

“The Secret Life of Seedpods,” an exhibition by Chelsea Baker.

The Write Gallery, 1 September- 30 September

Timing is everything and the Write Gallery at The Lighthouse Complex has managed an impressive coup by hosting “The Secret Life of Seedpods,” an exhibition by Chelsea Baker that coincides with the celebration of the iconic Carnival of Flowers

When the American biologist and writer, Janine Benyus, who popularized the term, ‘biomimicry’ said: “Deep inside, we still have a longing to be reconnected with the nature that shaped our imagination,” she could have been channelling Chelsea Baker. Chelsea is an unapologetic collector and hoarder of nature’s detritus. Many examples in her archive of specimens are the cones and seed pods from the numerous varieties of the banksia plant. Inspiration comes from discarded husks that hold a primal memory of trees that are able to survive bushfires and floods and scatter their seeds far and wide.

Tabletops of raw materials including gumnuts, firewheel tree pods, eucalyptus leaves, and the banksias, give viewers an insight into the magical metamorphosis that the artist has wrought. But Chelsea is not just the cosmetician breathing new life into the discarded and forsaken remnants of former lives. She is a co-conspirator, nature’s collaborator, and humbly in awe of the intricate and complicated designs that have inspired interpretation through biomimicry.

Chelsea upholsters nooks and crannies in painted detail that shines like satin embroidery. Empty orifices that once held seeds are now resplendent miniature secret caverns. Drab, dried exteriors are given makeovers that glow like the carapaces of exotic beetles. The shapes of the objects have not been altered but rather enhanced by colourful punctuation. Droplets of colour flow in a rhythmic embrace of the natural curves, protuberances, and scaly surfaces. The delicacy and focus, the restrained concentration that builds the multi-hued surfaces become a meditation, a spiritual wakening that pays homage to the original statements of nature by offering them reincarnation as artwork.

The spacious gallery encourages appreciation of the exhibition’s overall concept as well as inviting the closeup intimacy demanded by the small, resplendent treasures. A shelving unit with pigeonholes offers a formal geometrical grid in which to display the random, yet precise symmetry of the embellished objects. Strategic plinths present more examples and allow them to be seen from different angles. On the walls are open and limited edition prints of seed pod arrangements. Some have neutral backgrounds that enhance the subtle decoration of the pods, while others are on more vibrant backgrounds that tend to compete with the sometimes neon intensity of the many accumulated colours. The prints are produced under the Hello Chelsart signature suggesting a more commercial avenue which seems almost at odds with the very personal transformation of the natural vegetation. However, the wall art happily integrates with the more sculptural pieces to create a coherent and comprehensive body of work.

A further feature is a blackened room with ultraviolet lighting in which suspended pods like magic lanterns glow with an almost phosphorescent aura.

The exhibition is fascinating. Chelsea Baker's meticulous painting becomes adornment that enhances, translates, and honours the refined designs of nature.

Sandy Pottinger, September 2023

Sandy Pottinger is a Toowoomba based artist and writer. She is a retired lecturer in Visual Arts from the University of Southern Queensland and was the art critic for the Toowoomba Chronicle, writing the *Around the Galleries* column for twenty-five years.