



The Clarence River flowing through the Gorge.

the river, the big river, the river of 100 islands, the river of mythic proportions. The river that starts as a stream at the northern border range and runs its course all the way to the eastern coast gathering the waters of untold meandering streams, creeks and fast-flowing little rivers. The mighty river like a grand tree whose limbs stretch ever outward reaching into timeless wilderness. River of phenomena galore given to honour landscapes carved by time. The river of stories, of legends, of tragedies, of festivals. The river of a childhood spent watching for the deluge to come and cause the Swellings that would break the banks and fill the lowlands with a rich brown wash. The river we watched rise and fall season upon season. The river we paddled by, waded and swam in, boated on. The riverbeds, sandy, stoney riverbeds with quarled, eerie looking trees whose roots floods left exposed for us to play amongst. The river that was source of fantasies, dreams, nightmares, fears and sublime reverence.



South Arm with Woodford Island on the right

Sou
bar
West
Carl
New
old
Cun
mer
pam
tura
wan
ikar
crick
clay
Kew
collin
clay-
nort
east
east
foot
will
car
ma
clay

th gratton
beach, newcastle
ryde, sydney
on nth, melbourne
own, sydney
bar
dletown
umbula
bula beach
i beach
dsworth common
ia, greek islands
lewood, london
field, brisbane
melbourne
ngwood, melb
field, brisbane
hcote, melbourne
brunswick, melb
ivanhoe, melb
scray, melb
iams town, melb
rington, newcastle
yfield, newcastle
yfield, brisbane

Diversity and Depth of Connection

by Sophie Munns

As an artist bringing to light the hidden or under-appreciated elements of the world around me has always mattered. Curiosity around diversity rather than sameness got my attention from my earliest years.

Diversity, was rarely welcomed or celebrated in my early years. Division and difference were lines drawn up everywhere, ingrained as they were back then it could take a good deal of courage to throw off the binds of expectation linked to one's background, whether it was gender, race, socio-economic factors or cultural beliefs getting in the way of finding your way in the world.

High School years (1971-76) in the northern NSW town of Grafton offered little more than a distinctly European perspective in Art & Music, subjects I loved, leaving me with huge questions about the continent I was living on. Quietly absorbing challenges indigenous students in my year dealt with on a daily basis only added to those questions.

Art school followed by art teaching in NSW brought new perspectives, yet it was two years working & busily engaging in London's cultural intensity, 1986 - 88, that provided a fertile review of Australia, past, present and future. Returning home midway through the 1988 Bicentenary year it was clear we'd reached the point where the hidden stories of our continent needed airing, and vastly more complex and honest tellings highlighting indigenous cultural life, the diversity of migration, lives of women and all kinds of diversity within communities had to be key, and celebrated, not hidden from view any longer.

The 90's spent in Melbourne pushed me to the concept of CROSS-POLLINATION, ideas around building richer, more engaged communities through Art. As an artist in the 90's visibility of female role models and opportunities were far rarer than now. In that vacuum I went for things that made sense to me ... running workshops, making art to sell, teaching journaling courses, hosting guest speakers, cooking for community dinners and conservation events, fitting in hours to paint where possible at my Collingwood Studio, Themata Studio, smack-bang in culturally diverse inner Melbourne where conversation was inclusive and alive with rich exchanges.

The life established in Melbourne after relocation from London in late 1988 was an experiment in putting art to work as something much more than a means to creative fulfilment and selling art. The mission was locally engaged yet about being a vital part of a much more inclusive world. At Themata Studio, this artist-run space had generated a model for cross-pollination of the kind that is adopted by many creative around the world today and certainly I still practice today in various forms.

That life was left in 2000 after a house fire necessitated relocation and Newcastle became home for the next 8 years - with time divided between teaching in schools and studio life. By 2007 an MFA was commenced at Newcastle Uni, with new questions exploring what it meant to be living in a time of great complexity and velocity of change ... the concept of fluidity and change absorbing my thoughts in the studio, at Uni and often whilst swimming at the wonderful ocean baths. Humanity was on the crest of ever more change ... and so was I I found when illness sent me packing and

off to live with family in Brisbane in 2008.

Out walking in the subtropics seeds are everywhere to be found, and soon I began collecting and making art about seeds with a passion. A year after migrating from the south I'd started a seed project, was blogging and researching online, making art & volunteering in the Seed Lab at Brisbane Botanic Gardens at Mt Coot-tha. In that Lab destiny revealed itself ... everything that's ever mattered to me as an artist seemed to collect around seeds and became a residency proposal for 2010. Against expectation I was offered the opportunity and this paved the way for this project which continues now.

Launching the Homage to the Seed project for the Seed Lab residency triggered intensive exploration of the diversity of seeds and plants on Earth that continues to bring home to me just how interwoven plant-life is with the evolution of cultures, languages and patterns of living on the planet, going right back to earliest recorded history. To learn about seeds through time and place has been a sheer exercise in diversity on so many levels. Every seed one learns about opens up a history ... is it local, native, endemic or introduced or perhaps listed as an invasive species. Through seeds you can learn the story about the land it comes from or was introduced from, simple or extensive details as you wish. It's impossible to ignore the powerful role that the world's indigenous cultures have had in the preservation of the world's seeds and plant life.

Over the last decade, working in schools, botanic gardens, anywhere a workshop space is found, my classes focused on seed-collecting, uncovering the science, where possible, and the stories, making diverse artistic responses, documentation with smartphone photography ... all the while learning to make a relationship to habitats where they live, what has always been there, what was introduced and so on. In the beginning participants often wanted to draw & paint things they liked... like Banksias or other well known species. Insisting we focus on the unknown or less 'lovely' seed samples leads to more 'awake' exploration of the enormous diversity of forms and shapes, each one with significant scientific and cultural aspects to explore. Gradually imaginations unused to navigating biodiversity begin to shift away from popular or traditional garden species and start to notice the staggering complexity of species ... small and large ... living side by side in ecospheres of great intricacy.

Celebrating diversity I find happens when new relationships are formed and there is depth as well breadth of engagement. In 2020 we are far more aware than ever of the value of this kind of knowledge for the future. More people than ever know that losing a connection to nature is not healthy for individuals or communities.

South Grafton where I grew up is a town with a history of celebrating the Jacaranda tree (sp Jacaranda

Mimosifolia) of South American origin. In 1879, Grafton seed merchant Mr H. A. Volkens, was contracted to plant trees for the Council and during the 1880's he supplied and planted hundreds of Jacaranda trees in the streets of the town. The Jacaranda festival, inaugurated in 1934, holds great significance for the town yet inclusiveness for indigenous women to enter the annual quest for the roles of queen and princess for the festival was a very long time coming. A beautiful tree when flowering it has no relationship with region's natural habitat or history over millennia ... like so many celebrations in so many places it speaks to a particular time in history that is under review.

Last year I participated in an extraordinary new festival on the Clarence River: 53 Islands was set up to "inspire Clarence Valley people to salute/depict/tend/explore our river islands – with art, play, landcare, science, sport, stories, music, navigation, whatever it is you do." For the first time I'm aware of a festive in that Valley brought together all kinds of communities through the focus on the river and its islands. Indigenous stories were of central importance ... here was a way to bring people together across old divides. It completely opened up a sense of possible ways of seeing these landscapes existing over millennia. A remarkable festival for so many reasons ... with this dedication on the first page of the website: "We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of country, the Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr and Yaegl people, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging."

We need new ways to ensure our celebrations of diversity are able to deepen connections and understanding. And bringing nature and the rich cultural knowledge of our countries indigenous people into the celebrations of place is a powerful means of doing this. Nature supports and enriches our lives on a daily basis in incalculable ways. Its precious diversity is what our lives depend on and the more we look into the real stories the more we realise what is truly there to be celebrated and valued.

You can view some of Sophie's work on her instagram page <https://www.instagram.com/sophiemunns/> or find info about her Online Workshop: <http://seedartlabstudio.bigcartel.com>