

LAUREN BLACK | 2011

SPLENDIDUS MUSCORUM



WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS

Towards the end of the seventeenth century - 1683 to be precise - the world changed irrevocably. Until then, it was 'a generally received opinion', as the naturalist John Ray observed, 'that all this visible world was created for Man ... as if there were no other end of any creature but in some way or other to be serviceable to Man.' Admittedly, Galileo had already undermined this fallacy a generation earlier when, peering through his telescope, he discovered that our earth is not the centre of the universe but just one planet among many. Not until that fateful day in 1683, however, when the Dutchman Anton van Leeuwenhoek examined a drop of pond-water under a microscope, was the universe in miniature that exists right under our noses finally revealed.

There is something immensely appealing about van Leeuwenhoek's delight in observing and carefully recording the miniscule plants and animals that made up this beautiful and complex cosmos.

Even more than the infinite vastness of the universe, the intricate smallness of the microscopic realm is chastening, for us today as much as it was for van Leeuwenhoek's generation. It reminds us that what we see and experience is a very narrow spectrum of reality, that within our midst - even within our own bodies - millions of organisms live and die, eat and defecate, mate and reproduce, completely indifferent to us.

Lauren Black's drawings and watercolours lead us into this microscopic world, or at least into one particular corner of it, opening our eyes to the splendour and multiplicity of something we normally take for granted: the humble moss. She transforms this seemingly familiar plant into something strange and marvelous, giving it an entirely new dimension. In this, she is van Leeuwenhoek's direct descendent.

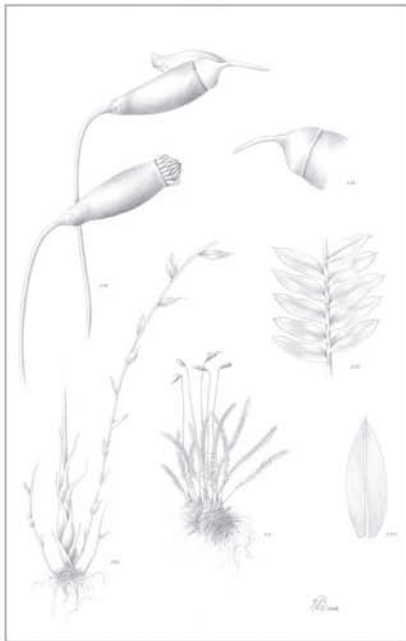
Her original brief, from Patrick Dalton, lecturer in the School of Plant Science at the University of Tasmania, was to draw specimens that he brought back from field trips. After carefully prising them apart with tweezers, she would observe them through a microscope and record their components: sporing capsules, stems, leaves and hoods. What began as an assignment quickly developed into an enthusiasm, and botanist and artist have now formed a close working relationship. Together they undertake many field trips, often to remote parts of Tasmania, in search of rare and previously unrecorded specimens. Who could have foreseen the astonishing variety of mosses they would unveil?

The pencil drawings with which she began, and the later watercolours, also take us through time, illustrating various stages of the plants' development from season to season. The studies of apple moss (*Bartramia mossmaniana*), for example, include the moss as we might encounter it in the wild (given the patience and perception, and a good magnifying glass), along with an enlargement showing the arrangement of leaves on the stem. Zoom in further and the individual parts in their successive stages are revealed. Most striking of all are the green-apple-like sporing capsules, with their jaunty little hoods and fragile stems.



Cyathophorum bulbosum 2010 [top]
Watercolour on paper 57 x 38 cm

Wijkia extenuata 2011 [bottom]
Watercolour on paper 57 x 38 cm



Yet, while there can be no doubting the scientific exactitude of these studies, that in itself cannot guarantee an engaging exhibition. What the non-specialist will respond to here is the ethereal beauty of these works - their subtle colourings, fastidious brushwork and fantastic, Alice-in-Wonderland forms - in addition, of course, to the evident passion that has gone into their creation.

In the *Splendidus muscorum* series that passion is given free reign, yet without sacrificing delicacy or precision. These beautiful mandala-like forms are actually spring capsules magnified many thousands

of times (note the apple moss in another guise), yet they might equally be medieval rose-windows or galaxies or atomic nuclei or mythological representations of the self from Hindu or Navaho iconography. They draw out the vital connections between the micro and macro worlds, and between the physical and the metaphysical. In so doing, they give this exhibition its symbolic heart.

To most of us, the thousands of dried plant specimens in the Tasmanian Herbarium, each preserved, described and systematically archived, will have little immediate appeal. Yet, among the annotations accompanying them (some dating to the early nineteenth century), Lauren has uncovered some remarkable stories. For example, *Sphagnum moorei* is named after the west coast prospector, naturalist and explorer Thomas Bather Moore, one of Tasmania's more extraordinary characters, who is now sadly almost forgotten (although two rivers on the west coast are named after his dogs). And the Herbarium's specimen of *Splachnum octoblepharum* is accompanied by the alarming news, written in elegant copperplate, that it was found growing 'on the Bones & deceased clothing of a Bushranger; at the base of the Western Mountains, with two double barrell'd Guns and Pistols lying by his side. Feb. 1845'. The playful collages that complete this exhibition bring to light some of these colourful episodes in the history of plant collecting, which, it appears, does have its excitements.

The unassuming nature of these drawings and watercolours might easily blind us to the vast world of ideas they conjure up. Above all, they are a timely reminder that nature is not just scenery. We have no need to invent magical kingdoms, for they are here among us, sumptuously arrayed for our appreciation. While these may not be worlds we can enter, there is a special kind of thrill in discovering their unique beauty.

Peter Timms



Rhizogonium novae-hollandiae 2010 [left]
Pencil on paper 42 x 30 cm

Tayloria tasmanica 2010 [top]
Watercolour on paper 57 x 38 cm

Treasure Packet 2 - detail, 2011 [bottom]
Pencil, ink, collage on paper 76 x 56 cm

LAUREN BLACK

Lauren Black [b.1971] studied botanical art at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, Victoria, and for the last ten years has been working professionally in the field as both artist and teacher. She is recognised as Tasmania's most prominent botanical artist.

Currently working freelance, Lauren has been involved in many exciting projects and commissions both as a solo artist and in collaboration with botanists, artists, community and government organisations. She has exhibited and curated local and international exhibitions in Tasmania and has won several awards including the inaugural Margaret Flockton Award for excellence in botanical illustration, NSW in 2004. In 2005 she was awarded an Asialink residency to Sri Lanka, followed in 2008-09 by a one-year residency to Rimbun Dahan in Malaysia.

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Splendidus muscorum 3, 2011 [front cover]
Watercolour, pencil and gouache on paper 76 x 56 cm

Bartramia mossmaniana detail, 2010 [front cover]
Watercolour on paper 57 x 38 cm

Splendidus muscorum 1, 2, 4, 5, 2011 [top to bottom]
Watercolour, pencil and gouache on paper 76 x 56 cm

