

Penny Algar

art revealing nature

by Barbara Hall, writer, and teacher in Swinburne University's Faculty of Design

Since 2006 Penny Algar has been building a body of work about Australian plants with a distinct and increasingly complex 'story' and imagery. Her most recent exhibition at Stephen McLaughlan's gallery in Melbourne over the 2012 – 2013 summer conveyed her passion for all of us to repair our disconnect from nature – somewhat paradoxically through her highly informed awareness of both the fragility and resilience of specific Victorian plants.

Algar's mediums have comprised printing, drawing and simple wall-mounted three-dimensional boxes or cones — often in combination. 'I trained as a sculptor, then a Graduate Diploma in Environmental Horticulture and a Masters in Art in Public Space from RMIT strongly influenced the way I approach my work. It's more interdisciplinary, especially the synergies between art and science. My favourite scientists are American biologist EO Wilson, the French gardener and philosopher Gilles Clement, and the Australian ethno-botanist Beth Gott: all eloquently elucidate and celebrate the importance of deep spiritual connections to nature.'

Penny and partner Michael Spencer have been learning the hows and whys of nature from close observation and hard, hands-on labour over ten years of enhancing grassy woodlands remnants on a degraded ex-grazing property in Victoria's Strathbogie Ranges. Penny is very active in local conservation groups, from initiating community art exhibitions to learning and sharing knowledge about conservation, particularly Indigenous cultural plant knowledge, seed collecting and landscape restoration methodology.

Her interest in the diverse ways native and introduced plants and weeds function in urban and rural environments as habitat, refuge

and sanctuary for other living organisms has taken her art to real and imaginary places. In the *Insect Ladders* series (2006), make-believe biological ladders offering insects a fantasy rescue from danger were depicted as photographed installations in trees or spirals on narrow lightboxes. Using recycled milk cartons as printing 'plates' gave her drypoint prints a surprisingly lush texture.

Her *Insectarium* series (2008) were monoprints from a mechanical lithographic press, presented as accordion-folded books. Strongly textured images were created by assembling torn shards of fibrous Indian handmade paper laid across Perspex offcuts.

Biodiversity Cones (2010) theme was the interdependence of plants and people. Exquisite rolled, wall-mounted paper cones were digitally printed, or hand-stained and tied with native plant fibres, giving the impression that they might contain seeds.

The latest drawings and prints for Algar's *Artist Books* exhibition at McLaughlan's are calm, elusive and elegant. The images are not immediately recognisable as seeds, stems, trunks or leaves. Yet they purposefully convey her ambition for the complete bio-harmony of animals, plants and humans needed to slow climate change.

Each work is a collection of prints with four different 'takes' on the book medium — bound, concertina and Solander book-form cases. For *Box Woodland – Arthropodium sp* (Native Lilies), a Solander case contains 27 individually designed loose sheets, each bearing a single letter from the plant's name in a collaged reveal. The plant fibre has migrated into paper made by Penny. Thin layers of paper pulp cover digitally printed images on translucent Japanese mulberry



Penny Algar, *Woodland Scars* (detail), 2012, concertina book, collagraph print on BFK Rives 300gsm paper, 19.5 x 26.0 x 2.5 cm (extended concertina length 160 cm). Bookbinding: George Matoulas. Printer: White Box Press.

paper: 'It appealed to me that when you peeled the pages back randomly they present a delicious, uncontrolled pattern, with the texture showing through from the layer below.' The reveal in a second Solander case, *Box Woodland – Habitat Hollows*, is cumulative with crisp brown and red drypoint sheets stacked and drilled through with holes that are emblematic of the marks and furrows made both by nature or the first Australians.

All these works demonstrate Algar's close study of the old 'scarred' eucalypts of Northern Victoria's grassy woodlands, made by Indigenous people removing slices of the main trunk's outer bark for coolamons, canoes, bowls and shields. The tree might be adapted for seed or food sourcing or storage — but never killed. 'Many of the marks and scars are a record of Indigenous occupation of the land. It saddens me to think of them now being lost without being protected or recorded.'



Penny Algar, *Box Woodland – Habitat Hollows*, 2012, collagraph print with Japanese paper chine collé on BFK Rives 300gsm paper, unique state, 35 x 25 x 5 cm. Solander box: Elke Ahokas. Printer: White Box Press.

Penny Algar is grateful for the skills of Elke Ahokas in making the presentation boxes and George Matoulas for the bookbinding.

For more images see:
www.pennyalgar.com.au

Penny Algar, *Box Woodland – Arthropodium sp.*, 2012, handmade recycled paper, pigment ink digital print on Japanese paper, indigenous grass fragments, unique state; 36.0 x 26.0 x 4.5 cm. Solander box: Elke Ahokas.

