

Double edge of nature

The sensual and erotic are central to a provocative and pleasurable experience, writes William Yeoman

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Lia McKnight creates works 'that seem almost like psychological landscapes or dreamscapes'.

The title of Gomeri artist Penny Evans' work Minyaminyagal Buribara means "everything

is pregnant". Her ceramic shapes with their delicately incised surfaces give birth to antennae of echidna quills, wire, cotton and raffia which in turn seem receptive to nature's every whisper.

Both the art and the idea reflect a propensity for ornament we share with the nature of which we are a part, born variously of desire, instinct and thralldom to the gorgeous generative capacity of binaries and their rhythms: birth and death, day and night, breathing, sex.

This game of theme and variations pervades fields such as environmental aesthetics and phenomenology. It also bubbles up and plays around the extremities of Fremantle Arts Centre's latest show Sensual Nature, curated by Ric Spencer after an original idea by artist Lia McKnight.

But as the name suggests, it is



Holly Story: Spellbound (detail).

the senses and not the intellect that are most immediately seduced. Sensual Nature invites submission as much as engagement, a surrendering of one's analytical propriety to the sensual, the erotic, the primal. And why not? It's a process to which the 12 artists themselves willingly submit. This is nature not as

found object but as precipitant, as lover.

Tane Andrews' flowers and butterflies are granted a poignant, specious immortality in materials such as marble and silver.

Sarah Elson's bristling silver and gold ensembles likewise memorialise the transient, the

ephemeral.

Three large panels from Miik Green's spectacular Xylem series demonstrate how the WA artist appropriates "cell-staining techniques and biological pigmentation" from the science lab while allowing "the paintings to evolve independently of his hand".

Frankenstein meets Grinling

Gibbons in Juz Kitson's *Life and everything in-between*, a rich profusion of blown glass, porcelain, wool, fur, boar tusks and more that manages to be at once funny, sexy and profound in the same way as Andrew Nicholls' repurposed Wembley Ware, featuring "surreal, eroticised encounters between male bodies and flora and fauna".

Julia Robinson's "playful and delicately rude" works take as their ground the gourd — an object that evokes both the womb and the phallus, and therefore ancient fertility rites. Nalda Searles' masterly *Tjunti*, an old tennis ball encrusted with river stones, repays sustained contemplation, its strange, dense, compact form at once intimate and expansive.

The beautiful, soft, sepulchral forms of Holly Story's *Spellbound*, made from flowers, silk,



Julia Robinson: Early riser.

plywood, xanthorrhoea resin and paint, similarly require sustained meditation, while the rearing serpent-shaped tines of Heather B. Swann's witty *Rake (Troublemaker)* both alarm and fascinate — as do Angela Valamanesh's alarming ceramic enlargements of microbes living

within and without our bodies which comprise her *Various friends and enemies no.6*.

Coolbellup artist Lia McKnight's works on paper and small sculptures reveal a particular fascination with nature's ability to elicit sensual and psychical riffs on organic forms.

"I draw from natural objects but then I like to allow stuff to happen in this stream-of-consciousness way," she says.

"One that often draws out those uncanny, erotic, darkly humorous elements. I try to create works that seem almost like psychological landscapes or dreamscapes."

McKnight enjoys drawing fungi, banksias and "all those things which cross between being very beautiful and seductive and quite repulsive and grotesque. I love that push-pull,

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Sarah Elson: Lament of the labellum – anaphora continued (detail).

and that's something that's really an undercurrent in the themes of the overall exhibition, and quite present in most of the artists' work."

In her fascinating catalogue essay, Lisa Slade "ponders art, and nature, as pharmakon," that is, "that which can simultaneously cure and harm".

It is this double edge, this frisson, that makes Sensual Nature such a richly provocative and pleasurable experience.

Sensual Nature is on at the Fremantle Arts Centre until May 20. See fac.org.au

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