

# Subtle themes of sensuality

Singular vision acknowledges all aspects of femininity, writes **William Yeoman**

**A**s Melbourne artist Filomena Coppola pitches up this weekend in the Wheatbelt town of York for *Earthly Tales*, a swirling, *Kunstkammer*-like exhibition brimming with delicate depictions of fish and flowers, she is like a fish out of water.

Born to Italian immigrants who made the long sea journey to settle finally in Mildura, Victoria, she crossed the Tasman to finish her formal arts training in Hobart and is now in country WA.

Fish out of Water — Murray Cod is an ongoing "intervention project" from which leap the beautiful polished stones of petrified red gum on which Coppola has painted miniatures of cod.

In York, they are featured in large-format photographs of the various locations into which they have been "released" over the course of the project or set on jarrah plinths projecting from the gallery wall with a photographic backdrop, echoing the dioramas and fossil displays of natural history museums.

On adjacent and opposite walls are small collages formed from real leaves and appropriated images of fish from old copies of *Reader's Digest*, as well as pastel drawings of Australian orchids. These latter also echo scientific practice in their references to botanical illustration.

But Coppola has zoomed in on details, cropping the whole, or illustrated the lips, throat, column and petals intact. Both original and William Morris wallpaper designs dance in the background. Thus the *Wallflower* series, of which these drawings form a part.

This is, however, art not science — though really the two cannot live without each other — and fish and flower vibrate with personality. These are portraits imbued with Coppola's own sensibility —



Filomena Coppola

self-portraits, if you like — that nevertheless acknowledge the integrity and individuality of the organisms they so sensitively portray.

Cyclical time, the flow of rivers, fish, flowers: all have unmistakable connotations of female sexuality and femininity more broadly.

But it would be a mistake to assume this is Coppola's intention. She is too subtle, too reflective, an artist for that.

Here, well-worn structuralist binaries, whether environmental, cultural, scientific or artistic, are gently prised apart and reassembled to form new complementarities.

As an introduction to Coppola's various practices, *Earthly Tales* nevertheless has a cohesiveness arising out of the artist's singular vision. "I think it's impossible not to use (this kind of imagery) without acknowledging femininity and sexuality," Coppola admits as we talk of Georgia O'Keeffe, among others.

"But the sensuality is also about not just the femininity of it. It's about drawing people into (the work). Making the works seductive so that you get close to it, to touch it even though you know you're not supposed to. That emotional response is really important."

She says women's strength is



Filomena Coppola's *Wallflower — Precious Blossom* references botanical illustrations.



*Fish Out of Water — Murray Cod* is an ongoing 'intervention project'.

precisely in being feminine. "Being sensitive and compassionate is a strong feminine standpoint. I don't agree with that idea that if you're soft you're somehow weak. You don't have to behave like a man to be a strong woman. So when I say I'm feminine or a feminist, that's what I mean. And I hope these works will be seen in that way."

One of the other themes running through this intimate exhibition — and there are many, too numerous to address here — has to do with identity, belonging and sense of place. Sensitive to the historical and cultural milieux within which she operates, Coppola responds to the numinous in nature as much as to her psychological imperatives.

"Coming as I do from regional Victoria as part of a very strong Italian community, the work references that sense of being between two cultures," she says.

"But even though it's my personal cultural background, it's explored through nature and that sense of identity through place."

Hence the river as a metaphor for the journey of life, in which "we all see the water at different points but we



*Wallflower — The Last Bell* vibrates with personality.

are all connected". The Hilliard-like miniatures of the fish floating out of the black void of the polished red gum that "carries within it stories of the Murray River, this continent, its cultural history, and the floods, droughts, fires that have affected this landscape". The Australian orchids "so small, so delicate in relation to Asian orchids", and the William Morris backgrounds "which refer to my parents migrating to an Anglo-Australian culture".

As poet John Kinsella writes in his exhibition opening speech, "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."

During her York residency Coppola has been in conversation with indigenous and non-indigenous locals, with the graceful Avon River, with the rocks and the hills and the trees within which the town nestles. Her intention is to create a new body of work specific to York and its surrounds, and to present it next year in a follow-up exhibition at Gallery 152.

In the meantime, don't miss *Earthly Tales* — itself a beautiful, exotic immigrant to the WA Wheatbelt.

Filomena Coppola: *Earthly Tales*, is on from today until August 12 at Gallery 152, Avon Terrace. See [gallery152.com.au](http://gallery152.com.au)



*Fish Out of Water — Lyrup Flats* 'released' into the environment.