Re imaging nature:
hidden visions

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glass cabinets installation 2003
Long Gallery, FCA University of Wollongong NSW
Hidden Visions explores the relationship between art and science in the representation of plants. The images, objects and texts in the cabinets refer to the status and significance of visual knowledge in botanical science.

The contents of the cabinets reference the tension between differing accounts of nature from the 17th century to the present.

Within these cabinets of curiosities an ecological view of nature is expressed through to the work of the artist and entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) and her study of European and South American plants and insects. These and other images are situated alongside the grid, pigments, ribbons and herbarium boxes to reflect subsequent developments in the systematic study and classification and mapping of nature that took place in the following centuries.

The graphic conventions of analogue and digital imagery are central to this installation, and the cabinet mirrors reflect the changing status of visual knowledge in science and the colonization of new worlds.

Cabinet 1. Cabinet & mirror 530 x 133cm.
“Let us...”, Artists book 3 pages, printed on archival rag paper, size unfolded ea.100 x 100cm.
Printed text and images can be read in the cabinet mirror.
“Let us ransack the globe, let us with greatest accuracy inspect every part thereof,

Hidden Visions - Cabinet 2 detail

Reflected in its mirror and punctuated by the stacked herbarium boxes, are items which reference the relationship between the new observations of nature’s botanical subjects, and their representations for the purposes of both aesthetic and systematic study.

Here the selections of porcelain, printed silks, multi coloured ribbons, the problematic green pigments, icon types (boxed drawings of botanical subjects) and magnifying glass ~ are underscored by the imagery and observations of the developing

Cabinet 2. Cabinet & mirror 530 x 133cm.
"Secret visions & icontypes". Herbarium boxes, ribbons, porcelain, silk, green powder pigments, botanical drawings, magnifying glass, digital inkjet prints.
.... let us with greatest accuracy inspect every part thereof, search out the innermost secrets of any of the creatures, let us examine them with our gauges....pry into them with all our microscopes and most exquisite instruments, till we find them to bear testimony to their infinite workman.”

William Derham Physico-Theology (1711-12)
Maria Sibylla Merian & Reimaging nature

Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) worked on the cusp of the changing images of nature - images claimed by science and art. Her observations and representations of the real thing had significance for the reimaging of nature and the agenda of natural history over three centuries. This radical shift resonates with the new worlds of biological science revealed by contemporary digital technology.

Her earliest publications Florum fasciculi tres 1675, known by 1680 as Neues Blumen Buch (New Flower Book), recalls ribbon tied plant subjects and symbolic insects of 16th and 17th century Dutch flower paintings. These decorative assemblages of garden flowers were ideal references for embroidery patterns.

By contrast Merian’s engravings in the three volume work Der Raupen wunderbare Verwandelung und sonderbare (The wonderful transformation of Caterpillars and Their Singular Plant Nourishment) 1679-1717 & Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium 1705, were acclaimed by the scientific community. Of the latter, its 63 images with textual descriptions resulted from two years in Surinam. Merian’s observations and representations of plants and Lepidoptera became influential for subsequent artists, and contributed to the systematic study of nature and the developing sciences of botany and entomology of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Cabinet 2 detail from top to bottom. Four boxes of porcelain, printed silk, ribbons, & their reflections, 2 inkjet prints.
Re-imaging nature: Hidden Visions
Selected prints from the series (1-6), The Real Thing: Caesalpinia pulcherrima, peacock flower. 2002-03. Ink jet prints on archival paper, 18 x 18 cm.
Darwin Australia 2002 & College of Science Poona 1890 (top); Merian 1705 (below);
Flora of Bombay VM Tilek “worship of Hindu gods” 1889; Nth Western India 1856-57 (right); Tobago, West Indies 1909 [not shown].
Specimens documented are from collection of Herbarium Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh 2002; Quote from Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717). Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensis (Amsterdam: Maria Sibylla Merian and Gerard Valck, 1705); Merian’s Suriname sketch book watercolour on vellum the Royal Collection British Museum.