





Filomena Coppola

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Mildura artist Filomena Coppola's first solo exhibition at the Australian Galleries in Collingwood was a triumph, not just for her but for our region. Filomena's *Wallflower – The Event*, showed during February this year, paid homage to a childhood embedded in the Mallee soil.

Filomena's pastel drawing creates images that are so real you can almost smell the flowers. There is a seductive quality to her velvety surfaces that draw you closer, where you then see something unexpectedly bizarre, like an orchid morphing into animal fur on a pale background of William Morris wallpaper.

Filomena teases with these part animal part botanical creatures, challenging you to make sense of something that seems so real and yet is not quite right. There's a clue in the often playful titles, such as 'Wallflower - tickle me pink', or 'Wallflower – A lick and a slurp'. Other titles hint at a more serious purpose to do with

how we see ourselves and are seen by others. 'Wallflower – speaking in tongues' and *Wallflower – I can feel you watching me* leave no doubt that Filomena is probing the meaning of identity from the inside out and the outside in.

Born in Mildura in 1968 to Italian parents, Filomena's work explores the common Australian story of what it means to grow up between two cultures. This is a story that could apply to most parts of Australia and she artfully includes all sides of the dialogue.

What really grounds the exhibition in this region is the splendid large scale installation work 'Wallflower – Mirror, rorriM'. This work was first exhibited in Rio Vista House in September 2011 as part of Mildura Palimpsest #8. One of the two panels of this large drawing (just over 1 metre by 2 metres overall) is a similar style to Filomena's other work, with a native orchid drawn over a delicate Morris wallpaper in the background. The other panel foregrounds



TOP LEFT - Filomena's large scale installation work 'Wallflower - Mirror, rorriM', first exhibited in the basement of Rio Vista House in September 2011 as part of Mildura Palimpsest #8. TOP RIGHT & ABOVE - Detail of the Mildura dirt. LEFT - Detail of the pastel on paper. Photography - Evan Meades



the Morris pattern which is drawn with a sublime texture as if it is printed on animal fur. So real is the effect that you're tempted to touch the surface of the paper to see if it is actually furry.

To get a closer look, you must walk on a room sized carpet of Mildura red earth etched with the same Morris pattern in yellow river sand, disturbing the careful pattern Filomena has created.

Filomena's parents raised her and her sister on a twenty acre block at Birdwoodton. The carefully tended vines and orchards found throughout the region create designs not unlike William Morris's iconic European wallpapers and fabrics that Filomena uses to great affect. The symbolism of Morris's designs, which covered the walls, floors and soft furnishings of many homes, can't be ignored. They suggest the care taken to create a warm and beautiful family home, a safe place and also a richly embellished, highly designed environment.

This work is the key which unlocks the mysteries of this exhibition. It's the first time that Filomena's created a floor installation and the first time she has worked with sand and loam. Filomena's uncle, one of her few close relatives in Australia, died last year and was the first family member to be buried in this soil. Although the Italian community is large and there were many



THIS PAGE - Filomena in her light field studio.



weddings and Christenings to attend throughout her childhood, funerals were not common due to the age of the migrant population.

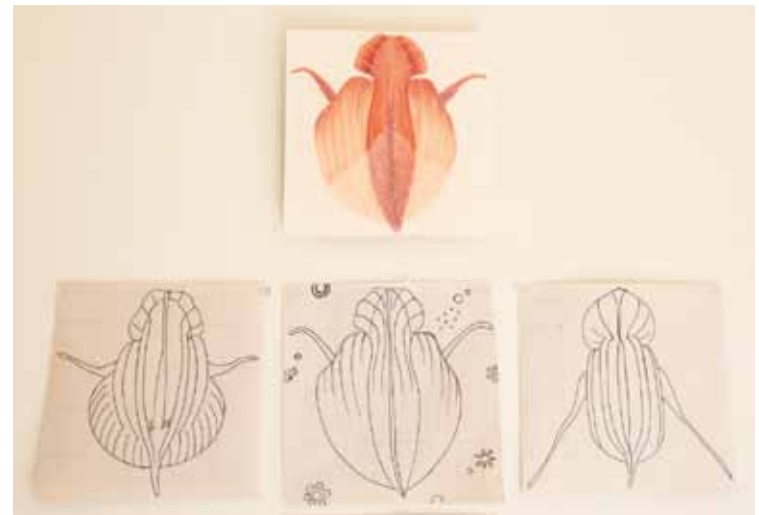
Like most children of Italian migrant parents, Filomena spoke Italian at home, ate Italian food, sang Italian songs, played Italian cards. She loved school and, although a shy girl, had wonderful friends. Moments of strangeness occurred in small things, like being invited to play cards and being confronted with a 52 card pack that she didn't understand (the Italian pack has only 40 cards).

The question of identity didn't really enter her head until one day at Our Lady's Primary School in Merbein an Australian class mate asked her whether she was Australian or Italian. Unable to answer, this simple question became a central motif in her life's work. It wasn't so much that she felt out of place as being aware that others were sometimes unsure quite what to do or say. There was something not quite right.

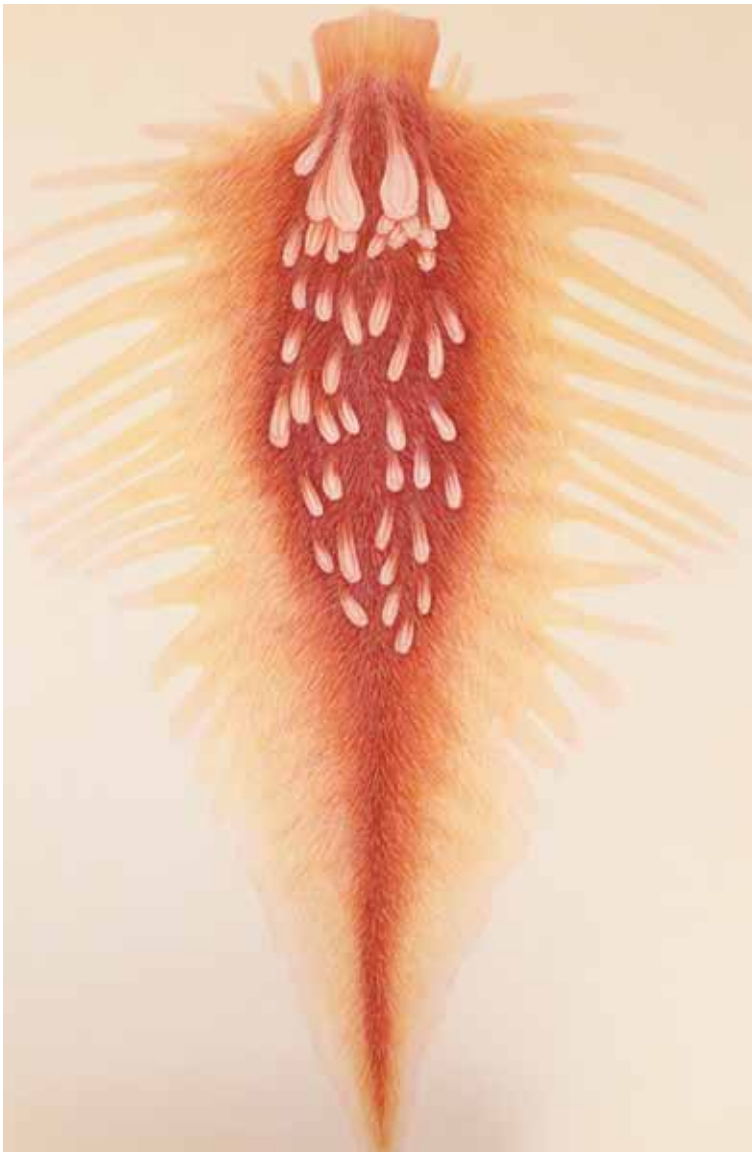
Filomena was a good student and was strongly encouraged by her parents to further her education. At St Joseph's High College in Mildura she loved Art but when confronted by a timetable clash with Mathematics in Year 11 she had no choice but to pursue the sensible option and study maths.

Luckily a wonderful teacher, Sister Maureen, arranged for her to have access to the Art room during lunch and she was able to continue with Art in her own time.

Assuring her parents that she could work as a teacher when she graduated from art school, Filomena studied Fine Art at La Trobe University in Bendigo. Later, with the help of her parents and part time teaching and waitressing work, she undertook a Masters in Fine Art in Printmaking at the University of Tasmania. Her work







at this time was a more literal exploration of migration, searching out her parents' roots and trying to understand their history. After several trips to Europe and America Filomena began to understand the commonality of the migration story. She also understood that people can encounter this sense of estrangement within their own country for a multitude of reasons.

Returning to Mildura in 2008 Filomena was struck anew by the vastness of the physical environment and the colours of the region. The plants growing through careful cultivation and breeding, seemed to be an organic expression of the cultural exploration that had absorbed her.

Filomena Coppola's work is a reflection of her experience as a child of migrants and of the effects migration has had on the region she knows as home. Mildura should be proud of Filomena and of the vibrant arts community that has sustained and encouraged her talent. *



ABOVE & OPPOSITE PAGE - Samples of Filomena's detailed artwork
 RIGHT - Filomena's studio space displays reference for her artwork.




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