

Kasia Tons

# Biotic Commune

11 February — 16 July 2023

**The Guildhouse Collections Project**

with the Botanic Gardens and  
State Herbarium of South Australia at the  
Santos Museum of Economic Botany







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As one of the most visited cultural institutions in the state, the Adelaide Botanic Garden is a welcome oasis in the heart of the City. It is valued by many as a place of calm, quiet and reflection. It is also a place of discovery and connection, where people can contemplate the relationships between plants, people and place.

The Botanic Garden has a long and complex history that is intimately connected with the foundation of the City of Adelaide. Kasia Tons work in *Biotic Commune* helps us to understand that both the plantings and the cultural collections can be read with many different perspectives and narratives, from an uncomfortable colonial interpretation to a message of hope in an age of climate change and species extinction.

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 collections 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.

Contemporary textile artist Kasia Tons was awarded the research and presentation opportunity in 2021, and researched the symbiotic relationship held between plants and humans through access to the Garden's plentiful living collection and its horticultural staff. Coupled with extensive reading, Kasia explored past mythologies and climate predictions speaking to the environment and the roles plants and humans play into the future to inform the narrative of *Biotic Commune*.

Through large scale hand embroidery, soft sculpture and sound work, Kasia shares her optimistic vision for a shared

**Image front**

Kasia Tons, *Citrus skin balaclava*, 2022, dried citrus skin, cotton, cotton canvas, beeswax, 19 x 19 x 19 cm (approx).

**Image left**

Kasia Tons, *Symbiocene blanket*, 2022, wool, cotton, 145 x 103 cm.



future. Unsurprisingly, relationship building and working collaboratively greatly informs Kasia's practice. She notes that working alongside contemporary photographer Emmaline Zanelli enabled the balaclava made from mandarin skin and embroidered blanket (future heirloom) to be viewed in a world that emulates her intentions, where plants and humans live and work together. Collaborating with performance artist Cynthia Schwertsik also allowed her to step back from the art work as an object and instead view the works as functional and futuristic adornment. Essayist Marie Falcinella digs deeper into the thematic of a non-hierarchical ecology and shows us not only Kasia's labour in the meticulous creation of the hand stitched artwork, but in its conceptual underpinning.

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. Since the 1960s it has defined itself through a commitment to partnerships, adaptation and responsiveness to the changing conditions facing artists and makers. Together with partners, Guildhouse creates 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 for their support of this vital project and congratulate Kasia Tons for her compelling body of work created in response to her residency at Adelaide Botanic Garden.

**Debbie Pryor**

Interim Chief Executive Officer / Artistic Program Manager, Guildhouse

**Michael Harvey**

Director, Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium



**Image right**  
Kasia Tons, *Symbiocene blanket* (detail), 2022, wool, cotton, 145 x 103 cm.



## Communal History Marie Falcinella

On Old Ways Island two humans bite into the bark of a tree at the stroke of midnight. According to the artist's research this was an ancient remedy for any illness a person may have, a transference from flesh and blood to bark, preferably that of a lime, pine or beech tree. What could not be determined was what happened to the tree from this ritual. Was it one of reciprocity, the tree synthesising human illness into nutrients? Or would it instead take on the illness, ultimately causing its death?

Assigning human affliction to plants is something we have done for centuries. An example of this in folklore can be found in documented stories of the mandrake plant. A potent medicine used in witchcraft and magic, the mandrake root was said to be pulled from the earth only at night by a black dog, where all those present had to cover their ears as the plant would utter such a terrible cry that anyone who heard it would drop dead on the spot<sup>i</sup>. Why the mandrake was deemed to have such an inextricably human response to its uprooting may be found in anecdotes that its root resembles the human body in form.

While empathetic, it is uncertain if moving beyond acknowledging plant consciousness to assigning them human conditions is helpful to inter-species relationships. In the world of natural medicine plants offer us clues in their forms to the healing properties they have for human bodies, but this has more to do with the sacred geometries found across species and phenomena in the natural world than it is about assigning human feeling. Surely compassion, no

matter how derived, is a good thing? If we humanise something, are we not less likely to destroy it? Or will plants, too, become subject to the tragic human trait of dehumanising our kin in order to divide and conquer? We are here regardless.

According to Adam Michael Krause, anthropomorphising plants in contemporary times is 'part of our problematic penchant for making the natural world a reflection of our societies'<sup>ii</sup>. Government policies favour the privileged, the One Percent getting richer while the most vulnerable suffer. We monocrop agriculture for high yield with little regard to the health of our soils and ourselves. Krause argues that until we create non-hierarchical ecological institutions that value diversity and difference, we will inevitably make the natural world 'a mirror of our mistakes'<sup>iii</sup>.

If the natural world favours collaboration over competition, takes only what is necessary and surrenders when no longer useful to allow space for evolution and new growth, this sounds like the blueprint we need for human existence, in particular for our systems of governance which are ready for the compost heap.

*Biotic Commune* is Kasia Tons' meticulous rendering of such a non-hierarchical ecology. With needle and thread on wool, she has provided a series of clues and hidden code that intertwines past and present wisdom, technologies, mythologies and imaginings of the natural world in pursuit of a future Symbiocene: a new epoch that nurtures all aspects

of being human in a world of other beings<sup>iv</sup>, doing away with environment and its implied separation of humans from nature to reconnect us in 'symbioment'<sup>v</sup>.

In many ways this is an acknowledgement and a return to Indigenous knowledge systems. However, more than suggesting we return to a purity of ancient practice, Tons explores a futuristic approach to abandoning the settler-colonial and industrialised state of our world that Western science calls the Anthropocene. In her most ambitious narrative embroidery to date, the artist weaves together a non-linear demonstration of how we might move to an era where humans are allies, not rulers, in bio-communal living. She has flipped Krause's mirror to reflect a society and its systems of existence that are naturalistic; connected, creative, harmonious and regenerative.

Tons' proposed cultural artefacts from the Symbiocene include a water resistant bullrush-stuffed sleeping mat, banana skin sneakers and a series of fruit skin balaclavas. This suggests that a covert operation of eco-anarchy will be required to enter our new epoch, or that ritualistic transformation to plant-like embodiment has occurred for human biotic communers, or both. The idea of transformation towards our plant kin is taken a step further in the artist's visual musings on human photosynthesis. As Potawatomi botanist and poet Robin Wall Kimmerer laments, "Sometimes I wish I could photosynthesise so that just by being, just by shimmering at the meadow's edge or floating lazily on a pond, I could be doing the work of the

world while standing silent in the sun."<sup>vi</sup>

*Biotic Commune* is the artist's journal, her bookmarks and margin notes from over six months of research and experimentation with traditional and contemporary plant-based technologies (which extended to the construction of mycelium bricks and creation of a durable bioplastic from algae). With her commitment to simplistic, off-grid living and interest and pursuits in survivalism, the purpose of this for Tons reaches beyond the walls of the exhibition space. It is not so much a case of life imitating art but of life as art, as practice. More than shimmering and floating, Tons reminds us that the work of the world requires our active participation as co-creators of a symbiotic future.

### Marie Falcinella

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<sup>i</sup> De Cleene, Marcel and Lejeune, Marie Claire, *Compendium of symbolic and ritual plants in Europe*, Ghent, 2002-2003

<sup>ii</sup> Krause, Adam Michael 'When Plants Sing: Plant Bioacoustics and the Problem of Anthropomorphism', *Harbinger Journal* Issue #1 2019

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Albrecht, Glenn, 'After the Anthropocene' *The Ecologist*, 27th February 2019

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Milkweed Editions, 2013





*Biotic Commune* is a collection of cultural artefacts from an imagined, futuristic society where the Symbiocene has replaced the former Anthropocene as its philosophy towards existing. Humans morph into the background as humble caretakers of the natural world and all living organisms are left to live and die by their own rules, slowly recovering, adapting and in some cases, mending the damage of humans from the time when they still held the power.

Inspired by research into both the living and cultural collections of the Botanic Gardens, *Biotic Commune* is as much about the past as it is the future. One of the pieces, a large, embroidered narrative blanket comprises visual notes from my far-ranging research. It is my way of recording the overwhelming hurricane of written information including, but not limited to, historical records of plant use, discoveries and revelations, First Nations perspectives, failed attempts at alternative agricultural utopias, and artistic impressions of future humans photosynthesising with the help of algae. As with my previous bodies of work, this embroidery was the first piece to be made— place to put ideas, a blueprint for the rest of the works and to reach some sort of clarity about this imagined world. What does it reference, how does it operate, what is its ethos?

I was only able to answer the last two questions quite late in the project, coinciding with the decision to move from my industrial studio in the city to work from my little home on Peramangk country. It didn't make sense to continually travel from a place where I was surrounded by nature to sit in a concrete nook to create a show about existing in the natural world. I need to really immerse myself in the concept, to live the ideas that I am exploring. Reading can be abstract. I need to sit and observe the quiet intelligence of plants and fungi, to try and learn the language of the natural world,

to be in contact with the reality of the seasons, to respond to and not buffer myself from changes in weather and the cycles of the day. I have to watch self-seeding calendula push their way confidently through the sticky red clay I live on, sunflowers sprouting out of gaps in an old wooden box, and Warrigul Greens, first gifted from a friend as a baby, growing so fast I can almost see it happening. The humans that exist within the *Biotic Commune* don't fear the natural world, they don't control, tame or exploit. They have remembered that all the elements of the natural world with which they coexist are part of their community, their family. They still make use of plants for food, shelter, clothing, and medicine but in line with the plant community, it is a regenerative process. They wear balaclavas made from fruit and vegetable skins - a symbol of their commitment to the Symbiocene. When they die, they no longer use the toxic chemical processes of the past but compost into the earth to complete the cycle of eater and eaten.

This imagined *Biotic Commune* world could be seen as utopian, romantic, unrealistic? And maybe it is, if viewed from an anthropocentric lens where the comfort of humans is central. But given the chance to imagine a futuristic world, I'm happy to stick with this one. The stories we tell, the myths we embrace, have proven, throughout history to shape our relationship with the natural world for better or for worse. *Biotic Commune* for me is a reminder to be humble, to observe and listen gently and never underestimate the intelligence and resilience of the natural world of which we are lucky to be a part.

**Kasia Tons**



**Kasia Tons** is a textile artist working and living on Peramangk Country. Hand embroidery and mask making are central to her practice which sits at the intersection of art, fashion, and craft. Her process is slow and intuitive, colourful, and expressive. The labour and time invested in creating her work acts as an antidote to the fast pace of the modern world and the addictive seeking of instant gratification through digital means. Recurring thematic interests include social impacts of digital technology use, the Anthropocene, and interpersonal/interspecies relationship dynamics. Kasia works as an artist mentor. She has exhibited nationally and internationally and has participated in residencies in Iceland, the USA, Latvia, and the Slovak Republic. The Rothko Art Centre, Latvia holds two of her pieces as part of their permanent collection and she was a finalist for the 2021 Ramsay Art Award.

**Image right**

Kasia Tons, *Banana skin sneakers*, 2022, banana skin, blood orange skin, natural dyed oil cloth - clay & soursob, linseed oil, cotton canvas, beeswax, wool fabric, 10 x 9 x 15 cm (approx).





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***Biotic Commune***

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