



'Flaming Flamingo', 2011 – after John James Audubon 1838 (New York Historical Society), reclaimed needlework, pins, tulle, 96 x 78 cm



'Ellis' Paradise', 2011, – after Ellis Rowan 1917 (National Library of Australia), reclaimed needlework, pins, tulle, 122 x 78 cm

SANCTUARY– The landscapes within

Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, Victoria, 24 March – 29 July, 2012

MOST days, Melbourne artist Louise Saxton walks her dog to the Kew billabong where Fred Williams loved to paint. A fecund place of ever-changing moods and patterns, the water and its surrounds has seeped into her being. The bird life there is incredible, she says, attuning her to life.

In her most recent solo exhibition, "Sanctuary", at Heide Museum of Modern Art, she pays homage to the natural world. She weaves together layer after layer of tiny,

reclaimed images of flowers and plants into large-scale reinterpretations of historical paintings of birds and insects.

Saxton has long worked towards the revival of creative needlework, reinterpreting the lost crafts of domesticity with dazzling results. With "Sanctuary" she takes the act of salvaging to another level by rescuing the floral motifs that once adorned all forms of embroidery and placed them within her multi-hued flamingo and striking birds of prey. Appropriately, in this

new higher incarnation, these embroidered landscape elements have come to inhabit the artist's suite of birds and insects. They have been transformed, elevated to reflect the cycle of life.

The interdependence of all matter is a reality which our uber-consumer and growth-fixated culture chooses to ignore. Yet, we – like Saxton's animals – are aspects of the landscape. And we – like her painstakingly pinned motifs – are as ephemeral and transient as the bird of paradise. Inevitably, we too

will be recycled and returned to the landscape from whence we came.

In a bid to confront the Western disconnect with nature, Saxton's pieces are deliberately larger than life. She wants to imbue a sense of being surrounded, of birds and insects looming everywhere, on all levels of the viewer's consciousness.

Close-up, the myriad forms of leaves, flowers, fruit and ferns are as cacophonous as a dawn chorus. Consider Audubon's famous pink flamingo: in Saxton's reinterpretation, a hot fuchsia flush is created in a riot of candy store colours, from delicate pink in its swaying neck to a large almost orange spot in its body, down to deep purple in the tail feathers.

Nature revels in creating such unity out of diversity. Every wild-flower garden in the Grampians-Gariwerd National Park in spring will, on close inspection, yield variety, but stand back and it is the drifts of dazzling white thryptomene or the white-pink stars of calytrix that brings the scene together. As seen in the pointillist palette of Papunyan people's art or that of Fred Williams, the repetition of form, style and material

'Right Place, Wrong Time', 2011, After Maria Sybilla Merian, c. 1705 (Royal Collection London), reclaimed needlework, pins, tulle, 32 x 66 cm



act as keystones to the creation of beauty and harmony.

Look at the glorious tail of Saxton's *Bird of Paradise*, after Ellis Rowan. One striking element holding the whole together are the repeated red callistemon brushes. Like a medieval village builder, she seeks the bricks and mortar of her trade from a single source and follows a repeated style of construction. Remarkably, in the total absence of planning laws, medieval villages show a pleasing harmony in form no matter how high the door or wide the roof. Out of chaos in form, unity is imposed through a common thread of material and style. Grading, sorting, combining and pinning her reclaimed material in endless repetition, Saxton mines a similar source of inspiration in her art.

For Saxton, achieving synthesis of subject and material delves deeper than mere representation of beautiful objects. While initially finding herself drawn to a striking image or captivated by its drama, its eventual collection for "Sanctuary" depended on a fourth dimension. The provenance had to intrigue and, in Saxton's own words, 'the medium has to speak to me about what it wants to become.'

Behind, for instance, "Sanctuary's" sculptured layers of a pink-toed tarantula devouring an iridescent hummingbird lies the fascinating story of Maria Sybilla Merian, a 17th century Dutch artist who was the first person to observe and record the metamorphosis of an insect and who, at the relatively advanced age of 53, travelled, fully corseted, to the Dutch colony of Surinam in the southern tropics to paint its insects.

In her own travels trawling for lost needlework in op shops, Saxton came across several tablecloths covered in spiky-petaled flowers – perfect in her eyes for depicting the tarantula's frighteningly hairy legs. As for the medium for the hummingbird, a gift of fragile silk embroidery from a Chinese-Australian friend matched the luminosity of its feathers, even after death.

Collecting for "Sanctuary" has proven a serendipitous process. To Saxton's delight, many of the original paintings to which she was drawn are by women. The drama of her Major Mitchell cockatoo's raised crest was first painted by Elizabeth Gould, artist-wife to the famous ornithologist John Gould. The shining illustration of a hovering black cicada that was to hold her captive was sourced to author and artist Louisa Anne Meredith. The provenance of her king parrot is an 18th century artist, Sarah Stone, who toiled for a London



'Weep', 2009, reclaimed needlework, pins, tulle, 177 x 165 cm



'Maria's Saturn', 2011 – after Maria Sybilla Merian ('The Insects of Surinam', c. 1705), reclaimed needlework, pins, tulle, 39 x 57 cm



'Queen Billie' (detail), 2010 – after Sarah Stone 1790 (National Library of Australia), reclaimed needlework, pins, tulle, 110 x 65 cm



collector, painting from hundreds of taxidermy specimens. Unlike Merian or Ellis Rowan, another indefatigable artist explorer, poor Sarah never travelled from the dark of her London room to the bright light of the Australian bush. In one of those cruel but all too plausible twists of fate, the collector went bust, the specimens were lost, and Stone's paintings were dispersed.

It is for Saxton a very familiar tale. Similar to the legions of anonymous women who channelled their creativity into needlework, Stone's



'Major Tom', 2010, – after John and Elizabeth Gould c. 1848 (Natural History Museum, London), reclaimed needlework, pins, tulle, 107 x 51 cm

'Lucy's Kite', 2010, – after John and Elizabeth Gould c. 1848 (Natural History Museum, London), reclaimed needlework, pins, tulle, 107 x 51 cm

like Merian's talent has remained hidden, unheralded until recently. Throughout her career, Saxton has sought to remedy this perceived injustice. In the process, she has metamorphosed from recycling archaic artwork to, in "Sanctuary", becoming a collector herself.

Saxton has always been drawn to colour fields. Her very first, large-scale painting, *Green Shift* (1990), is a graded wall of luminous green, sparkling over a base of gold. She describes it as an inner landscape – a product of meditation. Such colour saturation has remained as a constant throughout her career, whether reconfiguring discarded detritus or in, *Weep* (2009), her ambitious, jewel-like Tree of Life.

In this wielding of walls of colour, Saxton's landscapes share more in common with Australian indigenous painters' viewpoint. Not for her the muted tones of an exhausted outback, desiccated by drought; scenes experienced post World War 2 by landscape masters Sydney Nolan, Albert Tucker and Russell Drysdale, leaving impressions that were to haunt their paintings. In contrast, Saxton's birds and insects are awash with colour – more in



Detail of 'Major Tom'

keeping with the purple majesty of Albert Namatjira's MacDonnell Ranges or the sun-drenched hues of the Western Desert school.

From the vivid blues and oranges of "Sanctuary's" saturniid caterpillar to the dazzling displays of its parrots and cockatoo, Louise Saxton's vision of Australian and other wildlife intoxicates the senses. She is the goddess of small things, bringing the long-buried into the light of day.

Gib Wettenhall

Gib Wettenhall is an environmental writer, magazine editor and publisher of em PRESS, with a particular interest in cultural landscapes. His indigenous history, The People of Budj Bim, written in collaboration with the Gunditjmara people of south-west Victoria, in 2011 was Overall Winner at the Victorian Community History Awards. He has an association with Heide through his father Norman Wettenhall, who was instrumental in persuading the Hamer Government to buy the property from John and Sunday Reed. A renowned ornithologist and avid collector of Australian art, Dr Wettenhall sold his natural history collection, using the proceeds to establish an environmental foundation. Since his death in 2000, Gib has chaired the Norman Wettenhall Foundation.

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