



'Myriad No. 1', 2001, hydrangea, 40 x 40 x 6 cm



'Myriad No. 2', 1999, natural found materials, 30 x 35 x 6 cm

SALVAGE AND DETRITUS

Explicit in Shona Wilson's work is an understanding of the interconnectedness of things, not only of different elements within nature, but also between humanity and the natural world.

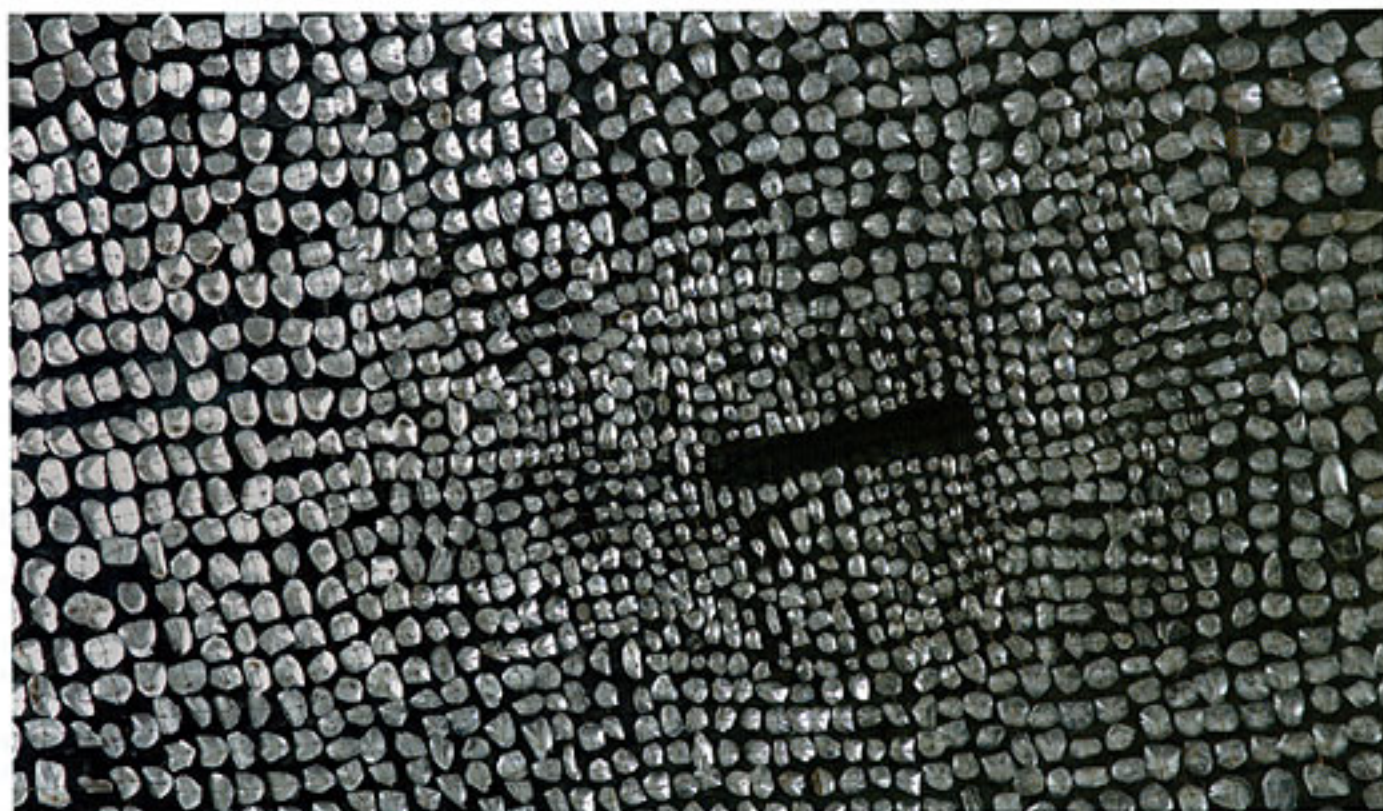
Profile by Bridie Macgillicuddy.

THERE is a mysterious life force present in the work of Sydney-based artist Shona Wilson – a curious notion considering that most of her materials are, in fact, dead. Bluebottles, fish scales, seaweed, cicada and butterfly wings, carcasses and a variety of other flora and fauna soon become the framework for her artful assemblages. Conversely, it is man-made structures that inspire her exquisite ceramics. Wilson's studio sits atop a precipice on one of Sydney's more beautiful northern beaches. It is here, in this quintessentially Australian environment, that she sources her stock.

Wilson has been exhibiting nationally for more than a decade. Solo and group shows reveal an extensive history as a professional artist – most notable, her solo shows at Michael Nagy Fine Art and in 2005 at the Manly

Art Gallery and Museum, Sydney. During that time, she has developed an acute sensibility for the inherent beauty of nature's refuse. Her studies are as various as her materials – sculpture, painting, jewellery, metalwork and ceramics – they elucidate the multi-skilled nature of her work and map the path of a true artisan.

An inveterate collector, Wilson sees beyond the reality of an object to its aesthetic properties. Natural debris is cleaned and treated then carefully stored until it can become part of a work of art or, in some cases, becomes the work. Her work comes together in such a way that individual fragments meld into a singular object of beauty, inspiring curiosity and wonder. Indeed, it is the aesthetics of the natural world from which the artist begins. Qualities such as colour and texture, pattern



'Sea-pelt No. 2 - illumination' (detail), 2000, fish scales and copper wire, 80 x 150 x 10 cm



'Surface Tension' (detail), 2005, bluebottles and fern, 70 x 75 x 10 cm



'Flotilla Series', 2003, ceramic, 8 x 13 x 4 cm, 25 x 26 x 6 cm, 17 x 10 x 4 cm

and shape are the fundamental elements of her work. There are many things to discover, her assemblages and sculptures reveal themselves slowly and are often only better appreciated after numerous viewings; even then, perhaps not fully.

Many of Wilson's early assemblages literally reference the form of animals, insects and creatures from the sea. Some are identifiable as a butterfly, shrimp, seahorse or fish but from a prehistoric time. Others more cell-like seem to come from the microscopic world of plankton and diatoms. Various found materials are suspended on tiny pins and map out the form. Her creatures are primordial and rudimentary. Sometimes starting from a single object a creature takes form through a process that involves more than just craftsmanship. Mounted on a neutral backing and framed like specimens, these two-dimensional creatures are skeletal in structure only, as light reflects a shadow behind them, giving body and life to the creature's frame.

While the title of her archive series provides us with an indication of what it is about, this isn't conclusive. The literal reference is environmental, but it is also sugges-

tive of our responsibility for these objects as they might be dying out, their future uncertain. As artworks, they are archived and preserved for posterity. Yet, many of them are broken and in some way incomplete. Half a wing, a fragment of seashell, a hydrangea petal – none are of themselves complete specimens, but together they present a composite of nature. Wilson says, "They are a record of our natural world."

The materials in this series are flattened and enclosed in individual twig frames. The distinct frames are then suspended on tiny insect pins and spaced on a backing board like squares for a patchwork quilt, or the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle (it is the latter pursuit which Wilson refers to when describing her methodology). Often working on several pieces at any one time, she oscillates between serendipity, playfulness and exploration, always having a mental picture of what she's working toward.

While many works within the archive series juxtapose different materials, hydrangeas and hydrangea branchlets are what comprise *Myriad No.2* (2001). The subtle qualities of this flower might have suffered in combination with other objects. While the title suggests an innumerable quantity of this substance, it is encased like a precious object of curiosity, an exemplar of the natural world that once was. Wilson has created a radiant contrast between the softness of the flower and the rigidity of the branchlets. Untrimmed, they create fractals between each frame as though the work is a living specimen, growing before our eyes.

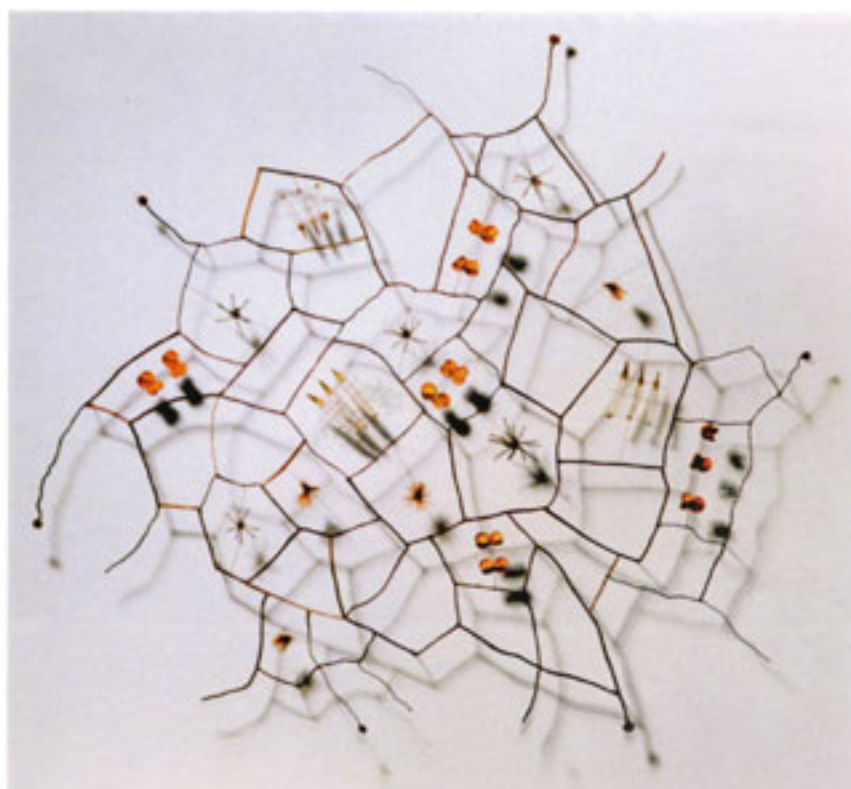
The artist's archival sensibility found a more literal expression in a commission for The Arthouse Hotel in Sydney's CBD. *ArtHouses* (2001) is a series of intricate structures, some of which are made from objects found on site during the excavation – for example, a letter and the pages of an old newspaper. Displayed in the walls of the hotel behind glass and internally illuminated, they are a historic reference dating back to 1830. Wilson uses the building's past incarnations as a chapel and the old School of Arts as inspiration. Objects such as twigs and fern fronds take on the form of a Victorian wrought iron fence, bark mimics the texture of sandstone, and beeswax is moulded into an altar with the transparency of a pressed flower creating a stained-glass effect.

It was here that Wilson first experimented with the little altar-like beeswax structure we see in *Altaration* (2003). This work comprises 16 small domed altars, stacked four across and four high. Small circular windows at the back of each archway are illuminated with splayed fractal forms. Fern fronds, flowers and leaves create a contrast between their own texture and the smoothness of the wax. Their innate transparency produces an illuminating effect not unlike the Rose Window of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

Similarly, the natural luminosity of seaweed and fish scales are used to great effect in the "Sea-pelt" series. Resembling a weave in natural fibres, the blankets of woven seaweed and scales are like veils suspended from the ceiling in see-through frames. They possess a precious quality, as though they are traditional fabrics from an ancient civilisation.

Once flattened, the translucent quality of the seaweed bears a resemblance to the brilliant colour of the fossil resin, amber. Brownish-yellow in colour, this sheet has an aged quality, further accentuated by the naturally eroded holes in individual pieces. Wilson has painstakingly, perhaps lovingly, hand-stitched each individual piece of seaweed using cotton thread, to form a rectangular patchwork quilt. Similarly, fish scales are threaded together with fine copper wire. The colour and texture

'Fortress No. 5', 2005. ceramic, coral, bone, 21 x 14 x 13 cm



'Creature Series - cell', 1998, natural found materials, copper wire, 40 x 40 x 6 cm





'Streamline No. 2', 2005, twigs and lichen, 126 x 126 x 5 cm



'Net No. 2' (detail), 2005, kelp, cicada wing, 45 x 45 x 6 cm



of the scales bears a resemblance to mother-of-pearl, making it seem all the more precious.

The title *Sea-pelt* suggests that they are a metaphor for human skin – our pelt or armour. This outer layer can also be seen as the first of peeling back an onion, suggesting there are numerous layers beneath the surface. While the title refers to the material as a kind of oceanic skin, it also alludes to a more global concept, the need for the natural world to have its own protective shield, perhaps, from humanity.

This notion of body armour is particularly evident in *En-trance No. 1*, where fragments of shattered sea-urchin shells are used as tesserae to clad an archway, with the spine of the shell forming the inner arch. At a diminutive 55 cm, the effect is both welcoming and threatening. It is this playfulness with scale that makes so much of Wilson's work enchanting, for it engages our imagination and appeals to the child within.

The "Flotilla" series and her current ceramic work, the *Fortresses*, possess monumentality despite being small in scale. Miniaturised and shown in family groups, they allow our imagination to explore them in a much bigger way. The process involved with these hand-built architectural forms is one much like the weathering effect caused by the elements – a constant paring down, stripping away until only the smooth surface is left.

Individual features imply a human presence, inciting one's inclination to search for a narrative. Some have twigs and ferns imbedded into the surface, little defences that ensure the safety of an imaginary occupant. In *Fortress No. 1*, Wilson has fixed crab claws to the ends of spindly twigs, like war trophies designed to ward off the enemy or, perhaps, evil. Exhibited as a group, these structures have a Middle Eastern quality that is further accentuated by their soft earthly tones, as if they were constructed from sand, or half-carved out of rock.

About 14 years ago, while travelling in Nepal, Wilson was intrigued by the cultural practice of carving small icons into the walls of buildings. Her little vestibules and niches similarly draw us into a space of contemplation, even reverence. It was in Kathmandu where she

'En-trance No. 1', 2003, sea-urchin on board, 55 x 16 x 10 cm



'Sea-pelt No. 1' (detail), 2000, *hemp, thread*, 130 x 100 x 10 cm

became acutely aware that size does not equate with impact. "The power that such an intimate experience can have is remarkable. This realisation has been one of the major influences in my work," says Wilson.

Wilson's trademark "windows" act as a unifying feature between the two factions of her work: the assemblages and her ceramics. It is through these portals that the two modes of her creativity meet on an allegorical level. What began as a technical device has become a signature motif in the artist's work. Originally circular in shape, the apertures were simply vents through which hot air could escape during the firing process. Instead of concealing the holes she incorporated them as an integral feature of the work. They soon developed into squares and more definitively the profile of a window. Wilson found that by introducing the square into the natural flow of things generated a build-up of tension that energised the piece.

This energy finds its most dramatic expression in her ceramic vessels, fortresses and the "Streamline" series. The minimalist aesthetic of smooth, clean lines with a simplified design renders these works contemplative and unisistent. There is a stillness to these objects which creates a balance without symmetry and a sense of warmth without the use of intense colour.

The "Streamline" series uses an assortment of twigs that are collaged onto board and hung like carpets on the wall, as though they are the forest floor. The repetitive nature of this work entails a painstaking process of graduating the colour and shape of each individual twig and *mapping* them out. Then repeating the process but with an adhesive to permanently lay down the twigs. Wilson manages to offset the monotonous assemblage process by taking regular trips to her ceramic studio in the Blue Mountains.

Explicit in Wilson's work is an understanding of the interconnectedness of things, not only of different elements within nature, but also between humanity and the natural world. She believes that nature provides us with a fundamental framework – the building blocks of life. This can be seen in great harmony with her cur-

'Leaf-Keep', 2003, *found materials, copper wire*, 28 x 17 x 5 cm

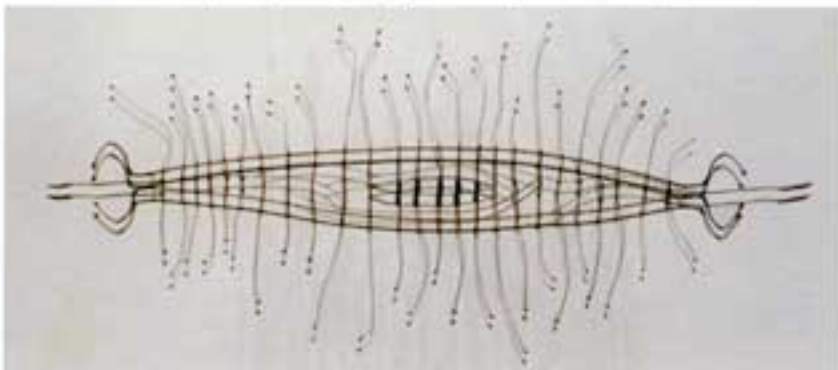


'Alteration' (detail), 2003, *wax, found materials, copper wire*, 57 x 45 x 10 cm





'Streamline No. 3' (detail), 2005, twigs and coral, 112 x 122 x 5 cm



'Creature Series - Diatom', 1998, ceramic, natural found materials, 27 x 42 x 6 cm



rent body of work. The ceramic structures and twig collages compliment each other not only in terms of art practice, but also on an aesthetic level. The smooth surfaces and rounded edges of her vessels and fortresses play off beautifully with the rough façade of the twigs, butted together to form an irregular and coarse surface. The two artforms communicate on many levels, presenting the viewer with an open space in which to contemplate their own relationship to this world.

While there is no denying the influence of a learning environment on the evolution of an artist's work, it was the working practices of Andy Goldsworthy that have had the greatest impact on Wilson. Upon coming out of art school, where one is continually encouraged to bend, even break, the rules, it was refreshing for her to discover that Goldsworthy had formulated rules from which to work by. It was his sense of structure that provided Wilson with the framework for her art practice. What we find is a clearly articulated vision that never loses sight of its origin – the material. Whether it be twigs, clay, fish scales or bluebottles, Wilson's artistic sensibility, indeed her artistry, is very special. Not only does the artist create beautifully crafted objects, they communicate beyond being assembled fragments of the natural world.

Shona Wilson uses natural materials as a kind of prism through which we can consider our relationship with nature. Whether with purely aesthetic eyes, spiritual or environmental ones, her work takes the viewer by surprise and allows us to rediscover known objects. The reality of her materials slips away, leaving only an ingenious arrangement of nuance. For this reason, Wilson defies classification as either an artist or craftsman – she is both and much, much more.

Bridie Macgillcuddy

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The next opportunity to see Shona Wilson's current body of work will be a solo show at MossGreen Gallery, Melbourne in November, 2006. In Sydney the artist is represented by Michael Nagy Fine Art, Woollahra.

'Skimming Stone', 1997, ceramic, 45 x 40 x 7 cm