



The Collections Project

Fran Callen

Buried worlds: the art of Fran Callen

It is the middle of winter and a dirty white blanket of cloud wraps the sky. Like a small child's well-loved comforter, the blanket is worn but still soft, and warms the treetops in the neighbourhood, tempering them while a storm begins its low hum. The anchor point of my view is a mature *eucalyptus camaldulensis*, or river red gum, a lone tree in the front yard. Many were felled for agricultural and housing developments in the local area from the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Down the road and along the creek in the lower reaches of my suburb, the numbers of river red gum proliferate. Grouped like families, their roots precariously hug the slippery banks, and each other, as they compete with fences, swimming pools and invasive weeds including the European olive. The creek flows west toward the eastern facing slope, where up on the ridge is the home and studio of artist Fran Callen.

At the heart of Callen's studio-home is a small, pine, kitchen table, where family and friends gather for shared meals, drinks, conversation and company. It is often covered by a tablecloth of sorts: a large primed canvas, which, like a forest floor, collects the debris of Callen's daily life. Small, often mundane moments drip onto and emerge out from the canvas. Time is captured in the form of spilt drinks, or tracings of place settings of the previous night's dinner, or 'to do' lists, or sketches and names of native flowers, seedpods and leaves collected by Callen and her children during neighbourhood walks and visits to the Flinders University Investigator Garden. Together these fluids, drawings and inscriptions transform, like humus, into an entanglement of memories embedded in the canvas-substrate. It is here that Callen navigates – through personal experience as well as research into this country's colonial history of collecting and discovery – the complexities of care and custodianship in relation to her family, home, and community where she resides on Kurna land.

As a means to tame the unpredictable nature of her artistic process and studio

environment, for *The Collections Project*, Callen applies identical rules to each 'tabletop canvas'. The rules act as a framework for which the routines, repetition and messiness of her intellectual, artistic and mothering worlds can flood into. Taking cues from prints and drawings held in the Flinders University Art Museum collection, grids, colour codes and symmetrical compositions are laid out in the preliminary stages of her canvas works. Each contains a centrepiece – a 'bouquet' – arranged with drawings of Australian flora, cooking utensils and baby bottles, which at times evoke the shape of the female reproductive system. Smaller components such as seedpods and serviette holders are placed methodically on the periphery.

Callen's measured order echoes the scientific compositions of botanical illustration, particularly Ferdinand Bauer's (1760-1826) engravings from *Illustrationes florae Novae Hollandiae* (engraved 1806-13 and republished 1989). Bauer produced studies for the series during the HMS *Investigator* expedition, led by Matthew Flinders (1774-1814), which circumnavigated Australia between 1801 and 1803. On the voyage Bauer utilised an elaborate colour code of almost one thousand hues as well as a letter code to denote sheen and texture.¹ Callen references his colour system by flanking each canvas with strips of individually coloured squares. Colour combinations are scrawled next to each strip: 'Chinese white, blue violet lake', 'mineral green, 3B, wine' and in *Chattering leaves* (2017), a collaged photograph of a 'feral olive' is cut into the shape of a square code. A sense of structure is sought by the use of a grid – a conventional drawing transfer tool employed by Callen's uncle, landscape artist Brian Callen (1941-1996), in his preparatory drawings for the mural, *Study for South Australian flora mural: orchards* (1987). Later, these strictures are overridden – buried and sometimes unearthed – as either Callen's young children (armed with crayons and glitter) or the artist's aesthetic decisions take precedence.



Callen's kitchen table adjoins the lounge room where large, stretched canvases lean against the walls. Swept across the floor a sea of papers reveal haunting drawings of jellyfish: other-worldly beings that glide and float in the depths of the artist's home. Initially a response to her daughter's pipe cleaner sculpture of *architeuthis dux*, the South Australian Museum's giant squid, Callen progressed the series after viewing Charles-Alexandre Lesueur's (1778-1846) *Mollusques et zoophytes* (1807). The hand-coloured engraving of a jellyfish and molluscs was published in the *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres Australes* atlas, following Nicolas Baudin's (1754-1803) 'voyage of discovery' to Australia between 1800 and 1804. Callen constructs her ethereal figures using 'pouncing', a technique popular during the Italian Renaissance. Numerous tiny holes are pierced into tracing paper, then dusted with ground charcoal to transfer an image to a separate sheet. The technique is repeated, overlaid and reversed, and the resultant filigree of dots is smudged with graphite and colour highlights, animating the marine creatures. They swim and hover in pairs, embracing as if partners, or interlace with a brood of jellyfish to resemble a family scene. In the watery abyss their tendrils hang, undulating, they are entwined like tree roots submerged within the deep dark earth.

The storm yields and rain begins to splatter onto the roof of Callen's home. Her son runs across the scattered drawings, barefoot and dragging Wee waa, his special blanket speckled with dirt from the garden and soaked in the recent history of his day. He has returned from the backyard where another, more majestic river red gum resides and oversees time. Beneath its canopy lay an assortment of toys and a crumpled, milk-coloured canvas which collects the rain and seems to sprout leaves.

Nic Brown

¹ PM Cooper, *Images of nature: the Bauer brothers*, Natural History Museum, London, 2015, p 12.



Acknowledgements

Flinders University acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations of the various locations it operates on, and recognises the continued relationship to their lands and waters by traditional owners past and present.

The Collections Project is a collaboration between Guildhouse and Flinders University Art Museum that provides artists with the opportunity to engage with the Museum's collections and staff to create new work.

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Flinders University Art Museum (FUAM) is responsible for the preservation, management and development of the University's art collections comprising some 8,000 works. It is actively engaged with students and staff through teaching, learning and research, and broader audiences by way of exhibitions, publications and associated public programs. FUAM's principal exhibition space, the City Gallery, presents a schedule of curated projects aimed at exploring contemporary themes, issues and ideas.

Cover image: *Dappled things* (detail), 2017, graphite, biro, colour pencil, watercolour, synthetic polymer paint, gesso, gold leaf, olive stain, beetroot stain, pomegranate stain, tea, wine and eucalyptus sap on watercolour canvas, 130 x 122 cm

Inside page: *Inside, our fridge hums* (detail), 2017, graphite, biro, charcoal, pastel, colour pencil, watercolour, synthetic polymer paint, gesso, gold leaf, collage, tea, wine and eucalyptus sap on watercolour canvas, 128 x 94 cm

This page: *Many, many welcomes* (detail), 2017, graphite, charcoal, pastel and colour pencil on paper, 70 x 50 cm (paper)

Images courtesy the artist and BMG Art, Adelaide.