



the shore thing

Artist Shona Wilson collects from the detritus left at high tide to create works of remarkable delicacy. Beautiful and mysterious, her miniature-scale pieces explore a much larger picture.

SHONA WILSON ADMITS the lines between fine art, decorative art and design are slowly blurring with each passing day.

"A lot of artists today get away with being artists without having any sort of craftsmanship," she says in her soft, if matter-of-fact way, before adding: "And a lot of craftspeople are told they are just that when I think they are artists. I think it has a lot to do with your intention. What you seek to reveal through your work."

More or less at peace with her personal observation that "labelling probably isn't very useful anymore", Wilson's own intentions in her work stem more from her fine arts background (she completed her Bachelor of Visual Arts in Sculpture at the Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney

University, in 1990), but her life experience also includes the set up and management of a contemporary gallery, furniture and artefact shop, The Federation Zen Artefact Gallery, in Sydney, from 1994 to 1997.

These days based in Sydney's northern beaches, Wilson only has to venture as far her garden to find the tools and materials for her undeniably decorative yet intricately conceived and emotionally revealing art.

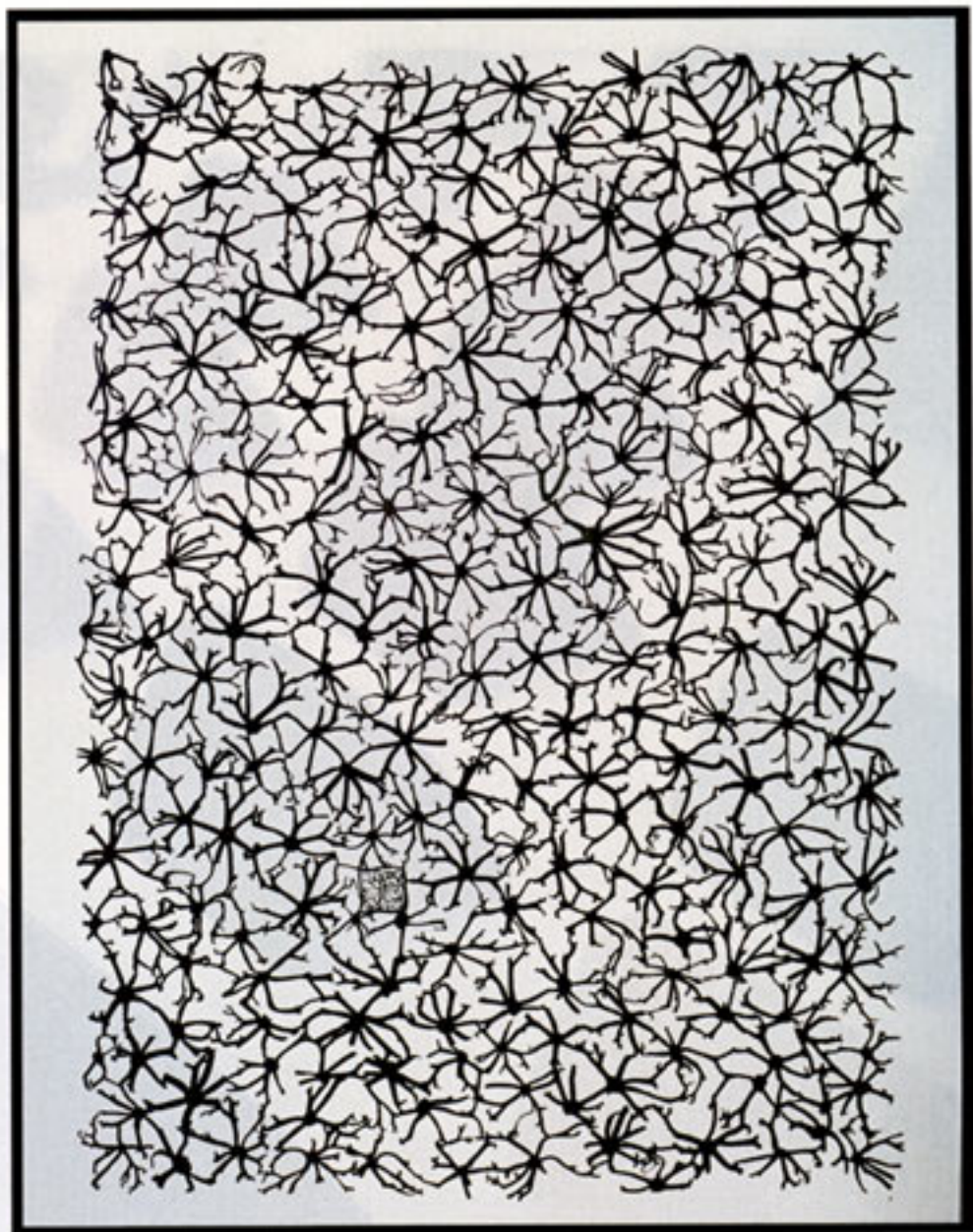
Considering one assemblage piece can take from three to six months to complete, this short trip is probably just as well.

"My back garden is a cliff face so I can collect shells, kelp, blue bottles and fish scales to recycle in my work," she says. "The high tide line is a great source of material – the line of death," she jokes. >

Natural selection. LEFT: Wilson's studio. A unit above the workbench holds test tiles and natural materials. Resting on top, second from left, is one of Wilson's ark-like ceramics, *Foundling*, 2003, one of a pair. BELOW: *Leaf Keep*, 2003, is made from acid-free board, copper wire and natural materials and is about architecture, "the building being a metaphor for our own bodies". BOTTOM: finds from the shoreline include fish and bird skeletons, sea urchins, coral and lobster shells.



PROFILE



Wilson at her workbench, TOP LEFT, looks through ceramic tiles used to test different treatments. ABOVE LEFT: *en-trance*, 2003. Made of acid-free board and sea urchins, the assemblage is based on a portal or threshold. ABOVE RIGHT: *Wall number 1-2000; Creeping*, 2002, appears like spiders crawling up a wall. The 'filtering wall' is made up of kelp 'holdfasts' and is reminiscent of an Islamic screen.

< Shona Wilson's art may be forged out of death but it is visually elating and quietly optimistic about the possibility of rebirth. Indeed the recycling of nature's cast-offs and the rebirthing of it as art is at the heart of her sculptural assemblages.

Whereas traditional forms of sculpture are often about chipping away from a block to reveal the true form within, Wilson's is primarily about adding things (albeit with delicacy and painstaking discretion).

As evidenced at her last solo show late last year, at Michael Nagy Fine Art, her work falls into two seemingly distinct artistic modus operandi: assemblages and ceramics. The link between the styles of these forms may only strike observers later.

Her fine assemblages are forged out of anything from flower petals to found butterfly wings, feathers, twigs and shells. Mounted in pristine Solander (perspex)

boxes, these refashioned collections from nature become a beautiful and uplifting museum of unnatural histories. Although John Davis's twig sculptures and the work of Andy Goldsworthy are influences, Wilson's sensibility is mainly her own.

If her assemblages enlarge the natural world to mirror the themes and moods of the human condition, then her kiln-fired ceramics are a microcosm of human scale. Their ark-like forms recall Japanese ikebana vases and those vessels used in Japanese tea ceremonies. These coil-built ceramics blend diverse cultural, as well as historical, influences so skillfully, they appear as if they have been spirited away from some long-forgotten Lilliputian civilisation.

While Wilson plans to focus on each of these areas in alternate shows and years, rather than divide her time between the two, the initial impression that two different

artists were jointly showing fades as the similarity of style and theme materialises.

"While there are many ideas running through my work," Wilson says, "it's as much about the body – and all the other words for it – as anything else. It's about an understanding of what architecture is about as a space and also how the body is a space. They are metaphors for each other. The assemblages also refer to the skin, the surface level which alludes to the mysteries within and underneath it."

Often present in both the assemblages and on the ceramics are 'windows' or 'doors' (literal or figurative) which invite the viewer inside. "I guess the window acts as a connecting doorway between my two forms of art," she says. RICHARD WALLER
Shona Wilson's artworks are available from Michael Nagy Fine Art, Woollahra, NSW; (02) 9327 2966; www.nagyfineart.com.au.