Bauer's Noisy Friarbird 2011
Pencil and watercolour on paper
76.5 x 6 cm
Canberra Museum and Gallery Collection
From the earliest days of the Sydney colony there are written references to the bird they called ‘the Friar’, in ironic reference to its bald head. A big honeyeater with a raucous call, it arrives in Canberra every spring and squabbles with other honeyeaters over flowering native shrubs and fruit sources. The featherless head is doubtless an adaptation to feeding in large nectar-sodden flowers in the tropics where it spends winter.1

Canberra based artist Nicola Dickson’s pencil and watercolour drawing of a Noisy Friarbird is inspired by the drawings of Austrian draftsman Ferdinand Bauer who joined the HMS Investigator in its circumnavigation of Australian in 1802-3.

The artist has added elaborate new plumage to its typically bald head and wings using a variety of historically inspired pattern and ornamentation, which carries through onto the flowering branch it rests on.

This newly transformed Friarbird with its splendorous display of pattern and colour embodies the artists’ imagining of the wonder and delight experienced by many colonialists as they encountered and exoticised the flora and fauna of Australia.2 Nicola Dickson is a Canberra based artist who uses painting and drawing to explore her long-standing interest in perceptions of the natural world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• What materials has the artist used to make this work of art?
• Name the colours you can see in this artwork.
• Do the patterns the artist has used remind you of something else you have seen?
• The artist has used colour in some areas and not in others. Why do you think she has done this?
• Is this bird real or imaginary? How do you know?

ACTIVITY – Birds of fancy

Teachers source one or more images of an Australian bird sitting on a branch or in a tree, and enlarge to A3 on the photocopier so that the bird is roughly the same size as the bird in Nicola Dickson’s work of art.

Students then paint out some of the background using white acrylic paint, so that only the bird and some branches or foliage are visible.

Once dry, add your own imaginative designs and patterns to different parts of the bird and branches using pencil or felt tipped pens and line work. Explore different ways patterns can be created through repetition of shapes and colours. Teachers can create nature-inspired samples for the students to reference.

Now add colour using acrylic paint, pastels or crayons. You might consider leaving some areas white like Nicola Dickson’s piece or limiting the palette of colours to cool and then adding accents of warm colour.

MATERIALS

• A3 black and white copies of an Australian bird as described above
• White acrylic paint and brushes
• Coloured acrylic paint, pastels or crayons
• Pencil or felt tipped pens

1 Ian Fraser, 2016, Bush Capital, exhibition text, Canberra Museum and Gallery
2 Adapted from text by Nicola Dickson, 2014, Waterhouse Natural History Prize catalogue, South Australian Museum.
Sally BLAKE

Seed baskets
(Poa, Smokers Flat) (Sphagnum Moss, Snowy Flats) (Phragmites australis, Bogon Fen) 2014
Silver, silk, wool, plant dyes
Dimensions variable
Canberra Museum and Gallery Collection
Canberra Museum and Gallery is part of the Cultural Facilities Corporation which is an ACT Government Agency.

www.cmag.com.au

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- How do you think this work of art was made?
- What materials has the artist used to create this work of art?
- Why do you think the artist chose to use these materials?
- Does this work of art remind you of anything you have seen?
- If this work of art was to be used for something special, what do you think that might be?

**ACTIVITY – Localised fibre baskets**

Create a basket or vessel using natural materials found in your local area. As a class, go for a nature walk in a park or nature reserve in your local area. Collect a variety of natural materials such as fallen leaves, grasses, sticks, small seedpods, feathers and bark.

To create the base for your basket, blow up a balloon until it is roughly twice the size of a tennis ball. Cover two thirds including the rounded end of the balloon, with a thin layer of Vaseline or vegetable oil.

Coat five strands of raffia with a thin layer of PVA glue. Do this by laying the strands of raffia down on large sheets of scrap butcher paper and applying the glue to them using a brush. Wrap one strand of the gluey raffia at a time, firmly around the oiled section of the balloon. Make sure the strands criss-cross over each other at times to add strength. Ensure you do no more than two layers of raffia and that there are holes visible between the strands. Stand your basket upright using a clean yoghurt or other plastic container as a stand, and leave to dry overnight.

Once dry, carefully pop and discard the balloon. Use the natural materials you collected earlier to weave through the holes in your raffia basket. You might like to also use a needle and coloured wool to stitch some of the materials onto your basket more securely, or simply weave into your basket to add colour and texture. Perhaps your basket will be lined with natural materials too.

**MATERIALS**

- Natural materials
- Vaseline or vegetable oil
- Plastic (yoghurt) containers
- Butchers paper
- Blunt ended plastic needles (older students might use metal ones)
- Coloured wool
- Balloons
- PVA glue
- Glue brushes
- Natural coloured raffia

The modest Sphagnum is arguably the most important plants in the ACT; its phenomenal water-absorbing properties ensure Canberra’s water supply. It can hold up to 20 times its own mass of water and the mossy bogs high above Canberra gradually release a steady flow of water into streams and ultimately reservoirs all year round. The moss hummocks can be 70cm high and 3000 years old. Armies have tended their wounds with absorbent sphagnum, right up until World War 1.

Artist Sally Blake has created three intimately scaled baskets made of silver, silk and wool. She has used dyes made from plants sourced from the ACT region to colour her materials; Poa a type of alpine grass, Sphagnum moss and Phragmites australis a wetland grass. The colour variations achieved are subtle, and their presence is made further known by her handwritten identification tags noting the type and area the plants were collected from, hanging by a thread from each one. The three vessels seem to float on the wall, the flattened ends of their silver stems like new shoots reaching up to the light. With intention, Blake’s vessels carry a little piece of those carefully recorded natural environments straight to the viewer like a gift.

Sally Blake is a Canberra based artist who uses textile and paper-based media to examine the connections and tensions between humans and nature.

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1 Ian Fraser, 2016, Bush Capital, exhibition text, Canberra Museum and Gallery

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**Sally BLAKE**

Seed baskets
(Poa, Smokers Flat) 2014
Silver, silk, wool, plant dyes
Dimensions variable
Canberra Museum and Gallery Collection
Peter MARSACK
Yellow Box 2011
Oil on canvas
25.5 x 30.5 cm
Collection of the artist
DISCUSSION QUESTION

- What materials has the artist used to create this work of art?
- What types of colours has he used?
- The artist has chosen to paint the tree in a realistic fashion, with the scrub in the background painted loosely. Why do you think he chose to do this?
- Do you think the artist actually made this painting out in the landscape, or back in his studio? Why? Why not?

ACTIVITY – Native tree journal

Create a ‘Native tree journal’. Research different species of trees endemic to the ACT region. Some examples are Red Stem Wattle, Blackwood Wattle, Black Cypress Pine, Yellow Box, Snow Gum, Soft Tree-fern, River Oak, and Mountain Plum Pine. A useful resource is: Ian Fraser and Peter Marsack, 2011, A Bush Capital Year – a natural history of the Canberra Region, CSIRO Publishing.

As a group, choose an area of local parkland or the school grounds and identify some endemic tree species. Draw diagrams and take field notes about the tree’s texture, colour and feel of the bark and trunk. Take fallen leaf samples and make journal drawings detailing their characteristics such as colour, shape and size. Make field notes and drawings that record the birds and insects that inhabit the trees.

Create rubbings from tree bark and fallen leaves using the side of a crayon and put these into your native tree journal.

Sit under a chosen tree with drawing materials, clipboard and paper, and make a line drawing in your journal from this viewpoint. Your line drawing will describe both the outline and contours of the tree. All sorts of lines can be used, for example: scribbly, straight, crosshatched or even one singular uninterrupted line. Make some notes about your thoughts and observations during the process on another page.

MATERIALS

- Fallen bark and leaves
- A3 paper
- Crayons for rubbings
- Clipboards
- A4 blank sketch books
- Pens
- Graphite pencils

This magnificent woodland tree is the essence of the now almost-vanished great woodlands. Its shaggy yellow-grey bark contrasts with the smooth grey-mottle white of the Blakely’s Red Gum, its co-dominant. Except in the few small woodland reserves, Yellow Boxes now survive mostly as scattered paddock trees across the western slopes, reaching their south-eastern limits in the ACT. The name *melliodora* means honey-scented, and bees produce excellent honey from the abundant nectar. Pollen is relatively sparse though, so the bees don’t thrive.¹

Peter Marsack’s oil painting *Yellow Box* depicts the tree in realistic detail standing in the foreground and leaning asymmetrically toward the edge of the frame. The scrub in the background is painted in a more gestural fashion. The dappled light falls on its trunk, casting a scribbly shadow onto the loosely represented golden grasses on the ground below. The sky behind is blue, the light clear and typically Australian.

Peter Marsack is a Canberra based freelance natural history artist and illustrator.

¹ Ian Fraser, 2016, *Bush Capital*, exhibition wall text, Canberra Museum and Gallery
Several groups of unrelated mammals have evolved spines, hardened bundles of hair which form formidable defences. An Echidna’s first response on being disturbed is to dig into the soil, as this one is, with shovel-like clawed feet, presenting an impenetrable array of spines. Those same powerful feet can rip into termite mounds and ant nests, so the long sticky tongue can extract soft juicy larvae and eggs to be mashed to a pulp against her tough palate – she has no teeth. The soil is excreted in distinctive cylinders.1

Australian photographer Jon Lewis’ large scale, black and white photograph depicts an Echidna curled up neatly into a defensive ball so that only its spines are visible. His photograph highlights the wonderfully textural nature of the animal’s highly effective defence system, and the sculptural shape created by its body, which seems to both attract yet warn us at the same time.

Jon Lewis was born in Maryland, USA, and moved to Australia in 1951. He is self-taught and spent the early years of his career working as a social photographer and film maker.

1 Ian Fraser, 2016, Bush Capital, exhibition text, Canberra Museum and Gallery

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• How do you think this work of art was made?
• Why do you think the artist has chosen to make the image black and white rather colour?
• Which words would you choose to describe the texture of the Echidna and the shape it has created with its body?
• The Echidna in this work is much larger than in real life. Why do you think the artist has chosen to do this?

ACTIVITY – Creature defences

Brainstorm a list of insects and animals that curl up or hide to defend themselves for example; slaters, turtles and snails. Now have turns with your classmates at pretending to be those animals and acting out their ability to hide. Can they guess which one you are?

On a large sheet of paper make a table showing the materials these creatures are covered in and the textures present and ways to represent those textures visually for example a spiky echidna, furry wombat, feathery birds, and scaly snakes. Now make a small drawing next to each one to show the way you might represent each textured covering.

Now imagine you are an insect or animal, real or imagined. How would you shape your body to defend yourself or hide? Make a line drawing of the shape your body would make, on A3 paper. Would you have a shell? Perhaps you’d roll into a ball or even another shape? Make your drawing large enough to cover most of the page.

Now add collage materials to your drawing to express the texture or combination of textures you imagine you might have. You may choose to add detail with fine liners or markers when the collage materials have dried.

MATERIALS

• A3 drawing paper
• Pencils
• Glue sticks
• Textured collage materials: half circles for scales, feathers, brown paper for fur, textured or patterned paper
• Fine liners or markers
Steven HOLLAND
all things known, all things sensed  2013
Bronze, oil paint and auto lacquer
50 x 30 x 75 cm
Collection of the artist
Snakes have accumulated perhaps more myth and superstition and unmerited bad press than any other group of vertebrates. They represent a highly specialised group of lizards which lost their legs long ago to be more efficient hunters in confined spaces. Lacking the benefit of feet, ancestral snakes evolved modified saliva containing chemicals to subdue struggling prey – the use of grooves in fangs to inject the venom came later. Both venom and fragile fangs are precious commodities, not to be risked on big animals like humans if at all possible.¹

On first glance, Steven Holland’s bronze sculpture of a Red-bellied Black Snake looks arrestingly real. Its body, an asymmetrical coil balanced perfectly by the curve of its slightly raised head and placement of its distinctively tapered tail looks as if it is just about to slither into another formation. He has convincingly replicated the pattern of interlocking scales that make up its skin and its realistic sheen has been achieved using auto lacquer. One might imagine the cool feel of the bronze mimics that of a real snake’s skin however Holland’s sculpture is decidedly still.

Steven Holland is a Michelago (NSW) based artist, who works across sculpture, drawing, performance and installation.

¹ Ian Fraser, 2016, Bush Capital, exhibition text, Canberra Museum and Gallery

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• What materials has the artist used to create this work of art?
• Why do you think the artist chose these materials?
• Describe what is it about this sculpture that makes it appear so realistic?
• Look closely at the pattern on the snake’s skin. What shapes can you see?
• Many people are afraid of snakes, more than other animals. Why do you think this is?
• How can we act safely when walking or playing in areas where snakes live?

ACTIVITY – Snake textile sculptures

Individually or as a small group, create a life-sized snake sculpture using wire and textile materials. Research the Red-bellied Black Snake. What is its average length and width? What does it eat? Where does it live? Record your findings.

Find some images of this species with its body in different positions; for example, stretched out, curled up and moving around. Pay particular attention to the shapes they make with their bodies. Look at the shape of the head and the way the tail tapers off. Look closely at the pattern and colour on their skins. Now make some drawings of the snake using these images and the new knowledge you have.

Twist and roll some large sheets of newspaper. Bunch them together, overlap them end to end, and wrap with masking tape to create a long snake shape. Keep measuring your snake with a long ruler during this process. Can you make it a realistic length and width? Form the head and taper off the tail using the same process. When you are happy with its size and shape, wrap the snake form with armature wire to give it strength. You should now be able to bend the snake into any position you like.

When you have positioned the snake’s body, wrap it with more raffia until the armature wire is no longer visible. Now wrap it with wool and any other textile materials you may have around, to add colour and texture. Lastly, use a large blunt needle and wool or coloured string to stitch designs onto the snake if you wish. Will the colours and designs you choose be realistic or imaginative?

MATERIALS

• Paper and pencils
• Armature wire (very soft malleable wire)
• Newspaper
• Masking tape
• Coloured wool
• Raffia/string blunt ended plastic needles (older students might use metal ones)
• Fabric scraps torn into long strips
• Raffia/string
• Long ruler
David WONG
Sugar Ant 2011
Photographic print on paper
42 x 59.4 cm
Collection of the artist
There are over 1000 species of sugar ants – also known as carpenter ants elsewhere in the world – with some 140 Australian species. In the central deserts they included the famous honeypot ants. Sugar ants are large, generally slow-foraging ants, mostly nocturnal in our part of the world. This is almost certainly in order to avoid competing with the ubiquitous and all-powerful meat ants. Like meat ants they have no sting, and like all ants the colony comprises castes to efficiently carry out tasks. Most colony members are female workers.¹

David Wong’s photograph of a Sugar ant is an extreme close up. This type of photography is also called macro photography. The artist presents the larger than life-sized ant on a white background, rather than in its natural environment. In doing this, he allows us to carefully observe and appreciate the colour and form of its body parts – something we may not get the opportunity to see in such detail otherwise. By presenting this usually very small insect on a larger than life-sized scale and in a studio setting, the artist is able to emphasise its importance in the natural order of things, and we in turn are able to give it our full attention.

David Wong is a Canberra based writer and photographer.

¹ Ian Fraser, 2016, Bush Capital, exhibition text, Canberra Museum and Gallery