that tension will generate insight upon insight in a cascading run of sensations. For these works are about sensations, as much as they are about displacement, disconnection, but also invitation and entry points.

There are three series of work here; each of the threads is in conversation, in this superb open space where light and bareness coalesce. The natural elements are displaced, as the Murray Cod you will see drawn on ancient petrified redgum sanded and polished to a sheen, and the orchids you see in their aching leaves and stalks and blossoms are a long way from home. Yet such separations create empathy, for the fish is trying not only to find its way home, to understand its own issues of belonging, but also to tell us something about our own conditions of belonging and isolation. In a sense, the threads interweaving in this distant space are about empathy and hope.

And as a silhouette of the 'Fish Out of Water — Murray Cod' series there is an earlier work, and some understanding of the drives of this work is useful in approaching 'Murray Cod.' Filomena Coppola has said:

Fish out of Water – Murray Cod is a development from an intervention project that began at summer solstice, 2013 and continued through summer solstice 2014. I have been painting a lone sardine on a river pebble – the sardine is a reference to the waters near Sardegna and the Port of Napoli – the port where my parents began their journey to Australia. I then released a pebble at each of the eight sabbats. These represent the earth changes of the summer and winter solstice, the equinoxes and the four cross quarters of Lamas, Samhain, Imbolc and Beltane. Often associated with pagan festivals, I am acknowledging this history as well as connecting with the earth changes throughout the year; the seasons, light and my own connection to place.



L-R. Sabbat Release, Imbolc, Port Melbourne, 2 August, Beltane, Monsalvat, 31 October and Winter Solstice, Botanic Gardens, 21 June 2014

If you're interested in the dynamics of this fascinating project, there's a downloadable pdf available via Filomena's website. And though these sardines are in evidence in the framed works here (which constitute one of the three main narratives in the exhibition), crossing Australia on their long, almost timeless journey, carrying stories across the world's oceans and acting as shamans and healers on behalf of the earth itself, while also functioning as cultural intermediary and creating a hybrid presence and new stories as they progress, the real focus of the 'Fish Out of Water' installations here is the 'Murray Cod' of which the artist notes:

This work *Fish out of Water – Murray Cod* is a continuation of this project. Working with petrified red gum, which is between 5000-9000 years old and sourced from the Murray River, I made nine organic forms – grinding and sanding the wood into forms that are beautiful to hold. The petrified red gum carries within it stories of the Murray River, this continent, its cultural history, and the floods, droughts, fires that have affected this landscape. I feel that each organic form vibrates with the history that it carries. On each, I have painted a Murray Cod – a fish out of water – a comment on this changing continent, its climate, culture and demographic. I then travelled the length of the Murray River and selected nine locations beginning at Cudgewa Creek and ending where the river runs to the ocean at Goolwa'

[Artist's statement — website].



Fish out of Water – Murray Cod, (Cudgewa Creek, Bonegilla, Boomanoomana, Barmah, Swan Hill, Boundary Bend, Kings Billabong, Lyrup Flats and Goolwa. 9 redgum shelves individually etched, 9 colour photographs, and 9 petrified redgum forms and gouache. Each component measures, approximately 23h x 30w x 25d cm. Overall dimensions variable.

And we can see that journey here, and we can connect with its cyclical movement, and share the journeys. This vital predatory fish of the Murray-Darling system — one that nurtures and protects its eggs — is under threat in its own home. It is looking for a way back to its stories, its narrative of being. And, in addition to this, we can all question our own understandings of cultural presence and relativism, and the responsibility we all have to respect the different stories of belonging, and the different stories of journeying. I appreciate and admire the respect shown to Indigenous knowledge and presence, and the power of that belonging.



L-R Wallflower – Precious Blossom, pastel on paper 80h x 80w cm and Wallflower – Meow, Make me purr, pastel on paper, 80h x 70w cm

The other thread of this exhibition, the ‘Wallflower’ series, is in part about sexuality and female subjectivity, and this doesn’t necessarily mean it requires the male, though the male may be there, hovering around the edges. It’s about identity more than sexuality, and as sensual it is, it’s for the ‘female’ to decide, to make choices.

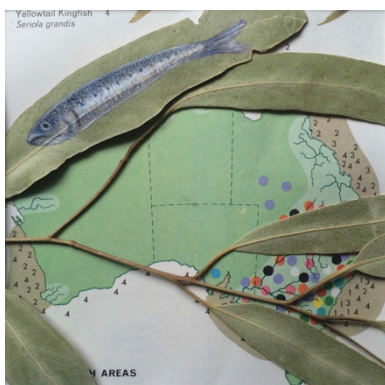
In many ways, these flowers are speaking to women, though not exclusively — these are not to be left sitting on the sidelines neglected, waiting to be asked to dance, they are far too active in their apparent quietude for that. These are suggestions of female bodies — but there’s the furred implication of male presence as well, but maybe that’s not essential here. What’s challenging in all this is that these ‘parts’ are closer than many would like to think — they fur together, they grow together, they are part of the living organism, of the essence of life itself.

There's nothing prurient in this — it's threatening, sure, but life is about risk and we need to understand our discomforts as much as our pleasures. So, enticing and disturbing, maybe, at once?

They are also outside sexuality, as they are outside the plant, the botanical. They are vegetable becoming animal and vice versa; they are the interweaving of all life into the moment of observation and experience. And the desire to touch. First thing I did when approaching the remarkable 'Wallflower — Meow, make me purr', was reach out to touch, then remind myself, No, that's not permitted, not part of the rules of encounter. Step back, respect the intactness of the image before you, and all it represents.

Not only did I want to stroke the fur as one might a partner's hair, or an animal's fur, but to stroke it against the grain, the wrong way. Because there's something disturbing going on in these drawings, something that makes the pastels hyper-real beyond illustration, and something almost carnivorous. Not as dentata, or as invasiveness, but as a dangerous kind of welcome.

Talking with Filomena, she mentioned the animal belly seam in the fur, and I agreed, I had encountered that in the work as well — something liminal, a line that is vulnerable and yet assertive. The irony of the docile image of the wallpaper background, the polite and muted domestic, is that within the walls of rooms the secrets are held, the risks taken in love and life, and shared encounters made. There is something threatening and rebellious in all this; with its undertones of the anarchist designer William Morris, one is also reminded of where the decorative meets craft.

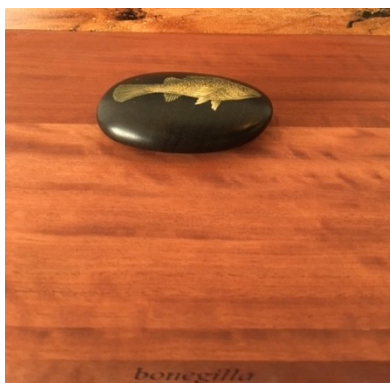


L-R, Fish out of Water — Fishing, gouache, gum leaves, and pages from "The Reader's Digest Complete Atlas of Australia" 1968 edition, 12 x 12 cm, 2014, Fish out of Water — Eucalypt, gouache, gum leaves, and pages from "The Reader's Digest Complete Atlas of Australia" 1968 edition, 12 x 12 cm, 2014, Fish out of Water — Murray Cod, gouache, gum leaves, and pages from "The Reader's Digest Complete Atlas of Australia" 1968 edition, 12 x 12 cm, 2014.

And also something investigative, as we find with the sardine swimming through the neat, small frames of botany, zoology, and rainfall data on the Australian map in the three confrontations with data and subjectivity — what facts we have, what we know, and yet the ‘touch’, the qualities of life itself are often missed. As the sardine ‘swims’ on the dry dead eucalypt leaves in these montages, it lifts details into the sensorium, into the realm of environmental investigation, consequence, and we hope, healing.

But we are ahead of ourselves here, because we need to find the Murray Cod trying to re-enter the river, a river that has suffered horrendously from environmental degradation, that is a barometer for the consequences of colonialism. Yet it’s also a river of ongoing beauty and strength, and that’s to be embraced; the presence of people has been part of its being for tens of thousands of years, and the new migrants to Australia of the last two hundred or so years, or, indeed, of the last decades, can be part of its repair and its spirit if they listen, learn and sense.

I see the ‘Fish Out of Water’ Series as very much about healing, about return, about belonging. The merging of textures in the ‘pebbles’ — the wooden stones, if you like — carrying the fish as they ‘bed down’ in different locations on or near the river, or by the sea shore, absorb the qualities of those locations, and return to their homes with the knowledge of their experiences. This is an ongoing conversation, in which learning is essential — Filomena Coppola has gifted us a role in this narrative, and that is to find the fish, to witness, to return them to their homes, and in doing so share in this illumination.



L-R Detail, Fish out of Water – Murray Cod, Bonegilla, Goolwa and Barmah.

For me, touch — the tactile — is a vital component of understanding. I was lucky enough to have the artist hand me one of the stones — the Barmah stone — to hold, to nurture in my palm. It’s a disconcerting and reassuring experience at once — a sense of breaking a taboo, of being where you shouldn’t, and yet entirely ‘natural’. Now, viewers can’t touch these objects,

but they will want to, and that's the point. On their wooden platforms with photos of sites where the fish out of water will try to find its way back, they tempt us to pick them up and put them in place. I asked a couple of people which fish they connected with, and three said the image of the reeds, as the fish was soon going to work its way through the reeds back into water. Another said, 'All of them' — a collective experience of return and belonging.

In all of this, the hybrid, the identity made up of many experiences and backgrounds and even origins, is part of the understanding, part of the beauty and the trauma. No easy solutions are offered in this, and neither, I think, can art do that. Art is about ambiguity as much as resolution.

Mentally, away from the space of the exhibition, my mind keeps returning the installation of/from/out of Bonegilla, and its relatively recent history as a migrant camp of many Nissen huts, and the transitions from one life into another. All lives are part of presence, and the fish returning to water is a complex journey, and involves many stories; these are fixed and unfixed, and have a massive breadth.

So, respect and welcome and difficulty and reconciliation and hope and desire and questioning and conservation and learning. And touch. Filomena Coppola said to me as we were looking at the image of the fish on its 'pebble' near rock-pools that will probably dry out, leaving it more stranded than ever in an alienating landscape, but we hope, we hope against the odds, that she intends, 'Layers of different cultures in landscapes...', and this is surely the case.

So, I declare this beautifully uncomfortable exhibition open — it is seductive and disturbing in so many different ways, and it is generative, and searches for a healing and a healthy future. And may you embrace its talismanic seeing-stones — touching them with your mind's eye, but not your fingers!