

The Collections Project

Michelle Kelly

14 August - 24 September 2017

Santos Museum of Economic Botany

Adelaide Botanic Garden





The Botanic Gardens is a place of inspiration – as we know, many artists are inspired by nature and concerned about environmental issues. As one of Adelaide’s oldest institutions, the Botanic Gardens is also the most visited cultural institution in the State. While most people visit the Botanic Gardens to enjoy the peace, beauty and tranquillity provided—and walk away with lifelong memories—there is an underlying seriousness in the work that’s done here—be it in horticulture, botany, conservation or education.

However, there is much more to the Botanic Gardens than meets the eye. Many people come to learn about the plant world and the fundamental relationship between plants, people and culture. The Botanic Gardens is a cultural and scientific institution and our history, like all Botanic Gardens since the Renaissance, has been an interaction between nature, science and art. You need only think of Joseph Banks with his artist Sidney Parkinson

accompanying Captain Cook on his voyage. The illustrations of the flora and fauna sent back to London caused a stir through their curiosity—imagine what the Europeans thought when they saw paintings of Banksias (or kangaroos) from the other side of the unexplored world.

Natural scientists have worked with botanical artists for centuries and continued to do so – even after the advent of photography—because the artists bring out something that a camera lens alone can’t capture. When we unleash the artist from the necessary restraints of botanical illustration, we see the world through another lens—one which helps us imagine and wonder.

Furthermore, the Botanic Gardens is a collections-based institution with many collections hidden from the public. Sometimes artists are taken into a ‘secret garden’ and in this case Michelle Kelly entered the rich resources of the State Herbarium.

Immersed amongst the one million scientific plant specimens, Michelle was provided with access to the thousands of fungi specimens and our resident mycological expert, Pam Catcheside.

In response to this special access, initiated by Guildhouse and the Collections Project, and facilitated by the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium, Michelle Kelly has created three fantastic works: *Growth*, *Specimens* and *Fairy Ring*.

This exhibition demonstrates the value of a scientific collection extends beyond its primary purpose and in this case manifests itself as inspiration. The artist sees something different to what the scientist sees—and together they provide a better understanding of the natural world.

Tony Kanellos
Curator, Santos Museum of Economic Botany



The Collections Project

Guildhouse has been working with South Australian institutions for over a decade to secure opportunities for its members to engage with the State's collections. The Collections Project with the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium (BGS) is a collaborative project, with Guildhouse, that provides artists with the opportunity to respond to the extensive collection of the Adelaide Botanic Garden and develop new work for exhibition at the Santos Museum of Economic Botany. Home to an extraordinary permanent collection, much of which dates back to the original museum display 130 years ago, the Santos Museum of Economic Botany is the last Museum of its kind in the world. Artists working with BGS not only have access to this collection but also the Gardens' living collection, library & State Herbarium.

Championing the art and artists of our time while celebrating our cultural, historic and scientific heritage, The Collections Project has a demonstrated ability to provide new audience experiences while delivering long-term benefits to the artistic and career development of participating artists.

Michelle Kelly is one of Guildhouse's long-term Accredited members and we are delighted to have supported her practice through facilitating an opportunity for the research, development and exhibition of a new body of work. She has long been fascinated by fungi, and mycology (the study of fungi) has been the inspiration behind a body of work spanning sculptures, installations and jewellery using traditional metalsmithing techniques and a variety of materials. Kelly's practice, through an exploration of size, form, colour and movement, consists of multiple layers, not unlike the growth of fungi. She has produced an exquisite body of work for The Collections Project and we are proud to present it as part of this year's SALA Festival.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium and particularly Tony Kanellos, the curator of the Santos Museum of Economic Botany, for sharing our vision for The Collections Project and working with us to deliver the project. We would also like to acknowledge the support we have received through the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund.

Emma Fey
Executive Director, Guildhouse

"The Collections Project facilitates an extraordinary set of endeavours. Open access to the wonder-filled resources of the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium for an artist such as Michelle Kelly who has such a particular interest in Mycology has opened many doors. In residencies such as these the exchanges that develop between artist and those with specialist knowledge can also expand both meaning and context of the collections at hand. These experiences are life-changing as the freshness and vitality of the new works that have evolved from this project attest."

Catherine Truman
Artist, 2017 JamFactory Icon



Collections of fungi in the State Herbarium of South Australia

The kingdom Fungi – how to explain it? The fungal kingdom is huge with an estimated 1.5 million species of fungi worldwide¹. Australia has about 250,000 species. Most are microscopic but there are somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 species² of larger fungi – those that can be seen with the naked eye. Fungi are strange, beautiful, come in all shapes, sizes and colours. There are good ones and bad ones but almost all the larger fungi are ‘goodies’. Without fungi, life as we know it would not exist. The earth would be deep in undecayed bodies of plants and animals. Trees would not have the materials to grow much taller than 2 metres. Fungi break down and recycle organic matter, releasing nutrients that benefit other forms of life. They are essential partners with plants: the fungus collects nutrients and water for the benefit of the plant. In return the plant provides energy needed for this collecting process in the form of sugars.

Because of their importance, we must have collections of fungi so we can refer to them. In South Australia we are fortunate to have approximately 23,000 collections of larger fungi in the State Herbarium. Most of these, about 16,000, were collected by Professor Sir John Burton Cleland, mainly from 1920 to 1935. Cleland described well over 300 new species and published a handbook “Toadstools and Mushrooms and other Larger Fungi of South Australia”³. He commissioned artists to illustrate some of his collections. His handbook was revised by Cheryl Grgurinovic⁴ and includes detailed and illustrated descriptions of microscopic characters.

Over the decades since Cleland’s work, fungal contributions have continued. Since 1999 almost 5,000 collections have been added, mainly by Pam Catchside, helped by her husband David, by truffle expert Teresa Lebel and by members of the Adelaide Fungal Studies Group.

When fungi are collected and dried for herbaria, many of the obvious characters such as colour and texture are lost. Many of Cleland’s fungi are described in his handbook but few are illustrated. More recent collections have been fully documented with photographs. However, the actual dried and shrivelled herbarium collection of a small mushroom does not help show the fungus as it was. An artist can take the nondescript scientific collection and portray the beauty or strangeness inherent in the fungus.

In spite of their essential roles, only about 5% of Australia’s fungi have been described⁵. This means that reference collections such as those in the State Herbarium of SA are particularly important. These fungal collections are used by mycologists and researchers from all over the world. Some wish to consult the 200 to 300 type collections⁶ held in the Adelaide herbarium so that they can verify their own collections and avoid duplication of names.

(A type collection is one on which the description and name of a new species is based.)

However, the fungal collections have a wider role. They provide historical and geographic information on the fungi that existed at any time and in any place. If we don’t know what species occur and where and when, we can’t monitor any changes to fungal communities or make informed decisions about managing habitats and biodiversity.

If we ignore fungi and our collections of fungi, we are ignoring a very big part of our existence. This exhibition helps to unlock the beauty, integrity and essence of fungi.

Pam Catchside

Honorary Research Associate,
State Herbarium of South
Australia

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6. Catchside P.S. (2015). <http://nrmscience.org/events/fungi-and-mycological-research-in-south-australia> Accessed 13 July 2017



Artist's statement

I do not eat mushrooms however I am fascinated by the beauty of this group of organisms that exist in their own realm and the important role they play on this planet. I have been making metal objects based on the forms of fungi for most of my professional artistic life. It is no wonder that I jumped at the chance to be the inaugural Collections Project artist in residence at Adelaide Botanic Garden. The State Herbarium contains a vast array of specimens, some of which were collected long ago, some that have been newly gathered and classified. It is inspiring to be in such a site of history that has an eye on preservation for the future.

Spending time with the collections has exposed me to looking at fungi from an entirely different view point, which has led to the generation of new ways of thinking about and representing these amazing organisms.

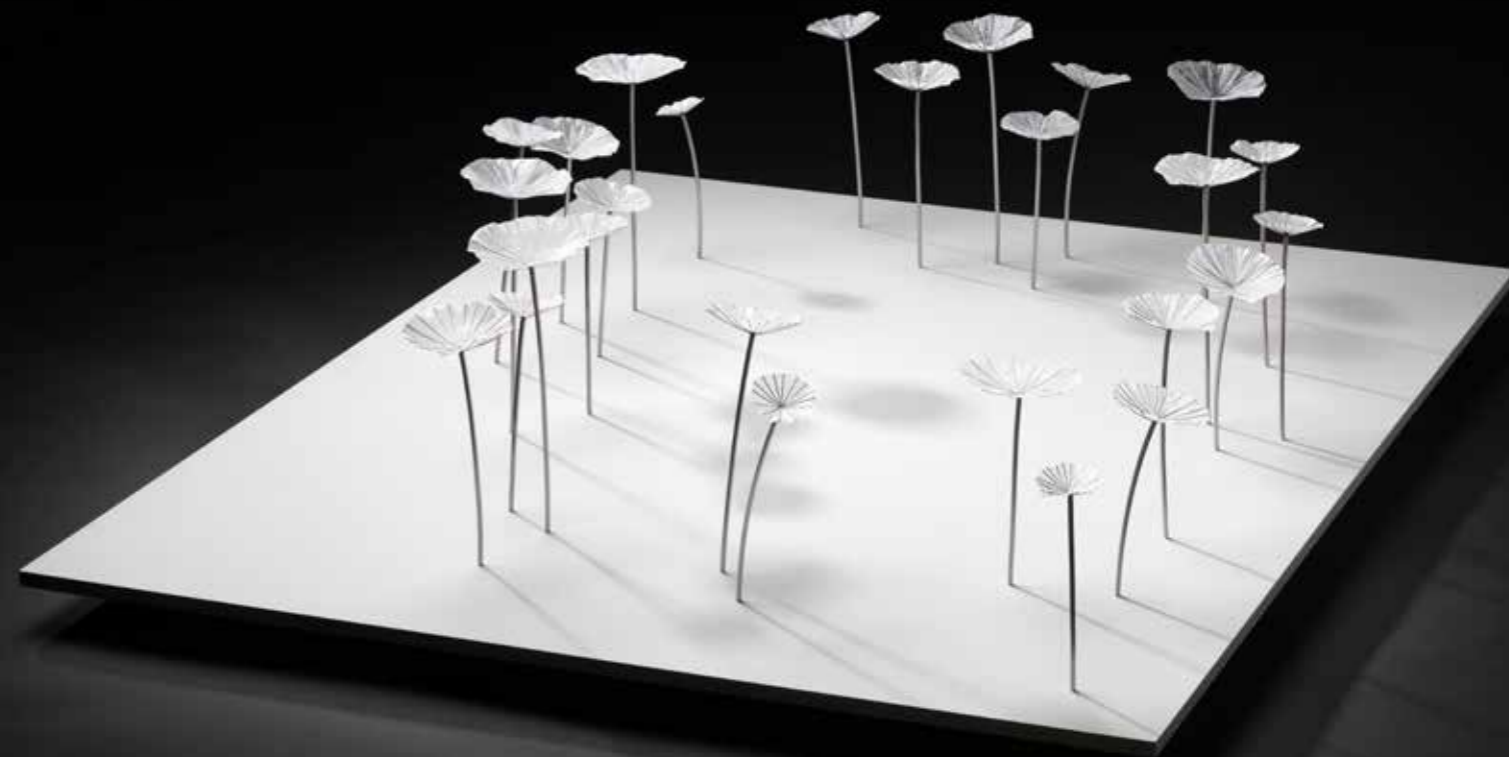
My experience has been further enriched by interaction with the researchers and curators who work amongst the collections. This contact with the human face of mycology has offered a glimpse into specialist ways of looking at and looking after fungi specimens. My responses to this project have broadened to include awareness of ways of gathering, classifying, and preserving the collections.

These artworks are predominantly made using stainless steel wire, welded to form the structure of certain types of fungi. To weld these pieces together I have used a Puk welder, a process that allows precise joining while looking at the work through a microscope. This method correlates to identifying fungi specimens in the scientific world. Stainless steel echoes the tenacity of fungi to manifest impossibly spindly forms. In *Fairy Ring* I have combined paper with the metal structure to depict the fragile quality of the fungi alongside the strength of the stainless steel.

The works incorporating jars respond to the preservation of specimens within research collections. I was intrigued by the familiarity of these containers and the similarity with those used at home for preserving food. This piece depicts the fungi as specimens that are continuing to grow out and escape their containment.

The largest of my works in the exhibition depicts the growth of a certain type of fungus. In this case, the form begins with the cap or hood of the fruiting body like an upturned shape on the stem. As the fungi mature they change in shape to eventually curl up before starting to decay. This work relates to the Herbarium's comprehensive approach to documenting each transformation that occurs throughout the life-cycles of particular specimens. Gaining access to the Herbarium has been a rare privilege and a very rewarding experience.

Michelle Kelly





1

List of **works**

1 **Glossy Brown Bracket Fungi** 2015
Wall sculpture
Materials - Patinated cast bronze
Overall Size - 2400mm x 1200mm
Photo - Sam Oster

2 **Fairy Ring** 2017
Materials - Stainless Steel, Tissue Paper
Various component sizes
Overall Size - 1200mm x 900mm x 250mm
Photos - Grant Hancock

3 **Growth** 2017
Materials - Stainless Steel
Various component sizes
Overall Size - 2000mm x 830mm x 550mm
Photos - Grant Hancock

4 **Specimens** 2017
Materials - Stainless Steel, Glass
Various component sizes
Overall Size - 1200mm x 300mm x 350mm
Photos - Grant Hancock



2



3



4



The Collections Project is presented as a partnership between Guildhouse and the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium.

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Santos

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