

gardening is
not a rational act





Gardening like an artist

AN INTRODUCTION BY TAI SNAITH

Our gardens have always been both a place of philosophical contemplation and fertile subject matter for creative people over the ages. From the famous gardens of Athenian philosopher Epicurus in 306 BC to the *Garden of Earthly Delights* painted by the early Netherlandish master Hieronymus Bosch, or more recently the compelling photographs capturing her spiritual and physical connection with the Earth by feminist Ana Mendieta in the 1970's.

The process of gardening is still analogous with the many varied processes of art-making today: progress through materiality or trial and error, understanding of beauty (consideration of colour, texture, composition and light) and the creation of a complete, shared living environment. The garden is also, literally, a site of digging up history and planting new futures, creating the essence of community and highlighting the politics of place and activity 'on country' both indigenous and introduced.

Memory Topiary

For many of us artists, the garden provides a parallel site to the studio in which a kind of intuitive knowledge can be accessed. Whether it be pruning a dying shrub in order to save it's life or harvesting the seeds of a vegetable and re-connecting with a primal understanding of survival, the garden taps into a kind of unspoken psychology or 'gut instinct' that many artists know well.

There is also a sense of experiential memory that is integral to the avid gardener and also to the artist. Of knowing and remembering the seasons, the pests, the angle of the morning sun, the mature heights and life cycles of different species, but also the lay of the land and the shape of a place.

The mysterious photographs of David Rosetzky suggest the vague but nostalgic memories of herbaceous oases we might see in our mind on a hot summer's day. Double exposures, taken with 35mm camera on black and white film, these

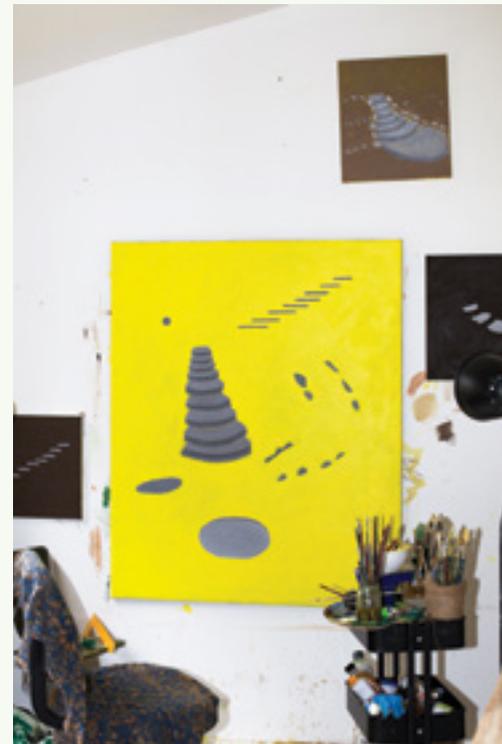
David Rosetzky 'Lyu', 2017
Gelatin silver print 67.2cm x 57.2cm



Below left; Eleanor Butt 'Delara, studio shot' 2017. Below right; Original photograph taken in the late 90's by Julie Butt of 'Delara', designed by Edna Walling.

ghostly images refer to plants and flowers from David's own garden and others, overlaid with faces. This distinctive recent style creates monochromatic semi translucent portraits where petals and curves of leaves suggest lips, eyelids, gestures or poses.

In a similar way to which David's photographs conflate a sense of memory with actual reality, Eleanor Butt's paintings monumentalise memories. Specifically her memories of 'Delara', the garden she grew up in, which is believed to have been designed by famous English-Australian photographer and designer, Edna Walling. Delara regularly appears in Eleanor's dreams with visions of its moss covered pathways, winding stone steps and walls, towering Rhododendrons, Azaleas,



Opposite page: Sean Meilak
'Study for a Metaphysical Garden.' 2017.

Lily-of-the-Valley, Bluebells, Tree-ferns (the only remnants of the pre-existing indigenous forest), Magnolia, Hydrangeas, Maples, Wisteria, Poplars, Pieris, Ginger-lilies, and countless other varieties of plants.

As a young child, Eleanor studied Walling's plans and sketches in her parent's books. Being immersed in an entirely considered landscape taught her to contemplate balance, symmetry and colour, and importantly, the way that composition can work in synergy with physical movement.

The subject matter in her paintings is reminiscent of forms and gestures from these gardens and how they interact, generating relationships and mnemonic narratives. Built-up forms act out movements that describe, however abstractly, a personal cartography, which in these works traverse the stone steps and pathways of 'Delara'.

Similarly, Sean Meilak's sculptural works exist, almost as form of semiotic, memory way-finding or mapping the matrix of the mind. His installation explores the theatrical, psychological and metaphysical space of classical and modernist gardens referencing the idea of the labyrinth and the geometry and order of Italian gardens of Ancient Rome, Renaissance and Baroque periods.

A labyrinthine arrangement of plinths painted dark green create the effect of both topiary and architectural forms. The plinths are topped with small plaster and mixed media sculptures referencing the fountains, follies, and sculptures of classical gardens but also reference art and architecture of the modernist and postmodern period.

The space in between, hedging, Topiary (ornamental pruning) and the consideration of negative space are concepts alive in both painting and gardening. Many expert gardeners have a keen sense of where a border is needed and when the composition of a garden is in need of re-arrangement or overhaul, much like a painter within a frame.





Alice Wormald
'The Border in Colour' 2017.

on the reverse of layers of glass - highlight the distance between the painted elements, echoing the idea of the garden border also being a liminal space. It is the edge between the controlled and built space of the garden path or wall — the human vantage point — and the beautiful and sometimes simultaneously brutally disappointing but mesmerising space that is the essence of a garden. They are the plants that can be reached away from the safety of the path, the ones that you step over to enter the dirt and the life and the magic.

A rose is a rose is a rose/ The root of words

Over the centuries, gardens have been an integral setting to many of our classic literary fictions. From Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Secret Garden*, Lewis Carroll's 'Garden of Live Flowers' in *Alice through the Looking Glass*, to the blood red rhododendrons in Daphne de Maurier's gardens of Manderlay (*Rebecca*) and let's not forget the fanciful backdrop to many biblical transcripts: what Milton described as 'a silvan scene' full of the 'goodliest trees loaden with fairest fruit, blossoms and fruits' – The Garden of Eden.

Opposite page;
Kate Daw 'Albertine' 2017.





Tai Snaith, 'Language of seeds' 2017.

Kate Daw's work 'Albertine' looks at the subjective links between gardening, art and literature. Daw has many species in her own garden chosen purely for their names. Often these names have a link to literature, which, she admits, is quite an unusual way to build a garden. For her, it's about 'how gardening offers a way to fall into the rabbit hole (not literally!) of memory, and in the act of gardening, the pleasure of recalling one's past and processing experience is a huge part of the whole, a production of life, literally'.

The 'hero' plant in relation to this idea is a rose bush called Albertine. The name Albertine, is also a character from Marcel Proust's famous novel *Remembrance of Things Past* (also known as *In Search of Lost Time*). Albertine is a quixotic character, who appears first as a small girl at the beach and later becomes an object of love across the whole of the 12 volumes of this incredible work.

What is interesting to Daw about this rose (produced in France in 1921, a year before Proust died), is that 'it puts all its energy into one, brief, massive show of flowers once a year. It is completely spectacular, but all over in a week, where for the rest of the year it sits as an extremely thorny green climbing bush...catching on everything, and dominating, without much interest. But for that one brief week in November, it's all worth it'.

Here, the name of a plant becomes a character in the cast of plants in her garden: literature and horticulture entwine. The meaning of a rosebush in full bloom evokes powerful passages from a novel, which in turn evokes memorable performances from the play derived from the novel and subsequently the image of the face of the actress who played Albertine.

The work I have created for this exhibition, 'The Language of Seeds' also focuses on language, referring to the ancient practice of 'Floriography' in which different types of flowers are attributed with specific meanings as a way of communicating a cryptic symbol, message or stance. For example, by arranging

Opposite (above and below):
Kate Ellis 'Untitled' 2017

a vase of wild Tansies in the front entrance of your home you might wish to 'declare war' with your guest. Or by wearing an Azalea on your lapel you may be signifying your commitment to Temperance. This tradition has been alive for thousands of years within a broad range of different cultures throughout Europe and the Middle East. It reached its most popular peak as a common practice in Victorian times.

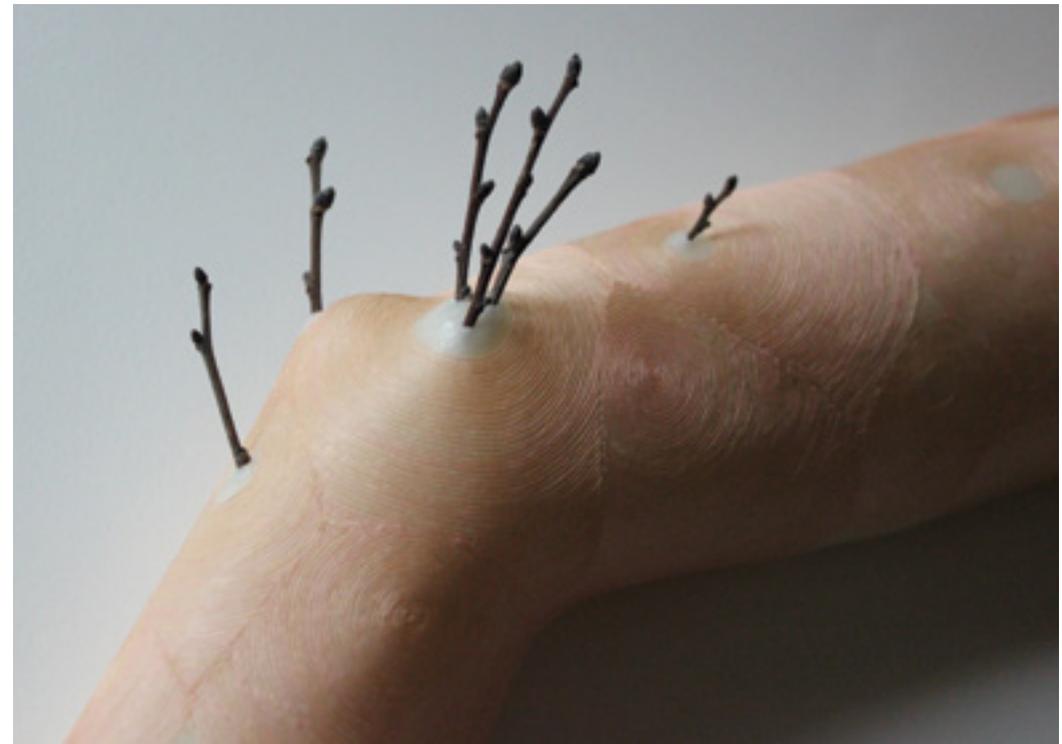
Taking this ultimately poetic idea of giving a plant a linguistic meaning, or making it into an emotional signifier, I have then applied it to the more utilitarian realm of seeds. The promise and hope that a seed holds has an emotional weight beyond many objects in our lives. In our current times of fear and trepidation around environmental futures and food security, seeds represent future crops, growth and prosperity and in that way are almost more valuable than gold (you can't eat money!).

The Language of Seeds is my own fictional dictionary of meanings for a range of seeds gleaned from my garden and re-presented here on a range of ceramic platforms, plinths and dishes, creating a secondary poetic sculptural language using the natural materials of clay and pigments.

Growing bodies, Feeling rocks

The relationship between the body and nature; creatures, plants and trees in her garden is something of interest to Kate Ellis. Here, she creates a series of works using materials of perceived transition or impermanence such as beeswax, sticks, fur, silk thread and found native seed pods. By-products of the natural world, re-purposed to create slightly impossible, limb-like sculptures, elongated, attenuated.

Her sculpted limbs are aesthetic and seductive but disembodied and detached. Ellis has embellished and decorated the waxy appendages with Bushy Yeat pods which themselves are reminiscent of fingers, thus suggestive of play.



Below: Kent Wilson
'Porous Perimeter Property',
bluestone basalt rock, 2017.

Evoking the childhood memories of foraging and collecting props from the garden to be used in imaginative games, Kate's work draws a graceful outline of a feminine language that speaks of gesture and the body, concurrently human, animal and vegetable- both real and fantastical.

In the same way that a wax limb can evoke nature, Kent Wilson's rock installations can evoke people. When Kent's family purchased their property in Kyneton, all of the plants in one section of the garden were introduced European species. Surrounding those plants was a curved line of local basalt bluestone – lumps of dried lava that had been spewed across central Victoria millions of years ago. In more recent times the humans of the region, pre- and post-European arrival, have

gathered those lumps and run them in lines, in circles and various other patterns to set boundaries, demarcate property, direct irrigation, build roads and construct their homes. The rocks have taken on a utilitarian, anthropomorphic quality, not unlike a traffic director or a workman. These little signs and symbols, previously mere composites of earthly interior, take on an almost performative role when they enter the gallery as 'artwork'.

Smelling like Dirt, tasting like home

The final, integral element in which we artists use our gardens is to connect and create meaning in our lives is through place and community.

Eugene Howard's work emerges from a practice of responding to place through quiet, poetic examinations of care, time and connectedness in various mediums: most recently with materials emerging from a garden. Working primarily with the processes of gardening, Eugene has a deep interest in deploying creative practice to examine diverse forms such as gardening as a methodology for *care* and *custodianship*; ultimately working towards a creative practice that is congruous with life.

After recently being evicted from his home of five years (due to the sale of the property by his landlord), Eugene had to choose which plants to save and which

Eugene Howard, 'Before
and after shots of the garden
at Clarke St.' 2017.



Opposite page; Chaco Kato
'Sketches for Cha-no-ma garden:
subterranean networking' 2017.

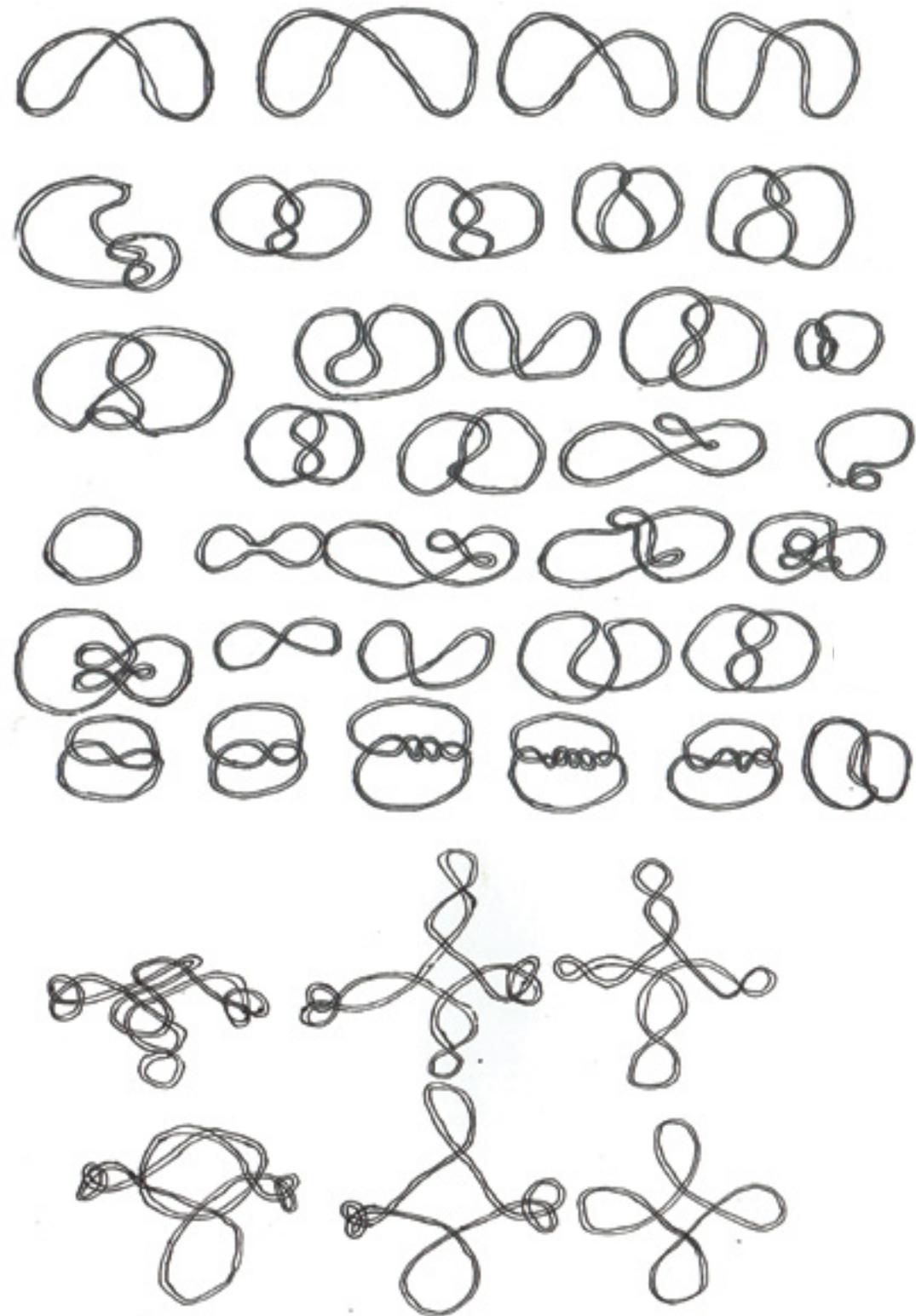
to mulch. The mulch is transferred to its new home on the gallery floor, made from his plants that couldn't be transplanted.

The second component of this work is a display of tools used for care and cultivation, from various sources. Tools are loaned from the Wurundjeri Land Council (who reside here at the Abbotsford Convent) to foreground the 65,000+ year Indigenous inhabitation of this country and to acknowledge the Wurundjeri of the Kulin Nation, upon whose lands this exhibition takes place. There are also tools on loan from other artists in the exhibition and the Abbotsford Convent gardener, Simon Taylor, who cares for the Abbotsford Convent garden today. He will then need to come in and out of the gallery throughout the exhibition in order to continue using the tools.

In this way, the smell of his deceased plants becomes a celebration of their meaning in his life for the past five years and a suggestion of their continuing importance as mulch, articulating the ever-evolving nature of the garden (and our practices as artists) in varying states of decay, re-generation and growth.

With similar incentives, artist Chaco Kato uses the idea of gardening to process physical conditions, networks and create new meaning. In her work '*Cha-no-ma garden: subterranean networking*' she reflects on information gleaned during a chat with the Abbotsford convent gardener earlier in the year.

He informed her that the nuns who previously lived here at the Convent planted a large garden full of secret herbs; this garden was used for making remedies, teas and chartreuse. As Chaco says 'A cup of tea means a lot in the world. In Japan, *Cha no ma* is a 'living room', it literally means 'a space for a cup of tea'. This is the centre of family life, however it is also a shared space for both social and personal use. *Cha* solves everything, physical conditions as well as relationships. My grand parents had a big *cha no ma* and a garden where they grew many flowers and herbs; this is one of my favorite childhood memories'.



Baker's Dozen

COUNTER

© BRUCE PASCOE 2017

Here she begins the process of gathering the disparate fragments from both the Convent history, combining them with her own *cha no ma* memories and elements of her personal garden, bringing them together to create a space of meaning and practice. Along with her everyday craft practice of weaving and tying knots, plants always play a crucial role in her work, as a powerful symbol of life force and to represent the idea *impermanence*. The theory of 'Rhizome' is the central framework to her practice: no beginning or end, always in the middle, in-between stages.

Gardening is a radical act of generosity. As artists, we glean so much from this daily, or weekly practice of getting our hands dirty. It is a ritual tonic for the senses, a physical assertion of instinct and ancient knowledge. Sometimes it is a new beginning, an unexpected frost or an inexplicable flowering. Not unlike the practice of making art, gardening is a kind of commitment to magic.

The initial, tiny germ of an idea for this exhibition was planted the first time I read this quote from Margaret Atwood;

"Gardening is not a rational act," she wrote. "What matters is the immersion of the hands in the earth, that ancient ceremony of which the Pope kissing the tarmac is merely a pallid vestigial remnant. In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt."

How many bakers does it take to make a nuisance of themselves?

Well last summer we had three bakers, two food scientists, two photographers, three dogs and two besieged house owners.

To harvest kangaroo grass you need hot weather and someone who knows what they are doing. All we had was the hot weather.

We had been researching some of the old people's traditional food plants and we were revved up to tackle the kangaroo grass. The summer before we hand harvested an area of grass on the local airport and ground the seed into flour and baked a loaf of bread for Ben Shewry of Attica restaurant, Melbourne. He was a bit over excited because we'd been out fishing on my home stream, the great Jinoor (these days Genoa) River, we'd had a couple of beers and he'd caught his first fish. He loved the bread and ate many slices. Which we thought might have been for breakfast.

It reminded me of Charles Sturt's 'exploration' party in 1843 who were saved from starvation by 400 Aboriginal people in Sturt's Stony Desert who gave them water and fed them roast duck and cake, a cake which Sturt declared was the lightest and sweetest he'd ever tasted. Now we know that Pom's can't cook so when they're dying of starvation they may be inclined to exaggerate the quality of any food they are given, but it still surprises me that in a country with 500 cooking shows in the media we still don't know the grass from which those people made the grain to make that light and sweet cake.

Maybe it's because we cannot afford to look at the agricultural economy of a people from whom we stole the land and justified that theft to our Christian selves by saying the Aboriginal occupants were a low species of life who knew nothing about growing their own food and therefore didn't really own the land.

Anyway, despite that small omission from our country's history for the last 220 years, a baker's dozen of us gathered last January to harvest kangaroo grass,



Left: Kangaroo grass

thresh it and grind it into flour and bake a few loaves. The baking was the easy bit because everyone in the room knew how to make bread, although the blue heelers were a bit scratchy, but for the rest of it we were working off a modicum of traditional knowledge and a thousand aberrant suggestions, the more aberrant the emptier the bottles became.

But our bread was aromatic as all heaven, had a wonderful texture and rich deep flavour. One baker started talking about the wonderful crumb but we thought there was plenty left and kept eating.

We are sampling other grains, other harvesting methods and other milling techniques but the certainty is that the grains Aboriginal people domesticated 30-40,000 years ago will become sensations in Australian and International cuisines.

We just have to get over the refusal to acknowledge how we came by the land, because you can't eat our food if you can't swallow our history.

BRUCE PASCOE IS A YUIN, BUNURONG AND TASMANIAN MAN WHOSE 2014 BOOK, *DARK EMU, BLACK SEEDS* WON THE NSW PREMIER'S BOOK OF THE YEAR IN 2016 AND HAS BEEN REPRINTED THIRTEEN TIMES.

Albertine

"People claim that we recapture for a moment the self that we were long ago when we enter some house or garden in which we used to live in our youth. But these are most hazardous pilgrimages, which end as often in disappointment as in success. It is in ourselves that we should rather seek to find those fixed places, contemporaneous with different years."

MARCEL PROUST, *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME*

I have built a garden with a collection of plants chosen for their names rather than their features and appearance which is perhaps the ultimate in irrational gardening. The idea around this is to create a space that pays homage to the important



The Language of Seeds

ideas, places and times in my own history and those I love, based on a language of words rather than plants; books rather than roses.

The hero of this idea is my rose bush *Albertine*. Chosen for Proust's quixotic character in *Remembrance of Things Past*, I planted this bush to pay homage to Proust's novel and to an artwork I made (and have never shown) about a play performed in 2002 at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. Written for screen by Harold Pinter and adapted to stage by director Di Travis, who came to VCA from London to work on this production for the Festival of Melbourne, this production was condensed, distilled version of Proust's extraordinary seven volume work, also known as *In Search of Lost Time* (originally published between 1913 and 1927). The play was performed by VCA students, all of who were instructed to learn about 19th century manners and social mores, including learning how to waltz.

"Love is a striking example of how little reality means to us."

MARCEL PROUST, IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME

The rose bush, *Albertine*, is infuriating. With a French heritage (it was developed in France in 1921) it sits all year, mostly just leaves and thorns, snagging on everything, looking utterly gloomy. Then for ten glorious days in early November, it bursts into staggeringly beautiful pink and white flowers and scent, completely overwhelming everything else around it.

I've come to love *Albertine*, annoying as she is for 50 weeks of the year, for her refusal to comply with anyone and anything, doing her own thing when she damn well likes. As I dig and muse and decide on what will stay and what needs to go, reflect and dream on past and future events, *Albertine* sits and broods, preparing for her own stunning annual event.

It's always worth it.

Runner Beans – Desire to bite the hand that feeds/Irrational patterns
Lambs Ears – Radical Softness
Sheoak – Self Loathing as an art form
Pinchushions – Tough Love
Aliums – Gratuitous display of affection
Cerinthe – Resting Bitchface will follow you to the grave
Kale – In need of Self Love
Garlic – Brains Trust membership
Avocado – An irrational desire to consume Idle funds
Clivia – left high and dry
Broad Beans – Easy living/ promise of flow
Sedum – Picnic with an ex
Salvia – Eyes on the prize
Magnolia – Love of Nature, loathing of technology.



Tai Snaith,

'Language of seeds' 2017.

This page: Creative women in their gardens,
including Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe,
Vera Lynn and Florine Stettheimer.



In Her Garden

BY TAI SNAITH

In her garden, seasons come and go. Each time round remains a remnant or a memory from the year before, but also brings a host of fresh characters. Where there was a sunny spot the year before now there is an area of shade. Where there was one mound of kangaroo grass, now there is three. Where last year the kale was thin and pest-ridden, this year it is strong and thick.

She might find herself worried by an unusually warm week over her birthday in winter, noticing that the purple hellebores and snowdrops and magnolias all open early, when this time last year there was a late frost. Some years, she is overwhelmed with the joy of abundance by a boom crop of something she can eat. Other years the fruit dries on the tree without even one reaching her plate. Or the blossoms are blown away by an unusually strong Spring wind, denied of their transformation into flesh.

Both the predictable and unexpected nature of her garden, as in her life, continues to fascinate her. Change is the only constant. There is always something to do. When the studio and the family take emotional toll on her sense of self, she escapes to her garden. There she can empty her mind, but still use her hands. She can be wild, but still with a sense of purpose. There she can be rough and forthright and physical and yet still, ultimately nurturing.

Often in the middle of night, under the full moon she breaks from her sleep and finds herself wide-awake. So sometimes in these moments, she ventures out into her garden. The light of the plump yellow moon reflects off the trunk of the lemon-scented gum as a pair of ring-tailed possums run the length of its limbs. Wallflowers are twisted neatly and tightly shut by the sandpit, in virtuous slumber until the dawn breaks and the first light gives them permission to show their faces. The world is quiet and alive. There is a certain feeling of radical intuition and pure impulse that comes with gardening at night, she always feels excited and charged by it.

When she returns to her garden in the honest daylight it almost feels like they share the secret of a midnight tryst amid the sleeping flowers and leaves and the moist soil.



David Rosetzky:
Combination 1 2017,
Gelatin silver print,
67.2cm x 57.2cm



Tai would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of c3 Contemporary Art Space, especially Jon Butt and Katie Paine.

Design by Peter Long.

This exhibition and publication has been made possible by funding from Creative Victoria.

All of the artists would like to thank and acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the true custodians of the land on which we were privileged to hold this exhibition. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded and we extend our respect to Elders both past, present and future.

CREATIVE
VICTORIA



Eleanor Butt
Kate Daw
Kate Ellis
Chaco Kato
Eugene Howard
Sean Meilak
David Rosetzky
Tai Snaith
Kent Wilson
Alice Wormald

Spring 2017