

## Wild/flower Women II: Art, Environment and Activism

### Exhibition Essay

Susan Davis (Central Queensland University) and  
Nina Shadforth (Independent Curator)

*Wild/flower Women II – Art, Environment and Activism* takes its inspiration from Kathleen McArthur, a wild and passionate wildflower woman whose art and activism was fuelled by her deep love of the landscapes and life forms of our country. Her work can be seen as being situated within a long history of women caring for country through artistry, including traditional custodians who lived off the land, the women who collected native wildflowers for eminent Australian botanist Frederick von Mueller<sup>i</sup> through to those who Kathleen knew and influenced such as Margaret Thorsborne. Kathleen's direct influences include her Aboriginal friend Sylvia Fox<sup>ii</sup>, as well as Estelle Thompson<sup>iii</sup>, whose slim volume of work on Queensland wildflowers published in 1929 was the inspiration for Kathleen's first book 'Queensland Wildflowers'<sup>iv</sup>.

Kathleen McArthur was a self-taught artist who specialised in painting Queensland wildflowers and is also well known as being one of the founding members of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, along with fellow 'wild/flower woman' Judith Wright. Prompted to enter the public domain Kathleen played a lead role in major campaigns calling for the designation of Cooloola National Park<sup>v</sup> (now part of the Great Sandy), and National Heritage listing for Pumicestone Passage<sup>vi</sup>.

Kathleen's detailed, delicate drawings and watercolours were provocative and passionate protests, not created solely to scientifically classify and identify, nor were they created as mere decorative objects to enhance living room walls. In a practical sense her art fuelled her activism through prints and cards being sold to raise funds for various environmental campaigns, but her deeper desire was to change the way we viewed and appreciated our native wildflowers and coastal environments:

Because our flowers have never settled into our consciousness they are not seen. ... *It is only when the mind opens that the flowers bloom.* It follows that if the flowers cannot be seen, they do not exist in the mind, so there can be no thought in those minds of protecting and preserving them for posterity<sup>vii</sup>.

### Intimate knowings

Kathleen McArthur's art and activism were inspired by notions of deep connectedness and *love* as Judith Wright noted in her introduction to Kathleen's book 'Looking at Australian Wildflowers'<sup>viii</sup>. Such ways of love and knowing may therefore be thought of as intimate knowings, and they are the ways of knowing that inspired Kathleen McArthur and the other artists in this exhibition.

With those we love and care for, the ways we come to know them are deep, physical, emotional, visceral and personal. These sensate ways of knowing are often experienced within private and domestic spaces, the details savoured and soul-sustaining. Artists have a similar way of knowing with their materials and process. Environmental activists have such ways of knowing with the land, waterways, plants, birds and living things.

Such ways of intimate, relational and domestic knowing are each to be discovered in the work and art of the artists represented in *Wild/flower Women II*. Each one has an intimate relationship with their artform and materials, with the ways that their practice allows them to express their cares and concerns, and engage in their relationship with place.

**Kathleen McArthur** began painting wildflowers through a combination of circumstance and challenge. A flood confined her at home while living near Mt Mee. She was curious about the flowers and plants that grew around her immediate surrounds, but which she didn't know or could name<sup>ix</sup>. She borrowed her daughter's paints and tried to represent what she saw. Her painting, deep looking and knowing all combined to feed into the development of her art practice and her plant knowledge. A mother or parent's love drives them to protect their children against all bullies and foes, and similarly Kathleen's love of wildflowers, forests and foreshores served to fuel fierce emotions, concern and actions.

**Anne Harris** calls herself a plant artist and she doesn't just paint plants, but she enters into a relationship with them as she explores their nature, qualities and characteristics. She weaves with them, she makes dyes and paints from them and celebrates their textures, shapes and powers. She delves into old knowledges, traditional knowledges, and women's knowledges as she experiments and coaxes them to reveal their secrets, and through this process they transmute from being mere materials to becoming her allies and teachers.

**Shannon Garson** enables intimate knowings through a tactile and exquisite hand-formed experience in porcelain works. Marrying nature and culture, the outdoor and the indoor, the untamed and the domestic, she draws nature onto every surface of her cups, plates and bowls. These objects are meant to be touched, loved and used. Lips on cups, hands wrapped around a bowl, the intimate contact with art and nature is domesticated and everyday, but also elevated to the sublime.

**Ulrike Sturm's** intimate knowings draw attention to the quirky and hidden, she looks and sees the remarkable within the ordinary and through her mastery of various printed forms, highlights small revelations and joys. The print-makers eye seeks out the contrast and line with detail and clarity, the essence of place or character that can be captured and delineated through two dimensions displayed not only on paper and bark, but directly onto surfaces, and with her ephemeral vinyl wall art these spaces are then transformed.

**Marvene Ash** captures the energy of her subjects, the places, the plants and the spirit of moment through her painting. Working deftly and rapidly, the years of training, knowing and doing inform her intuitive acts and compositions. Taming the untamed, whilst releasing the contained, she has reworked the image of the carefully constructed botanical bouquet and injected a wild vitality into her floral subjects. Through this current collection of works she has applied her intimate knowledge of her media not only in the studio, but also working 'en plain air', animating her blossoming relationship with the wallum and the wildflowers of Kathleen McArthur Reserve.

This exhibition recognises that what is known and valued by a culture is an active process and so not only pays homage to a legacy, but also serves to generate a new one. Together, the works of the inspirer and the inspired connect and reimagine the relationship between women, art and the environment, acting as gentle intervention, they challenge and disrupt through creativity and creative activism. The exhibition also asks something of you, to become more than a viewer, to not only look, enjoy, learn and love, but to consider what you know about our native wildflowers, wallum and natural heritage, and what you can do – through multiple forms of expression, communication, art and action to ensure the legacy lives on.

What is not recognisable will not be saved. So, with great urgency let us get to know our wildflowers and it will follow that we will love them and desire their preservation<sup>x</sup>.

'Wild/flower Women II: Art, Environment, Activism' exhibition  
Caloundra Regional Gallery, [gallery.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au](http://gallery.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au)  
May 3 – June 17, 2018

#### **Acknowledgements:**

Curators: Nina Shadforth and Susan Davis

Kathleen McArthur works have been generously provided on loan from her son Hugh McArthur and the Fryer Library, University of Queensland. We also acknowledge the support of Wildlife Queensland, Sunshine Coast Branch, and the friends and family of Kathleen McArthur.

The exhibition and development of the work is being supported through a RADF grant. The Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF) is a partnership between the Queensland Government and Sunshine Coast Council to support local arts and culture in regional Queensland.



For further information about 'Wild/flower Women' see  
<https://www.wildflowerwomen.net/>

(Images of works in publication)

Kathleen McArthur

*Hibiscus splendens*, 1959

35.5 cm x 29.5 cm

Anne Harris

*Plant Study Hibiscus tiliaceus - Cotton Tree*, 2018

Silk & natural dye

26 x 31 cm

Anne Harris

*Embodied Wallum*, 2018

Hemp, Linen, Organic Cotton, Silk

Thread, Natural Dyes

150 x 42 x 23 cm

Image by Sam Frysteen

Shannon Garson

*Tiny nest bowl* 2018

Porcelain, glaze, underglaze, oxide, terra sigilata

Approx 4 cm x 5 cm

*Stoneware beakers* 2018

Stoneware, glaze, underglaze, oxide, terra sigilata

9 cm x 9 cm

Kathleen McArthur

*Wedding Bush - Ricinocarpus pinifolius*

35.5 x 29.4 cm

Marvene Ash

*Wallum Bouquet 5 with white bottlebrush and thyme-leafed myrtle (from A Suite for Kathleen)*, 2018

Gouache on paper, 34 x 30 cm

*Wallum Bouquet 4 with white bottlebrush and wallum grevillea (from A Suite for Kathleen)*, 2018

Gouache on paper, 34 x 30 cm

Left: Kathleen McArthur *Vanilla Lilies*

Right: Ulrike Sturm *Sowerbaea Juncea after Kathleen McArthur*, free-form vinyl cut.

Cover: Ulrike Sturm

*Kathleen wildflowering with hat*, 2018

Image for free-form vinyl cut, 119 cm x 84 cm

---

## References

- <sup>i</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *The Bush in Bloom: A Wildflower Artist's Year in Paintings and Words*. Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, NSW, 1982.
- Olsen, Penny. *Collecting Ladies: Ferdinand von Mueller and Women Botanical Artists*. Canberra: National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2013.
- <sup>ii</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *My friend Sylvia* [Unpublished Lunch hour theatre script]. Sunshine Coast Council Heritage Library, 1992
- <sup>iii</sup> Thompson, Estelle. (1929). *Flowers of our Bush*. Read Press, Brisbane, 1929.
- <sup>iv</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *Queensland Wildflowers: A selection*. Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1959.
- <sup>v</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *Living on the Coast*. Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, NSW, 1989.
- <sup>vi</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *Pumicestone Passage: A living waterway*. K. McArthur, Caloundra, 1978.
- <sup>vii</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *The Bush in Bloom: A Wildflower Artist's Year in Paintings and Words*. Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, NSW, 1982: 8.
- <sup>viii</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *Looking at Australian Wildflowers*. Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, NSW, 1986.
- <sup>ix</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *Living on the Coast*. Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, NSW, 1989.
- <sup>x</sup> McArthur, Kathleen. *Queensland Wildflowers: A selection*. Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1959: 1.