



ATTENTION to detail

Susannah Blaxill's artistic take on nature has won admirers around the world, including British botanic art collector Shirley Sherwood. In her Mittagong studio, Susannah shows DEBORAH McINTOSH how she creates her detailed works of flowers, vegetables and nature long past its prime.

SUSANNAH BLAXILL sees herself as an artist rather than a botanical artist – she's as likely to paint quail eggs or old vines or out-of-date vegetables as she is to paint a thriving plant. But there's no doubt the self-taught artist's biggest break came when her dynamic painting of a beetroot caught the eye of the

world's foremost collector of botanical art, Shirley Sherwood.

Susannah, who has lived in Mittagong for 25 years, painted the beetroot in Armidale in 1993 and in 1994 it was purchased by Sherwood. Housed in the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art in London's famous Kew Gardens, it continues to be one of the collection's most requested works for travelling exhibitions.



“I think I see in a very small way... I would see the acorn rather than the oak tree.”

ABOVE SUSANNAH BLAXILL IN HER MITTAGONG STUDIO – THE PEONIES ARE FOR A NEW COMMISSION. **BELOW** GARLIC, USED IN PETER GILMORE'S BOOK *FROM THE EARTH* (2018); BEETROOT, ONE OF 13 OF SUSANNAH'S WORKS IN THE SHIRLEY SHERWOOD COLLECTION IN LONDON.





ABOVE SUSANNAH IN HER GARDEN. **BELOW** SEAWEED, A LARGE WATERCOLOUR (510MM X 730MM) HELD IN THE SHIRLEY SHERWOOD COLLECTION AND EXHIBITED AT THE SMITHSONIAN IN WASHINGTON, US, IN 2003. SUSANNAH WANTED TO SHOW DEAD PIECES OF SEAWEED “AS IF THEY WERE ONCE MORE CARRIED ADRIFT BY AN OCEAN CURRENT”.



“It is one of the most popular in my collection,” says Sherwood in a 2020 video about the work posted online. “It is floating in space and it’s got an energy about it.”

She continues: “I think this painting caused such a stir because people hadn’t been painting vegetables with any enthusiasm. And they all started. It sort of triggered a surge of vegetable paintings, fruit paintings, so it’s had quite an impact.”

Susannah, who has 13 works in Sherwood’s collection, feels the beetroot has a life of its own. In 1997 it was shown as part of a travelling exhibition of the Sherwood collection in New York, and appeared on the front page of the arts section of *The New York Times*. “That was a bit of a thrill,” she says. Another early highpoint was in 1992 when a painting of pears was selected for the 7th International Exhibition of Botanical Art and Illustration at the Hunt Institute of Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, US. The invitation-only exhibition

takes place every five years and an artist can be shown only once. Susannah’s work was chosen for the catalogue cover.

In 2013, she was one of 10 international artists chosen for an exhibition at Kew Gardens called *The McEwen Legacy: Artists Influenced by Rory McEwen* (McEwen is regarded as one of the finest botanical artists of the 20th century). Since 1988, her work has appeared in more than 50 group shows – she’s a regular at *Botanica* at Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens. However, she says two solo exhibitions in London in 1991 and 1994 stand out as particularly significant. Both were sell outs. “They gave me the courage I needed to go on painting.”

Susannah continues to do so 30 years later, as regular as clockwork, in a studio as orderly as you would expect for someone who creates such painstakingly detailed work. Monday to Friday, from 8am to 5pm, you’ll find Susannah in the sparse, white studio she and husband Peter Jenkins, a retired economist, added to their mid-century home, designed by renowned Sydney architect Peter Johnson. Susannah and Peter bought the house in 1996 to raise their children, Grace, now 27, and Phoebe, 25.

For the past 20 years, Susannah has focused on commission work for Australian and international collectors. She works in

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pencil, ink, charcoal and watercolour. “I love working with black and white, it’s so clean and so pure. But the funny thing is, when I work in charcoal for a couple of months, I think, oh, charcoal’s so difficult, I’d love to go back to watercolour. Then I go back to watercolour and think, oh, this is so difficult!” she laughs. “It balances out.”

In choosing her own subject matter, she often uses pieces of nature found on walks or in her garden. These are placed in bowls or on shelves while she mulls them over. “I’m happiest when I just pick things up and think, that looks fun. These are leaves that have dried [on her desk]. Here are some turkey eggs. That’s a bit of our grape vine that our neighbour twisted into a wreath. I have boxes and boxes of things in the laundry cupboards that I want to draw. I think sometimes the house might smell of things that are half dead.”

She points to a drawing of rosehips. “These are very ordinary. You’d chop them down and put them in the compost. And this drawing of a red onion, it’s well past it. You would throw that out because it’s shooting and it’s cracked. But if you can take something ordinary and create something that stops people in their tracks, that’s the thrill. It gives me real joy.” She lays out some intricate ink and graphite works that include a slice of orange and a dragonfly. She will exhibit them when she has about 50. “They’re ordinary but I want them to be jewel like.”

She doesn’t paint from a scientific perspective. Nor does she seek out the rare or obscure. “I’m not interested unless I find something visually appealing.” Most commissions focus on flowers, which are usually depicted as strong subjects.

A small drawing takes her a week or more. A large watercolour of a flower could take two to four months. First, she takes lots of photographs of the plant from every aspect, “playing with it in multiple positions”, because it will die long before she finishes the painting. “Then I do lots of drawings, with the real plant in front of me, to get a feel for what I’ll be painting. Everything is carefully thought out before I start.”

Once she chooses the drawing, she blows it up and transfers the image using tracing paper onto thick paper. How much of the final work comes down to botanic accuracy or artistic choice? “I might add things. If it doesn’t have enough leaves, and I want



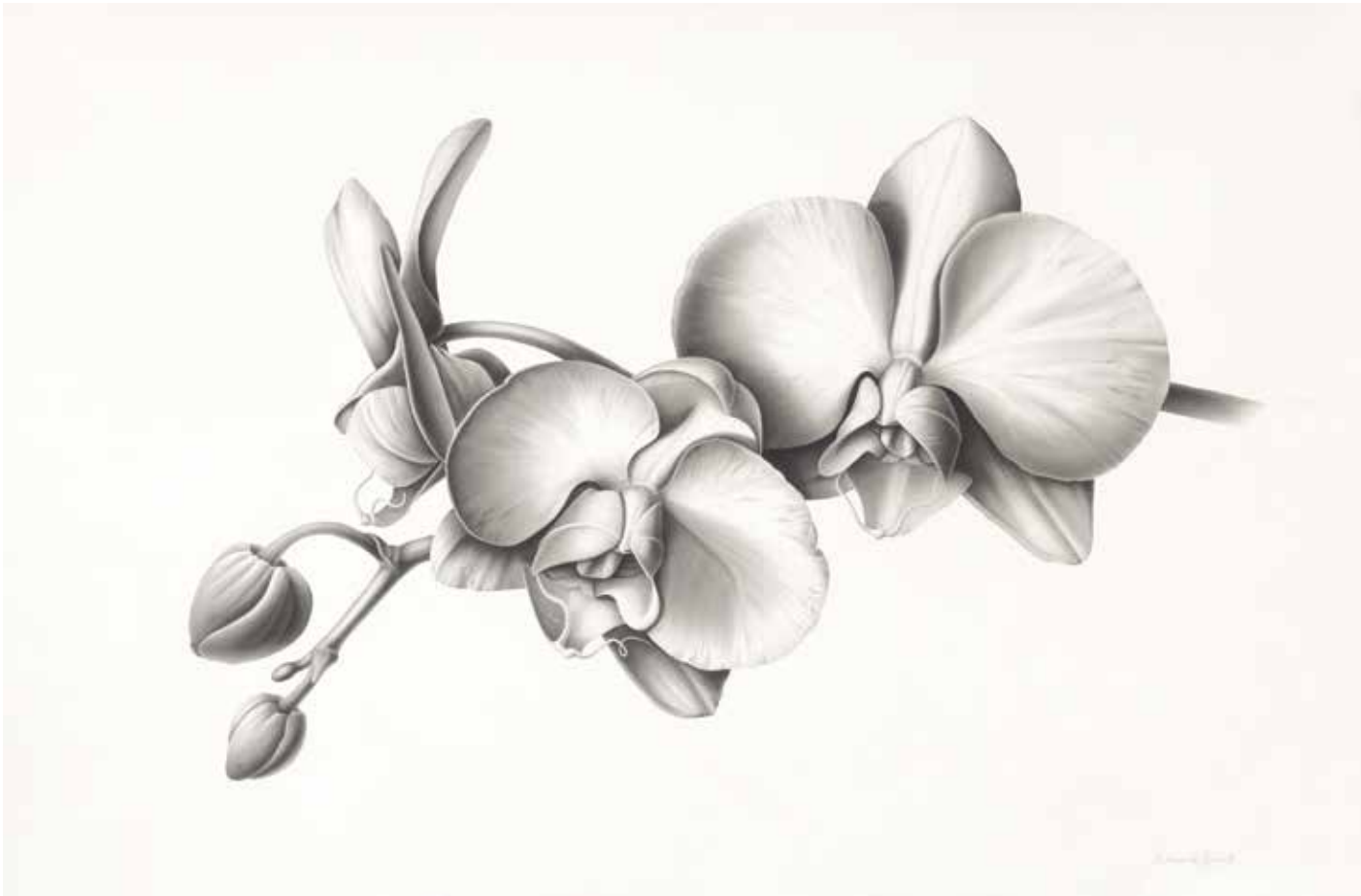
ABOVE PARROT TULIP. BELOW, FROM LEFT GINGKO BILOBA; WATERCOLOURS AND POSSIBLE FUTURE SUBJECTS SUCH AS CICADA CARCASSES, EGGS AND CRAB CLAWS; TOOLS INCLUDE WELL SHARPENED PENCILS.



leaves, I'll put them in. But I'll make sure they go in correctly. I want it to be real."

Whether painting or drawing, all the main work is done with exceptionally sharp pencils and thin brushes, laying and overlaying the finest of lines. Susannah has dozens of boxes of graded brushes and pencils (she uses mostly German tools and paper). She continually masks areas with plastic film to protect work from being marked by her hand. She wears glasses with jeweller-strength magnification.

"Often watercolour work starts with big washes, and then I work on top of that, mostly with a 0000 brush [about 1mm]. It's sable. A lot of artists work with synthetic brushes in this area, but sable hair has lots of little indentations that trap the water. If you press it fully on the paper, all those little hollows will be emptied. But if you just touch the paper, you release the tiniest amount. A synthetic brush is a straight hair so it dumps on the paper.



WHITE ORCHIDS (1.5M X 1M), A RECENT COMMISSION IN CHARCOAL.

That's why I don't use them. Because I want to be in control.

"It's called dry brush work because there's barely any water – the brush is filled with pigment. The small brushes help me explain the detail."

She strives for dramatic plant portraits, choosing white or black backgrounds depending on which will be more effective. She may also play with colour to meet this end. She points to a print of a Gynea lily (the original belongs to a Sydney collector), saying, "I was able to put in a heap of vibrant colours to make it come off the paper. This morning, I said to a client, 'I think I'm going to have to make the pink a little stronger than it actually is to make it stand out [for a *Corymbia ficifolia*, a flowering gum]'. I do alter things. It's the drama I'm after."

Susannah didn't know what direction she would head in when she started to paint, but she was always drawn to nature and detail. She grew up in Armidale, and started university after school, but left in her second year to go to England, where her mother was from. She did an honours degree at the University of East Anglia in medieval history and landscape archaeology ("You can't make a career in it, but it was interesting") and then trained to become a primary school teacher. "I taught briefly and then decided to give myself a year of dedicating myself to painting."

Susannah lived in Norfolk where she turned a field into a garden. "I was fascinated by the things that grew. I think I see in a very small way. I couldn't paint a landscape, because I'd think, how will I show that? You can't do detailed work on that scale. I would see the acorn rather than the oak tree. That's what I was absorbed in. So I painted the things that I grew."

For the first year she just drew. "When I started, I really wasn't very good. But I got hooked. I thought, I have to go on painting. I was very secretive about it for a year. I didn't want to show the failed pictures – I wanted to keep them and just get better. And slowly I did." She started exhibiting in group exhibitions in 1988. In 1992 she returned to Australia.

Susannah was disciplined about art from the beginning. "In

my 20s I'd get up at 5am and paint until 9pm. I was so determined. I can't do those hours now because I get tired. Also, I work more finely now, so I can't honestly paint that long. I'm just whacked at the end of the day.

"Some people say, 'Oh, how wonderful to be an artist, you can do what you want when you want'. And I think, not if you're going to make a living. I just get up and go to work."

She has often taught classes in watercolour, graphite and ink, and says for her, being self-taught had some drawbacks. While it meant she stayed true to her interests, it took her much longer to learn how to use materials. "With charcoal, it took me three years to learn how to use it as I wanted to. Now when I show students

"I have boxes and boxes of things in the laundry cupboards that I want to draw. I think sometimes the house might smell of things that are half dead."

how to use graphite, I probably save them a year of learning. I'm sorry that I wasn't taught because it would have saved me years."

Her home is filled with art – her own, works by her daughters and Peter, and many other artists. But when she buys art, she chooses "the loose and the free". "All my books are on people like David Hockney, Fred Williams, Lloyd Rees and John Wolseley. It's everything that I can't do. That's what I'm interested in."

Yet when it comes to her own work, she is compelled to capture objects in exquisite detail. "Some people don't get it. It's horses for courses and that's fine with me. One of my brothers was once so exasperated, he said, 'For goodness sake, use a house paintbrush!' But it's such a thrill to show work to people who love detail, to watch them be drawn right into the picture and appreciate the beauty, just as I do." **HL**

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