

# Interrelated Worlds

The recent ceramic projects of Julie Bartholomew by Altair Roelants

Like our world, Julie Bartholomew's art practice is open to surprising shifts and departures. Driving both the conceptual and aesthetic elements are issues that inspire her – cultural patterns, social debates and new ideas that are thrown into our popular conscious – and always with a visual criticality that flourishes amidst the artist's love of process. Over an extensive career<sup>1</sup> this flow of inspiration has seen Bartholomew delve into communication technology and virtual spaces<sup>2</sup>, the international beauty and fashion industry's influence on Japanese<sup>3</sup> and Chinese<sup>4</sup> female identity constructs, and eroding cultural traditions in China demonstrated through the fading past-times enjoyed in public parks.<sup>5</sup> And necessary for a contemporary practice that responds to these dynamics, the artist's medium has also seen variations – working in paper, digital installations, photo media and of course, clay. Bartholomew's most recent series of ceramic projects, *Endangered* (2010) and *Rarely Seen* (2012–2013), explore two of Australia's most identifiable and fascinating natural phenomenon – the birds and flowers, and, importantly, those that are under threat of extinction. Interestingly, it was Bartholomew's spate of residencies<sup>6</sup> in China that helped inform these projects, which 'solidified' after returning to Australia through the artist's desire to 'resituate' her practice within a local context while drawing on China's rich ceramics tradition and her personal response to Asia's global environmental impact.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, *Endangered* and *Rarely Seen* foster the subtleties of porcelain and handbuilding, and the hues inherent in color, form and language, to visualise the natural world's often invisible but unequivocal ties to science, man and colonisation, and question where they may be leading.

During childhood trips to her mother's cottage in Talbingo, rural NSW, where Bartholomew used to take pleasure from being surrounded by birds, it seems only natural that the artist's *Endangered*<sup>8</sup> series should so eloquently illustrate Australian birds that are under threat of extinction. The deliciously named flock of five – *Paradise Lost* (2010)<sup>9</sup>, *Swift Parrot* (2010)<sup>10</sup>, *Rainbird* (2010), *Coxen's Fig Parrot* (2010), and *Fairy Wren* (2010) – are colourful porcelain tributes to this country's waning bird life. Chosen for their visual impact, each has distinct characteristics and wears striking glazed plumes combining bold reds, greens, blues, yellows and oranges. Bartholomew experimented with mixing commercial glazes and firing at high temperatures to achieve bright hues and an "effect of movement and somberness", as if the glazes are "weeping" off the feathers. The birds perch stoically atop stark white branches<sup>11</sup> as if clinging to the last gasps of life, as the bark's earthy tones and textures appear to have already drained from their boughs. The composition evokes art historic painting references, or indeed the taxidermied creatures in colonial glass display cabinets. To contrast with the birds, the branches are unglazed and inscribed with white text (using a tissue transfer technique) with details of the animal's demise, current situation and condemning words such as "vanish, decrease, disappearing, extinct, decline", and "final", and the jarring conclusion to this story – "there is no solution to extinction".<sup>12</sup> For her content, Bartholomew draws upon a wealth of scientific resources and the placement of words creates a direct 'imprinting onto nature'<sup>13</sup> as the gesture of wrapping the object expresses the pervasiveness of this environmental damage. So while Bartholomew's message is explicit through her use of form and colour - there is another, more discreet, conceptual layer to the work in these narratives for viewers to uncover.

Bartholomew's following two-part project, *Rarely Seen* (2012–2013)<sup>14</sup>, explores one of the other great wonders of Australia's landscape – its flowers and, more specifically, those that are disappearing.





**Julie Bartholomew**  
*Paradise Lost I*, 2010  
detail, porcelain, decals  
and glaze, life-size  
Photo: artist

**Julie Bartholomew**  
*Rarely Seen Shy*  
*Eyebright*, 2012  
 porcelain, decals  
 h.36cm, w.16cm  
 d.10cm  
 Photo: artist



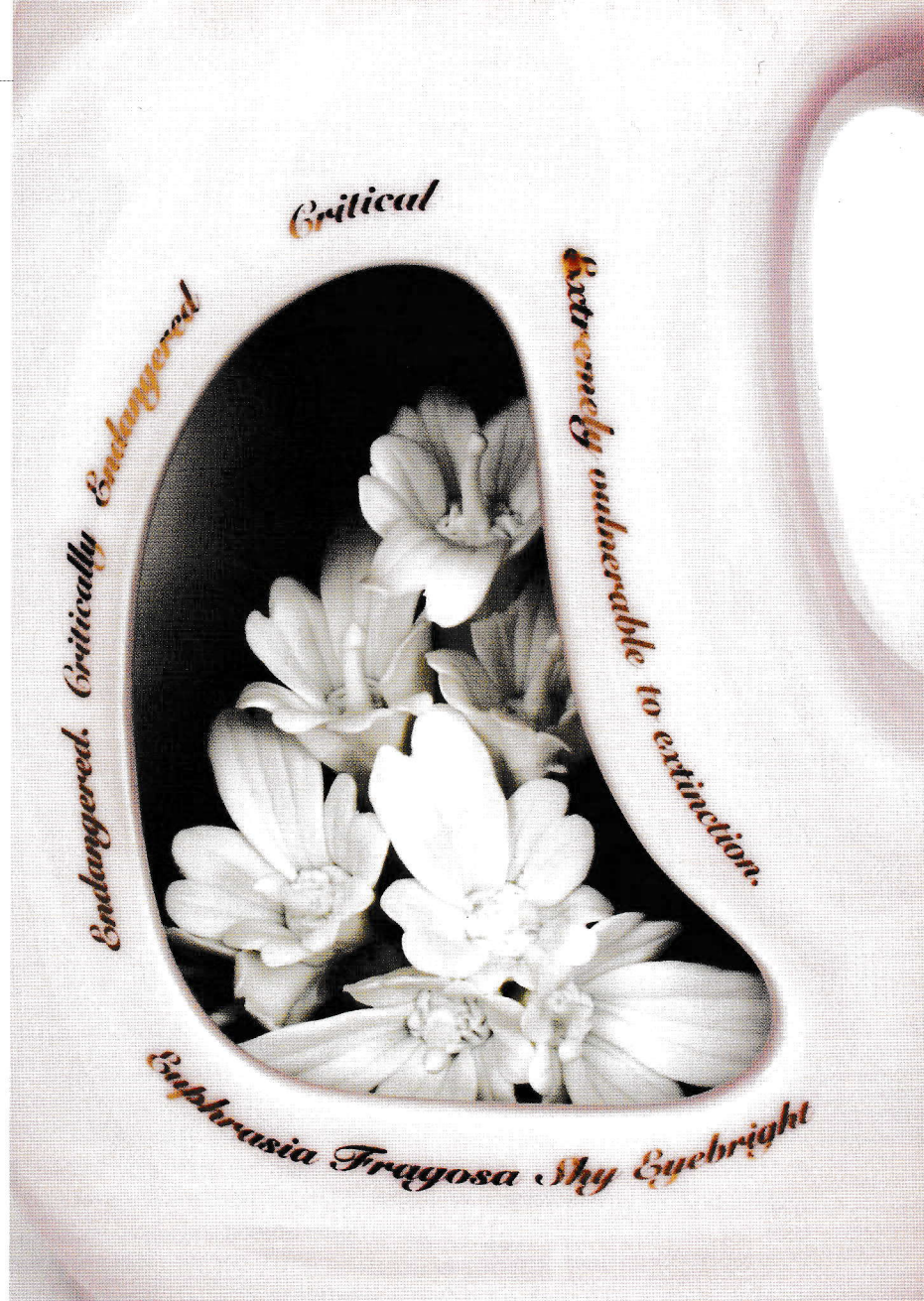
**Julie Bartholomew**, *Rarely Seen Spiked Rice-flower* and *Rarely Seen Drummond's Cronostylis*, 2012, porcelain, decals  
 h.34cm, w.16cm, d.5cm; photo: artist

As the artist discovered during her research, the rate of loss of flora in Australia is faster than in other countries due to the continent's isolation, and then sudden exposure to pests and human infrastructure. In 2012, many readers will have viewed Bartholomew's *Rarely Seen – an Installation* (2012) at The Vitrify Alcorso Ceramic Award Exhibition (7 September – 19 October 2012) at Adelaide's JamFactory<sup>15</sup>, a wondrous circular sea of one hundred and twenty single white porcelain flowers bursting from petri dishes<sup>16</sup>, each filled with a thick, almost sticky looking, blood red glaze<sup>17</sup>. As a collection, one is struck by the diversity of Australia's endangered flowers which many of us know little about, or that are "rarely seen", that now explode from the scientific apparatus that symbolise the roots of their decline. As individual pieces, audience's marveled at their beauty, vulnerability and obvious dedication to craftsmanship. For this series Bartholomew used detailed photographic references and botanic illustrations, constructing each specimen with the guidance of traditional flower-makers<sup>18</sup> in Jingdezhen, China<sup>19</sup>, using an ancient hand-building technique of immense dexterity that Bartholomew has been learning since 2007<sup>20</sup>. The results are wonderfully life-like and the attention to detail is exquisite - some have a myriad of fronds, curved arching petals, or flies resting on their lips.<sup>21</sup>

This year audiences enjoyed the second part of this project, *Rarely Seen – an Exhibition* (29 May – 22 June 2013), at Sydney's Sabbia Gallery. For this installment, a new body of white and red petri dishes was displayed in pairs – one containing single flowers and the other inscribed with text. Bartholomew's use of script is more pronounced than in *Endangered*, the words now surfacing from red copper glaze.<sup>22</sup> To cite just one example, the *Darwinia Carnea* (2012), that, as its coupled text outlines, "is critically endangered. This species is facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future ... Darwinia Carnea is a threatened species".<sup>23</sup> Alongside these works, clusters of white porcelain

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flowers – such as *Tinsel Lilly*, *Shy Eyebright* and *Spiked Rice Flower* (2012) – are contained in an assortment of ceramic scientific vessels and chemical spray containers<sup>24</sup>, each glazed in an artificial pink, yellow or acidic white. The flowers, constructed on the base and the shell being lowered over them, peer out of purposeful incisions in the contours of the bottles. The delicate petals trapped and growing in the dark, cold interior, reference science's impact on nature and the artificial environments that some now come to exist within. Like many locally produced commercial products, their 'packaging' bears a map of Australia, alongside an image of the flower and an account of the species' situation, all in silver decals. This series sees Bartholomew returning to the form of the vessel and the smooth surfaces



**Julie Bartholomew** with *Rarely Seen – an installation*, 2012, porcelain, 120 handformed flowers in petri dishes, perspex tubes, diam.200cm; photos: courtesy artist

“acted like a canvas for words” which she “enjoyed revisiting”. And these words perform like uttered verses creating textual patterns that articulate and mimic man’s continual marking of the land. As one exclaims: “Stuarts Heath is Critically Endangered. This species is known from only a single locality on the Southport Bluff, Tasmania. Threats include sea level rise associated with climate change. Vegetation and habitat loss caused by dieback. Habitat devastation due to mining and quarrying.”<sup>25</sup> The ceramic vessel itself offers an interesting juxtaposition of functions and meanings, as traditionally such objects have very different connotations – the home, bearer of food and water, nurturing and warmth. Casting shadows on the surrounding gallery are an assortment of porcelain wall pieces that look like artillery with such titles as *Shy Susan 1* and *Davies Waxflower 1* (2012). The works comprise long thin casts taken from glass scientific objects that see flowers and gnarly branches unfolding to connect the various modules which are bound in white text<sup>26</sup>, again imagining a dependence on one another – although in this instance it’s hard to tell who is in control.

*Endangered* and *Rarely Seen* visualise the interrelated natural and man-made worlds in a delicate and beautiful but unnerving and suggestive manner, offering us a two-fold warning about the dangerous effect man’s meddling has on the environment and, simultaneously, our attempts to fix these intrusions into natural cycles with scientific methods. Also, as both cause and effect are drastically speeding up, Bartholomew’s work should be viewed with even more urgency. The multifaceted dimension to the artist’s ceramics practice – the use of obvious visual signifiers and then the closer reading of the text – gives them both aesthetic and analytical depth, and that audiences learn something is certainly one of Bartholomew’s main concerns. Her inclusion of short, sharp and pointed



**Julie Bartholomew, A**

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Julie Bartholomew, *Rarely Seen – an installation*, 2012, detail

phrases that speak out to the viewer and clearly implicate us in the work's dialogue, again, highlight the artist's understanding of the quiet, yet powerful nuances of detail. In this sense, individual stories become voices for broader international environmental concerns – the bird's white perches, the trapped flowers and the morphed, creative assemblages – offering a sense of futuristic, doomsday sublime in a world where the line between these two great forces is no longer clear. They also hint at our own fate at the hands of climate change, genetic engineering, body modification and robotics, and are a reminder of Bartholomew's earlier works. In a historic context, there are interesting correlations with the use of scientific language, classification and collections – which are western knowledge systems and the intellectual foundations of colonialism that paved the way for contemporary Australia's indigenous and environmental devastation. Similarly, man's global paths can be traced through ceramic objects which are one of the most durable, and reliable, historic documents. In this light, the choice of white

porcelain to produce detailed, handcrafted objects is a clever use of a material that is conversely fragile and amazingly strong; much like individual species that, while endangered, have continued, often at all odds, to blossom and survive. It is maybe for this reason that Bartholomew attempts to save the stories of these species by "setting them in stone".

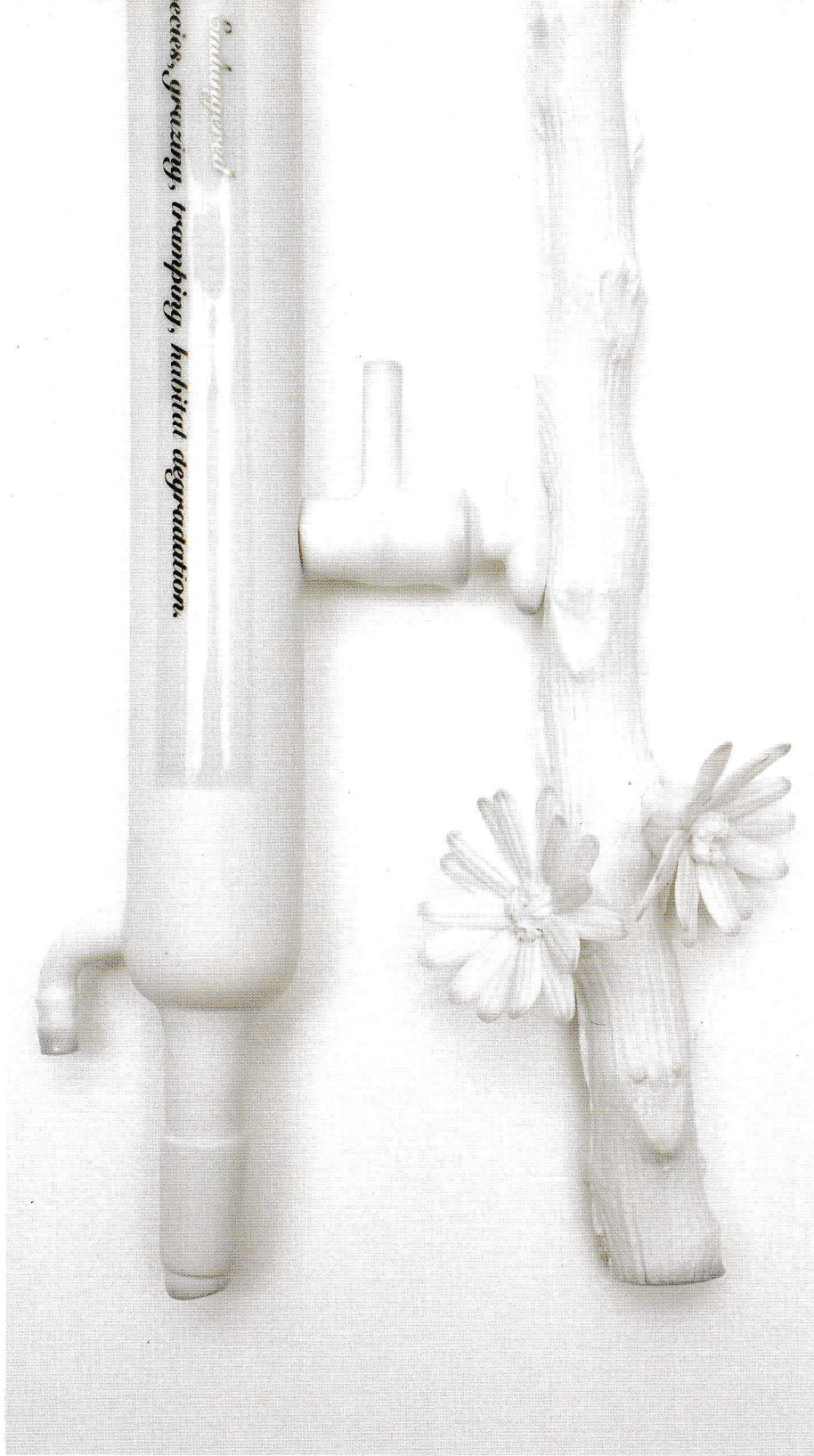
**All quotes were taken from the artist during interviews with the author in 2013.**

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- 1 Bartholomew has received numerous awards including the 25th Gold Coast International Ceramic Art Award 2006, Taiwan Taipei Asialink, and numerous scholarships from the Australian Council of the Arts; taken part in residencies in Taiwan, Jingdezhen, Beijing, Shanghai and Tokyo and has work held in both national and international collections.
- 2 In the series *Spin* (1999)
- 3 *Transitional Bodies* (2006) was a case study on Japanese women.
- 4 *I am Louis Vuitton, I am Manolo, I am CoCo* (2006) and the *Qing, Chanel and Armani Series* (2008) focused on Chinese women. Bartholomew conducted research for these works while on residencies in Beijing and Shanghai. The piece *I am Louis Vuitton, I am Manolo, I am CoCo*, won the 25th Gold Coast International Ceramic Art Award 2006.
- 5 In the exhibition titled *Vanishing Ground* (2009)
- 6 These residencies were in Jingdezhen, Beijing, and Shanghai from 2007–2010.
- 7 An earlier work Bartholomew did on the environment was *By Land and Sea* (1989) – ceramics made in New Zealand that were then exhibited at an exhibition at the Bondi Pavilion Gallery in Sydney.
- 8 *Endangered* was exhibited in Sydney at Sabbia Gallery, 8 September – 2 October 2010.
- 9 *Paradise Lost 2* (2010) was bought by the Yingee Museum, Taiwan.
- 10 Julie Bartholomew's *The Swift Parrot* (2010) is in the National Gallery of Australia's Collection.
- 11 Each of the branches is constructed from 3–5 separate sections.
- 12 Excerpt taken from text on a detail of the work, *Swift Parrot* (2010).
- 13 And in some cases there is a montage effect, as sentences have been physically cut to wrap around the branch.
- 14 In 2012 Bartholomew received an Australia Council for the Arts - New Work Grant for the two-part project *Rarely Seen*.
- 15 *Rarely Seen – an Installation* was on display during the Australian Ceramics Triennale 2012: Subversive Clay (28 September – 1 October 2012).
- 16 With one empty petri dish filled with Copper Red glaze at their centre
- 17 Bartholomew used Copper Red glaze.
- 18 Bartholomew was assisted by flower maker and teacher, Tung Ling.
- 19 Bartholomew completed the decal transfers in Australia.
- 20 First exhibiting a selection of smaller flowers at *The Narrative Knot: Stories in Ceramics* (2 December 2011 – 22 January 2012) held at The Manly Art Gallery and Museum, Sydney.
- 21 Like *Endangered*, Bartholomew chooses species that are visually interesting but the form is also dependent on the restrictions of flower building itself. The ceramic insects are also another traditional genre in China, like flower making. The handformed insects are sold, by artisans, on the side of the streets of Jingdezhen, China.
- 22 Bartholomew first experimented with the red text in the flower works made for *The Narrative Knot: Stories in Ceramics* exhibition.
- 23 Excerpt taken from text on petri dish in work titled *Darwinia Carnea* (2012).
- 24 The vessels are ceramic casts taken from various pieces of glass scientific equipment.
- 25 This is one example of text taken from a detail of a decal supplied by the artist. Much of the research was done in The Botanic Garden Library and on the website: <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicthreatenedlist.pl?wanted=flora>
- 26 Using a decal technique



Julie Bartholomew  
d.5cm; photo: ar



**Julie Bartholomew**, *Brachyscome Muelleri*, 2012, detail, porcelain, celadon, silver decals, h.53cm, w.15cm d.5cm; photo: artist