



Laura Wills and Louise Flaherty

Plant Notes

The Guildhouse Collections Project

with the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium of South Australia at the
Santos Museum of Economic Botany **15 August–31 October 2021**



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Adelaide Botanic Garden has a special place in people's hearts. A place of childhood memories, suspended realities and special celebrations, it offers inspiration and wonder. One of Adelaide's most iconic cultural establishments, the garden is also one of the most visited institutions in the State.

While most people visit Adelaide Botanic Garden to enjoy the peace, beauty and tranquility, there is an underlying seriousness in the work that's done here; be it horticulture, botany, conservation or education. At a time when we are all re-evaluating our relationships with the natural world, the Garden plays a fundamental role in building deeper connections with nature's beauty and complexity.

The Garden is a cultural and scientific institution and its history, like all botanic gardens since the Renaissance, has been an interaction between nature, science and art. Natural scientists have worked with botanical artists for centuries and continued to do so, even after the advent of photography, because artists have the ability to capture something that the camera lens alone cannot. When artists, such as Louise Flaherty and Laura Wills, are invited to respond freely to nature, we experience the world through another lens of enquiry and beauty.

The Guildhouse Collections Project with the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium provides a rare and wonderful opportunity for artists to delve deep into the treasures of an important state collection; to research, study and collaborate with collection specialists and produce new work for exhibitions in the historic Santos Museum of Economic Botany. Home to an extensive permanent collection, much of which dates back to the original museum display 130 years ago, the Museum is the last of its kind in the world.

Flaherty and Wills not only had access to this valuable collection, but also the Garden's living collection, library and the seed collection archive within the SA Seed Conservation Centre during a period of vital field-work in the aftermath

images front and inside cover
Louise Flaherty and Laura Wills *Threatened Night* (detail) 2021
pastel, pencil and pigment on rag paper, 75 x 55 cm

The Guildhouse Collections Project continued

of Australia's bushfires in early 2020. Integral to the artists' understanding and experience of the collection has been access to the caretakers and researchers of the collection; fieldtrips and robust conversation created a generous environment for meaningful, valuable research. The resultant work is sensitive and evocative, gently inviting audiences to spend time to consider lost plant species and their own role within the cultivation and colonisation of the South Australian flora and fauna eco-system.

Working and researching together, the artists' new works are presented in dialogue with the permanent collection of the Museum, while also emanating out into the Garden through ephemeral drawings, participatory and multisensory audience experiences. The layered outcomes of this project are born of the crucible of this time of great challenge, global and local upheaval and desire for community connection. Flaherty and Wills' Guildhouse Collections Project has seeded new connections, ideas and creative outcomes throughout its development, spanning new collaborations and exciting new directions. This has included ephemeral community projects with Vitalstatistix, Nature Festival and a digital music/visual experiential project supported by The Australia Council for the Arts.

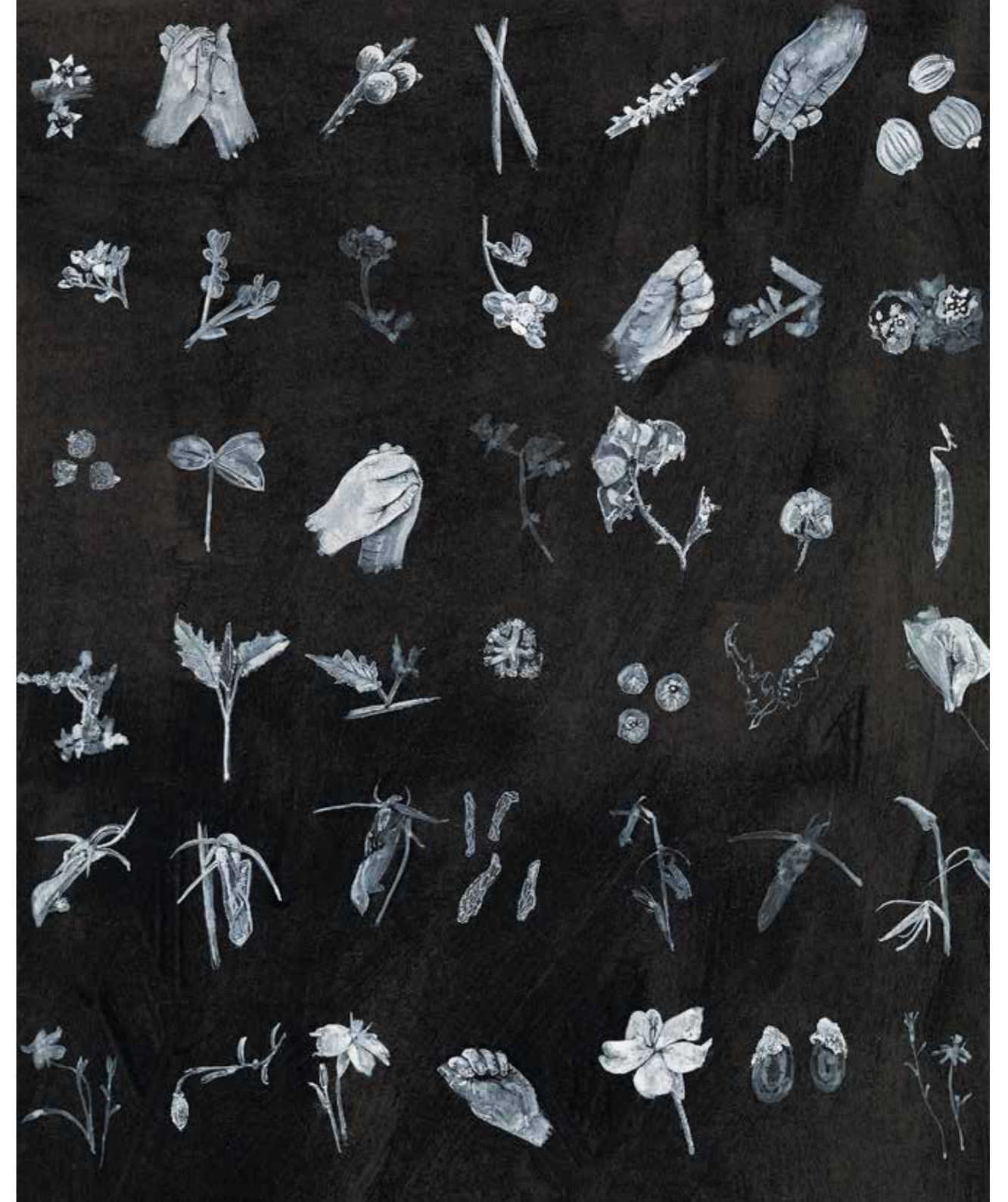
Guildhouse is a South Australian organisation dedicated to working with visual artists, craftspeople and designers, government and industry, to champion the visibility and appreciation of artists in our community. For 55 years we have defined ourselves through a commitment to partnerships, adaptation and responsiveness to the changing conditions facing artists and makers. Together with our partners, we create opportunities for meaningful, sustainable careers in the creative sector.

The Guildhouse Collections Project is the result of true partnership and demonstrates the value of creating new and ambitious environments for artists, scientists, collections and audiences to coalesce. We extend our thanks to the Government of South Australia and the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund for their support of this vital project and congratulate Laura Wills and Louise Flaherty for the compelling body of work they have created in response to their residency at Adelaide Botanic Garden.

Emma Fey
Chief Executive Officer, Guildhouse

Michael Harvey
Director, Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium

image right
Louise Flaherty *Threatened Collection* (detail) 2021
ink on rag paper, 75 x 55 cm



Odes and Understories

Several years ago, deep in Epping Forest (UK), a roiling conversation took place between nature writer Robert Macfarlane and biologist Merlin Sheldrake. Reflecting upon the unforeseen realities of fieldwork, like funnelling drunken monkey urine or shaving bee abdomens, Sheldrake observed “Science is ... full of happenstance and stumbles and getting knackered and crazy in the field or the lab. It’s so weird to me how science always presents its knowledge as clean.”¹ As they further pondered how nature’s knowledge is tidied, skewed and reinterpreted through human perspectives and conventions their discussion meandered into the hidden understories of species, including the ‘wood wide web’ of fungi. Macfarlane suggested “Perhaps we need an entirely new language system ... We need to speak in spores.” Sheldrake agreed. “That’s exactly what we need to be doing ... That’s the job of writers and artists and poets and all the rest of you.”²

Artists Louise Flaherty and Laura Wills have devoted their Guildhouse Collections Project at Adelaide Botanic Garden to meeting these challenges set by Sheldrake and Macfarlane. Collaboratively, they have revelled in the messy actualities of real-world research and art practice and deliberated on how to honour non-human language systems; it could be said they are learning to speak in seeds. Research into threatened native flora of South Australia has led Flaherty and Wills into the knowledge banks of the South Australian Seed Conservation Centre. To grow their art-based seed language they have observed, interviewed, and conversed with the community of scientists, botanists, volunteers and carers, as well as gathering research from further afield, from organisations dedicated to native plants, First Nations voices, and from the home of seeds themselves—the ground of Country.

Tiny seeds can appear lifeless, but Flaherty and Wills have learned native flora seeds are alive with dormant potential, their rich language and stories contained within tough outer shells. These protective shells, housing embryonic plant matter evolved to fulfil highly specified ecological roles, require specialised co-evolutionary keys to be cracked open; precise conditions ranging from the heat or smoke of fire, to floods, interspecies symbiosis, and the continuation

of First Nations care practices that have sustained plants over thousands of years. A great part of Flaherty and Wills’ project has been refining methods of listening—to First Nations voices and to seeds—to spur on the cool cultural flames of renewal and to recognise seeds teem with entangled understories, many not heard nearly enough.

The loss of seed language is palpable, as Botanist and woman of the Potawatomi nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer makes clear; ‘losing a plant can threaten a culture in much the same way as losing a language ...’³ For upon this colonised land a great number of native plant and seed understories have too often found themselves underfoot, under hoof, under tyre, under tractor, under bitumen, under spreading weeds, undervalued and under-known. They have also been drowned out by metadata records gathered by the ‘clean’ colonial conventions of Western scientific research. Such data offers facts but requires delving beyond to glimpse the complexities and wonders of the language living in co-evolved roots.

The most wondrous of basic facts about plants is that all existence hinges upon theirs, for breath, habitat, foods, medicines, and culture; we have co-evolved and co-exist. Yet in undertaking this project Flaherty and Wills have had to continue their reckoning with the darkest of understories: that currently 1 in 4 native plants species are threatened, meaning we are co-threatened. At this time approximately one thousand species hang on wherever they can; up steep slopes, on verges, in small percentages of uncleared bushland, and in degrading soil as viable seeds.

Though overwhelming, in response, from the thousand threatened species, Flaherty and Wills have selected eight to champion. Their art practices have long been dedicated to servicing communities of plants and selecting a handful is practical strategy to know these few more intimately. For if we do not know plants, their understories, and reforge our connections to them, then how can we care for and value them? *Plant Notes*, as the manifestation of this research, is our introduction. Meet Large Cress, Corunna Daisy, Woods Well Spyridium, Clover Glycine, Yundi Guinea-flower, Fire Goosefoot, Ladies Tresses and Spiked Sour-bush.

Odes have been created to each of these highly threatened South Australian plants and their ecologies. Flaherty and Wills have used their expanded drawing and painting practices to mirror the structure of ecologies, incorporating collaboration, conversation, participation and care. *Plant Notes* is a multifaceted experience merging eight series of seed and plant ‘portraits’ in the Santos Museum of Economic Botany, with participatory clay paint workshops to reground Adelaide Botanic Garden with threatened species, all of which is accompanied by an atmospheric soundscape, accessible via QR code across the Garden, which layers in narrative, music and the sounds of this local ecology.⁴

Odes and Understories continued

With *Plant Notes* Flaherty and Wills add to the growing cacophony reigniting wonder in the astounding interconnectedness of nature.⁵ As artists they are amongst those nutting out renewed ways of representing the intelligence of plants.⁶ There is an urgency to these quests, and artists have long been asking what they can do to engender interspecies care. In learning this language of seeds Flaherty and Wills have faced a conundrum at the crux of creative practices grappling with climate disasters; negotiating wide gulfs of comprehension between our species and others. It was not too long ago when the pain of animals was disregarded; now the intelligence of plants offers expansive ways of rethinking existence. Nora Bateson, a leader in researching complex living systems, questions if we might have been 'navigating with the wrong map'⁷ and it is heartening to imagine placing Flaherty and Wills' maps, drawings and paintings atop those used by extractivist corporations, governmental policy makers, or Western science to renew trails, webs and pathways into interspecies care. In this endeavour artists can be translators working between fields and coalescing findings into new configurations which honour non-human voices. As translators Flaherty and Wills reinsert amongst dire data what really matters: the understories of a frog croak in damp vegetation, the sustenance of leafy greens, the promising smell of charcoal, the pleasure and wonder in living responsibly with non-human species, and the planting of seeds of recognition that can continue the stories of these plants for generations to come.

Dr Sera Waters
Artist, arts writer and academic

- 1 This conversation was later recounted in Robert Macfarlane's *Underland* (2019); republished as a chapter excerpt in 'The Understory', *emergence magazine*, June 26 2019: emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-understory
- 2 Macfarlane, 'The Understory', *emergence magazine*, June 26 2019: emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-understory
- 3 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Penguin Books, 2020, p261
- 4 The soundscape also involves co-collaborators: musician Naomi Keyte and violinist and composer Belinda Gehlert
- 5 This is led by First Nations voices which have known these wonders for time immemorial and Tyson Yunkaporta as well as Robin Wall Kimmerer have been especially inspirational to the development of this project, particularly to grasp the reciprocal relationships which are brought to life via, in Will's words "the actions people (First Nations) have with the land, with the plants and that enables the plant (and the human) to grow to its fullest potential. It enjoys and thrives in the relationship. They need each other. They love each other." (email correspondence, June 2021)
- 6 Michael Pollan, 'The Intelligent Plant', *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2013: [newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/23/the-intelligent-plant](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/23/the-intelligent-plant)
- 7 Nora Bateson, *Small Arcs of Larger Circles*, Triarchy Press: Axminster, 2016, p16

image right
Louise Flaherty Expanded Voucher *Hibbertia tenuis* (detail) 2021
ink on rag paper, 75 x 55 cm

Field determination *Hibbertia tenuis* **Common name** Yards Guinea-flower

Locality endemic to the Fleurieu Peninsula, South Australia
only known from two small populations - less than 20 plants remaining in the wild.

Family surrounded by a small family in the location (the number of species is 1-2)

Relationships **Aspect**
pollinator: small insects? need to investigate further. above: shuffles into pavement to scrambling
weather: would not survive if the weather changed and there wasn't swamp rain? if swamps were to dry up? below: wet - swamp (peat swamps) likes grey clay

Context only grows in peat swamps with diverse healthy vegetation. friends: *Leptospermum continentale* (prickly tree-fern) - remember getting scratched by this plant - it is prickly. *Melaleuca squarrosa*, *Gehmia obtusifolia*, *Vaccinium* species, *Cladonia* species, *Embellisia* species, *Saxifraga* species. peaty grey clays with quartzite gravel. very habitat specific.

Conservation status Critically endangered. Threats: habitat clearance, livestock grazing, weed invasion, changes to water hydrology. Limited genetic diversity, seed viability and seedling require we also likely to impact on the survival of the species.

Mood little lonely, and worried, but ok day to day as they all band together in their small family. Happy when they have visits from scientists.

Growth can be hard to germinate but there has been success. Family members growing up in the seed orchard.

Notes I first saw/met you in February this year. I had seen and drawn other *Hibbertia* before, but not heard about you. I saw you in a swamp in the Fleurieu. I remember it was a hot sticky day with a blue sky. I would have missed you and walked straight past you if it had not been for the experts we were with. You are so small and delicate. I have learnt that you only grow in this area and you like to grow in permanent wet areas/places. You like a peat bog swamp (I don't know much about swamps, but I am trying to learn). You like the swamp to have a diverse healthy vegetation + dry soil? You are very RARE, and have been listed as critically endangered. I read somewhere that there are less than 20 plants remaining in the wild? That was on a report I read - which is perhaps in old. I hope that the numbers has gone up?? I saw some of your relatives of yours growing here in the city. They are being grown in the seed orchard so that there can be more seed saved in the collection.

wish I hope that you can stay healthy and sustainable for ever. Hope for you. I have hope for you - people are looking out for you.

colour yellow flowers, green leaves, stems are brown, yellow-green brown. and the bright yellow.

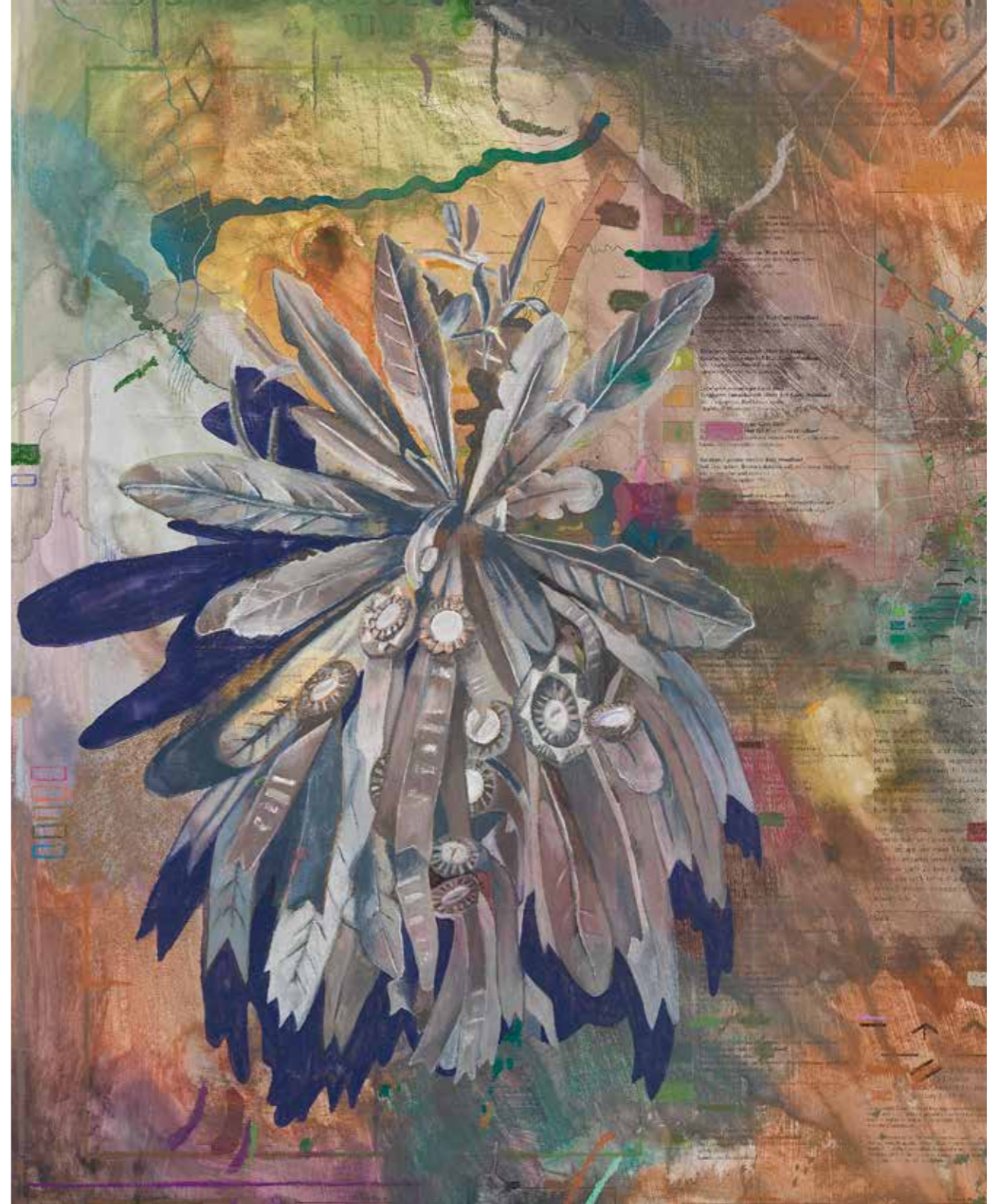


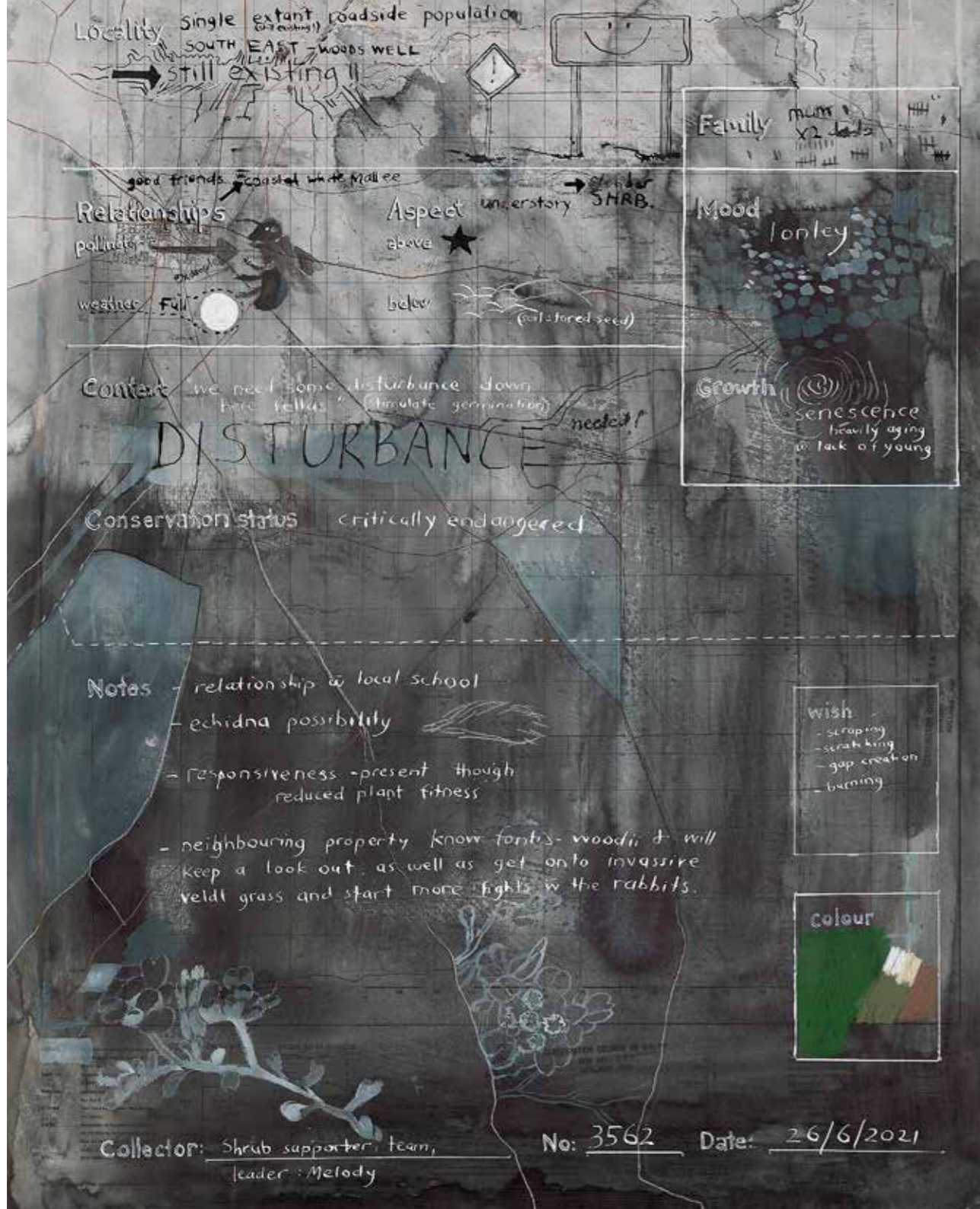
Plant Notes is accompanied by sound work, an ephemeral art tour developed with Belinda Gehlert and Naomi Keyte. The sound piece, designed to be experienced within Adelaide Botanic Garden, provides audiences with an experiential tour encouraging movement and thoughtfulness within the natural environment.

www.plantnotes.com.au/audio

images above courtesy of the artists
Plant Notes Adelaide Botanic Garden workshop 2021

image right
Laura Wills Awarded *Vulnerable Cross* (detail) 2021
ink and pastel on map of Tatiatara region, 75 x 55 cm





Disturbance and physical removal of native vegetation are the most significant causes of loss of Australian native plants. Climate variability in Australia is now expected to include a 3°C increase by the end of the century and will increasingly exacerbate the impact of other causes of species decline. Several South Australian regions of relatively high plant biodiversity have recently experienced a lowest-on-record 20 year period (2000–2019) of cool weather rainfall. There has also been an increase in the annual frequency of dangerous fire weather days culminating in the catastrophic fire season of 2019/20—the worst on record.

These changes to rainfall, temperature and fire frequency and intensity will impact plant species survival by exceeding their tolerance, for example, the death of seed banks in extreme fires. There may also be a coincident loss in ecosystem function such as the loss of critical services from insect pollinators resulting in failure of plants to reproduce.

Our threatened and endangered native plant species are the most extreme in their fragility to such changes. They have reduced resilience due to increasingly extreme climate variation making the survival of their remaining populations fraught. Intervention for species survival is possible but success requires understanding species limits under expected changing conditions, alongside community commitment and engagement supporting such actions.

Professor Michelle Waycott
 Chief Botanist
 Head of Science and Conservation
 Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium

image left
 Laura Wills *Expanded Voucher Spyridium fontis-woodii* (detail) 2021
 ink and pastel on map of Tatiara region, 75 x 55 cm

Artist Biographies

Laura Wills is an Adelaide-based multidisciplinary artist based at Central Studios. Traversing the boundaries of drawing she explores social and environmental themes through found materials, collaborative processes and community-based projects to create hybrid works that are communicative in nature and connect us to the environment.

With a Bachelor of Visual Arts and Applied Design from Adelaide College of the Arts (2003), and a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) from South Australian School of Art (2011) she has exhibited nationally and internationally and has worked collaboratively with many artists including Anna Dowling during a residency at SAHMRI; Elisabeth Close as part of an artist in resident at Flinders Medical Centre and Louise Flaherty in the creation of Grassy Shadows workshops for Nature Festival 2020. In 2017 she was awarded the Fleurieu Art Prize and in 2019 the National Works on Paper prize; both for her collaborative work with James Tylor.

Recent projects include Parklands Project and a four week Country Arts SA residency at Palace of Production, Kangaroo Island. Current Wills Projects with William Cheesman include Tiny Gems, for City of Port Adelaide Enfield; installing a mural in Clare with Rosina Possingham, and developing public art for Rural City of Murray Bridge.

Louise Flaherty is an artist and arts worker based in Adelaide. Informed by quiet reflection on the natural environment, her current practice spans drawing and installation with a focus on community driven projects.

Founding Director of Downtown Arts Space, she has worked at the South Australian School of Art, was Arts Program Manager at Barkly Regional Arts in the Northern Territory and studied Visual Arts at the South Australian School of Art, receiving First Class Honours.

She has exhibited widely and in 2019 was the winner of the Tatiara Art Prize at Walkway Gallery. During a residency at The Mill in Adelaide CBD she created work based on research of local native plants which was expanded upon in a later residency at Sauerbier House Cultural Exchange, Port Noarlunga. In 2018 she was recipient of a Guildhouse LimberUp mentorship with artist Laura Wills, focusing on community engagement and participatory practice. In 2019 she was Artist in Residence at the Women's and Children's Hospital and more recent projects include presenting a new collaborative work for OSCA's Parklands Project; participating in Vitalstatistix's Adhocracy program; and creating a collaborative audio-led workshop for Nature Festival. Louise is a studio resident at Post Office Projects, Port Adelaide.

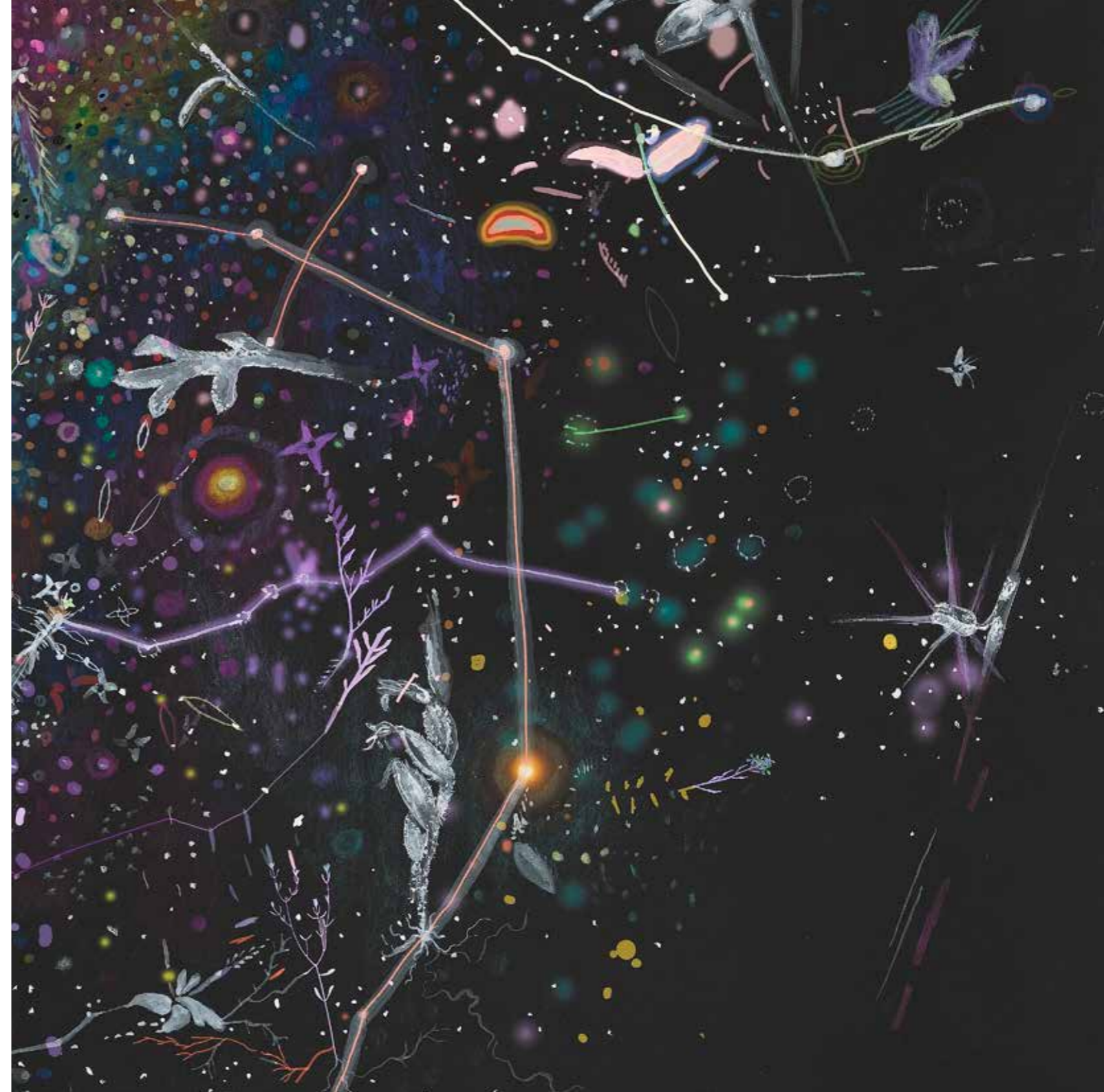


image right
Louise Flaherty and Laura Wills *Threatened Night* (detail) 2021
pastel, pencil and pigment in on rag paper, 75 x 55 cm



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Guildhouse and the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium acknowledge that they operate on the lands of the Kurna Nation and recognise the continued relationship to their lands by traditional owners past, present and emerging.

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

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