



MUNDARING
ARTS CENTRE

WHAT ON EARTH CELEBRATING THE BOTANICAL WORLD

PEREGRINATIONS OF A CITIZEN BOTANIST

SUSIE VICKERY

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I first came across Susie Vickery's work four years ago when curating *The 'wit' of the stitch* for Ruthin Craft Centre, North Wales. This was programmed as a positive response to the overly didactic and drily theoretical exhibitions that can occupy gallery spaces. We wanted the show to have a warmth and humanity that would engage visitors even as it provoked thought. Humour can be a divisive presence in art as in other areas of life, but wit was another matter. Wit suggested an acuity of perception. It brought a particular intelligence to the discourse; it was playful and resourceful. Wit, we felt, could draw people in as it gently challenged perceptions. It could open minds that might otherwise be closed.

Susie Vickery's work proved a perfect marry. It combined excellent craft skills with a lively and informed intelligence that immediately engaged visitors. This was work that had depth - a depth of knowledge, experience and feeling - yet which held that depth lightly. It tackled serious issues - the exploitation of people and working conditions in textile factories - but did not leave the visitor feeling defeated, only admiring of the imagination that had brought the idea into being.

I have kept a watchful eye on Susie's work in the years since that exhibition, currently from a distance of 9048 miles. I long to see the *Peregrinations of a Citizen Botanist* in person but, rather like the compatriots of Monsieur de Labillardière himself, I am reliant on the transmission of written reports and illustrations. And, as with the sharing of that information over two centuries ago, my eyes are gradually being opened. My understanding is changing; my horizons extended. I may never experience that new world for myself, as the crew of the *Recherche* did, but I am grateful to those who venture the globe as fellow world citizens rather than conquistadors, and whose insights make me see my own world differently.

This seems to me one of the beauties of Susie Vickery's practice; it brings worlds together. Physically present in three, sometimes four continents in any one year, Susie has developed a wide-ranging portfolio of work that combines an arts practice with involvement in community development and social enterprise initiatives in Nepal, India, Tibet, Myanmar, Turkey, Mexico and Australia. Her background as a theatre costumier with a fascination for eighteenth century dress, feeds into much of her work, as does her love of hand embroidery. This is often expressed in ways we might expect, the Citizen Botanist's wardrobe being a fine example. At other times her exploration of subject matter and media take us down unexpected avenues.

Peregrinations of a Citizen Botanist, her most ambitious project to date, is one such avenue. Taking the form of a cabinet of curiosities, the project charts the journey to Western Australia in 1792 of French botanist, Jacques-Julien Houtou de Labillardière. As one of the great traveller-naturalists who produced the first comprehensive description of the flora of Australia in 1804; Labillardière is brought to

life in the exhibition in the form of a third size puppet that Susie has made and animated. "Do you see that I resemble my original form, but perhaps a little more handsome?" he says to camera in one of the films that accompany his travels. It is an affectionate evocation of a person who the artist has come to know - and admire - through extensive historical research. The accuracy of that research is reflected in the costume he wears, and the affection evident in the gallery installations that chart his fictional progression as he "sloughs off his European habillements and takes on the flora of the land". Plants he noted have been used to dye the cloth of his garments, some of which have been embroidered with the flora he recorded. Australian bluebells, *Eucalyptus occidentalis*, *Nuytsia floribunda*, the Kangaroo Paw and *Banksia repens* all have their place in his wardrobe as the Citizen Botanist is slowly absorbed into the natural world he is traversing.

Developed in collaboration with fellow artists and indigenous advisers who have each brought their own knowledge to the project, *Peregrinations of a Citizen Botanist* has been described by the artist as "an immersive learning experience". This parallels Labillardière's own encounter with the territory. There is no greater immersive experience than exploring a land far from one's home, and few better examples of how to respond than the "curiosity and willingness to learn" that we are told he demonstrated. This is also the artist's approach. She is ever immersed in work, curious to learn and keen to draw together the strands of life-experience and creative endeavour. We see it in the collaborations involved in realising the exhibition and, before then, in the imagining of the project itself.

"For me, it is a homecoming after living overseas for over thirty years," A coming home: a coming back to see a place anew. The subtitle for the puppet Citizen Botanist's journey is: "The adventures of a time-travelling naturalist as he returns to Australia 227 years after landing there". It is a journey taken in tandem with his maker, as they revisit a known land from the perspective of a different time. "A time of learning the indigenous history that was never taught [at school]." A time of "relearning the history of Australia, especially the French exploration of the west coast, as only the British version of history was



taught when I was young". A time to "look back at the descriptions written by early explorers [and] at our current relationship with the environment...". A time to "present an alternative view of history, [of what] could have been made if we had chosen to learn from the environment rather than destroy it or mould it to fit a European model of agriculture".

There is much to reflect on here, much to admire. *Peregrinations of a Citizen Botanist* covers serious issues, but the wit of its making ensures it is immersed in joy and we are the better for its being.

June Hill
July, 2019

All quotes by Susie Vickery





IMAGE CREDITS

Susie Vickery, *Peregrinations of a Citizen Botanist* (detail), 2019, linen, silk, embroidery



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