

JULIE BLYFIELD  
— flowers of the sea



*flowers of the sea | An exchange between the self and the atmosphere*

There is a rhythmic *tap, tap, tap* emanating from Julie Blyfield's studio in Maylands, Tarntanya (Adelaide) that sounds in concert with the birds of the surrounding garden. It is in this space and its orbit that the artist undertakes a daily vigil: being with, caring for and then recreating nature in her own vision.

A garden begins with the intimacy of the hand touching the earth. Soil is turned and sifted, seeds scattered, vegetation plucked. The science of nature's cycles is considered, its erratic changes negotiated. The garden expresses an 'exchange between the self and the atmosphere', wrote poet Stanley Kunitz. If we remain observant and mindful of the garden's needs, it nurtures us with fragrance and food, colour and shape, humming insect activity and stirrings in the dark.

In the unceasing task of domesticating the unruliness of nature, gardeners create spaces of pleasure and contemplation.

Blyfield's fingers are long and slender, palms broad and strong, and horticulture runs in her blood. Her creative practice brings into focus the discipline and attentiveness required of tending to her garden. With the *tap, tap, tap*, she pushes, pulls, hammers and chisels to shape and soften metal. Using sterling silver and copper in place of soil and seeds, she reimagines botanical specimens.

Cultivated over 12 months, *flowers of the sea* presents a move away from more recognisable flora and instead draws on the beguiling strangeness of aquatic environments.

Specifically, this body of work interprets the unique red algae endemic to the coastline of southern Australia. Mining the depths of the State Herbarium of South Australia collection, which holds some 90,000 algal specimens, Blyfield studied the details of largely unseen forms of ocean flora. A few resemble lace or snow crystals, others are ferny and vine-like, and some even bear feathery tresses.

The term sea "weed" is misleading. Though seemingly delicate, marine algae store carbon and are responsible for producing 70% of the oxygen we breathe. They constitute a vital part of the underwater world which plays host to the majority of the world's biodiversity yet is threatened by a myriad of man-made changes including global warming, acidification, overfishing, pollution and seabed mining.

Consulting resident scientists at the Herbarium, Blyfield sought to understand the significance of the ocean-tossed plant life. Over several months, she documented and sketched favoured specimens, returning the forms to the world anew as exquisite sculptural objects. Heirlooms of another world, unlike their ephemeral and threatened source material, the objects can be passed through generations.

The artist takes license in representing scale, yoking multiple specimens into each of the 15 nameless sculptural forms. Like her great-grandfather who collected seeds across continents, the artist borrows techniques and tools from around the world; her tools are often sourced from antique markets abroad, applied with the traditional metalworking techniques of chasing and repoussé from 19th-century Australian gold and silversmithing traditions in combination with 'chisel' feathered linework studied under a Korean master.

Hand-chasing is the technique of shaping malleable metals by pushing back the metal, while repoussé is the opposite action of hammering on the reverse side of the sculpture so that the design protrudes forward. After more than 30 years of practising her craft, Blyfield's reverence for metalsmithing techniques is evident in the hammer marks and processes that are integral to the design of each work.

In the creation of *flowers of the sea*, she draws a comparison to the time invested in the preparation and preservation of flora. With each action, the bi-metal of copper and sterling silver moves and shifts in unpredictable ways, giving the work a life of its own.

Just as the red tones of seaweeds vary according to the depth at which the algae photosynthesizes, so too does the palette of burnished copper-red change across *flowers of the sea*.

Under the eye of a microscope, the algae reveal varied tones of translucent reds, deep maroon, soft pinks, browns and burnt sienna. After a long and controlled process of carving and fabricating for up to a month, each piece is torched to a cherry red and plunged into boiling water or patinated verdigris with copper nitrate. The final act risks the integrity of the work as too much heat can blister or separate the metal. The surprising chromatic results echo the randomness of nature. Once waxed and buffed with silk cloth, they are ready for display.

The presentation of *flowers of the sea* mimics arrangements found in Victorian-era natural history museums, specifically the Museum of Economic Botany. Shafts of light across a darkened room recreate the depths of the sea and engender an aura of wonder around each piece, spotlighting the intricacy of each exhibit.

Each is raised on a white tablet to echo the 19th-century tradition of pressed plants stored in leather-bound seaweed albums. No stone is left unturned – even the soft grey of the plinths replicates the grey geothermic volcanic rocks found deep on the ocean floor.

It makes sense that the artist and her work are at home in a museum context. Beyond this exhibition, Blyfield is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, France; and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England. Like gardening, the scientific study, cataloguing and museum display of specimens further demonstrates our compulsion to understand and organise the mysteries of the living world.

There is an inherent melancholy in recreating life-forms from a world that seems distant yet is deeply enmeshed with and threatened by our own. During the remaking of specimens plucked from an intertidal world alien to most of us, Blyfield was navigating the strange depths of grief. Immersing herself in the push and pull of the underwater currents, chasing and repoussé, she tempered inner currents of sorrow following the profound loss of her partner. *flowers of the sea* is a textured homage to the fragility of both nature and ourselves.

— Emma O'Neill

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Images: Julie Blyfield, *flowers of the sea*, 2022 detail,  
bi-metal-copper/sterling silver heat coloured, wax sealant.  
Courtesy the artist. Photography Grant Hancock.



Julie Blyfield has worked at her jewellery and object artistic practice for over 35 years. She creates art from her own independent studio, which overlooks her garden environment in Maylands, South Australia. Blyfield's artwork is inspired by her research into botanical specimens, historical silver collections, and the rich diversity of the Australian landscape, which she interprets using the techniques of metal chasing, hammering and surface chiselling, predominately in sterling silver, and more recently, copper.

In 2007, Blyfield was a recipient of the prestigious South Australian Living Artists Award, which celebrated her achievements with a major monograph about her life and work, published by Wakefield Press. An Australia Council - *Creative Australia* Award (2015-16) offered Blyfield the opportunity to create and exhibit *Panorama*, a significant body of new jewellery and objects.

*Panorama* was an international touring solo exhibition at Ruthin Crafts Centre, North Wales; the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh, UK and Bilk Gallery in Canberra, Australia in 2017. She also collaborated with the potter Kirsten Coelho to present *Ormolu*, which opened at Gallery Funaki in October, 2017, and toured to JamFactory in Adelaide, and to The National in Christchurch, New Zealand. In 2018, Blyfield presented the solo exhibition *Flora* at the Irene Belfi Gallery in Milan, Italy.

Blyfield's jewellery and metalwork is held in Australian and international museum collections, including the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra; the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, France; and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, United Kingdom. Her work has been shown in international art and design fairs such as *Collect* in London and *Chicago SOFA* in America. Blyfield's work has also been selected for the prestigious international jewellery exhibition *Schmuck*, and her silver art objects have been shown at the *Schoonhoven Silver Award* several times throughout her career.

Blyfield has travelled, lectured and presented workshops in Australia, the United States of America, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. As part of her practice, she regularly mentors emerging jewellers, sharing her knowledge, skills and professional experience, and helping them to develop their careers. Blyfield has won numerous prizes for her work, including the *Overall Winner* of the South Australian Museum Natural History Art Prize, where her work was acquired for the South Australian Museum collection. In 2021, she prepared a new body of object art works which references South Australian marine algae collections stored at the State Herbarium of South Australia. This current work, *flowers of the sea*, was generously funded by the Australia Council for the Arts.

Julie Blyfield is a UniSA alumnus.

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Friday 1 July — Friday 30 September  
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