

Contemporary Fine Art

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SUE LOVEGROVE – ARTISTS STATEMENT

I remember standing in the front room of Sylvia and Ingo Kleinert's house looking at the three cabinets that Ingo had recently completed, each beautifully crafted by hand with speciality timber from mainland and Tasmanian native forests and inlaid with carefully chosen words from our dark and complicated colonial history. To me the cabinets made elegant references to different moments in the history of aesthetics in the decorative arts in Australia while also touching very deep chords of conflict and loss in our colonial past. They also presented possibilities of how things could have turned out differently. I imagined their secret drawers and fold out panels to be lovingly touched and filled with small objects collected and souvenired by gentleman explorers and surveyors sitting down to write letters to their beloved wives in far away places or paint delicate watercolour landscapes – trying to make sense of this strange place and trying to transform their experience of the unknown into something more fixed and real. This is a Romantic image, which often overshadows the dreadful mistakes that were made by colonial settlers with dire consequences and worse still, that we continue to make now.

My small paintings in the exhibition, *Speaking of History*, respond directly to these cabinets of Ingo's with particular concerns around ideas of 'loss and being lost'. I am also bringing together my research interests in colonial natural history illustration and Persian miniature painting from the perspective of being a conservationist and through my experiences as a contemporary 'explorer', bushwalking in the mountains of southwest Tasmania.

I have exhibited three series of small paintings featuring dancing trees, endangered Tasmanian parrots and landscapes of un-named peaks.

"... and all hands danced together"

The words of Lt William Bradley, "These people mixed with ours and all hands danced together" (1788, Sydney Cove), were spoken at a brief moment in Australia's history before the destructive outcomes of British colonisation became apparent. It was a moment when the possibility of conciliation and friendship could have occurred between the British and Indigenous people, but didn't. After that, things went horribly wrong and colonial history is marred by carnage and suffering for Indigenous people and significant loss of species, vegetation and destruction of habitat for wildlife through encroachments of pastoral and forestry activities. The French explorers led by Nicolas Baudin may have been more friendly and sensitive to Indigenous people, but would the outcomes have been any different? These dancing trees in my paintings, although they are beautiful sculptural forms, are dead because of us. Hundreds of years old, they stand silently with their wiggly fingers curling out into the air. They have borne witness to our dark history and they did no harm to anyone. For me they are symbols of all that has been lost.

On the brink

The two Tasmanian birds, the Orange-bellied Parrot and Swift Parrot are currently struggling to survive and are listed as critically endangered. The Orange-bellied Parrots, inhabitants of the button grass

plains of southwest Tasmania, are now mostly hand reared on budgie food, and have lost the skills to migrate and search for native feed. Occasionally Swift Parrots find refuge in the flowering gums at my place south of Hobart. I hear them as they pass through, but have never seen one up close. Swift parrots are rapidly losing their habitat while farmers are allowed to continue clearing land and important breeding sites are felled for firewood.

Un-named peaks

Recently standing on a rocky crag in the Western Arthurs Range, southwest Tasmania, I tried to imagine what it was like for artists like William Charles Piguenit or John Skinner Prout who walked, along with surveyors, through these mountains back in the 1880's carrying their paintboxes and painting landscapes as they went. There were a lot of blank spaces on maps back then and although they were in rugged mountains that were new and unfamiliar, they knew their instruments well, knew how to navigate the route they were aiming for and knew how to survive. In a sense though, they were in fact in a perpetual state of being lost because they had never been there before so they never expected to know where they were. My series Un-named peaks on the one hand pays homage to these artist explorers while also presenting the possibility of what if these mountains were not named and claimed and they remain as unknown blank spaces on the map. Places of the imagination and places not scarred by history and loss.