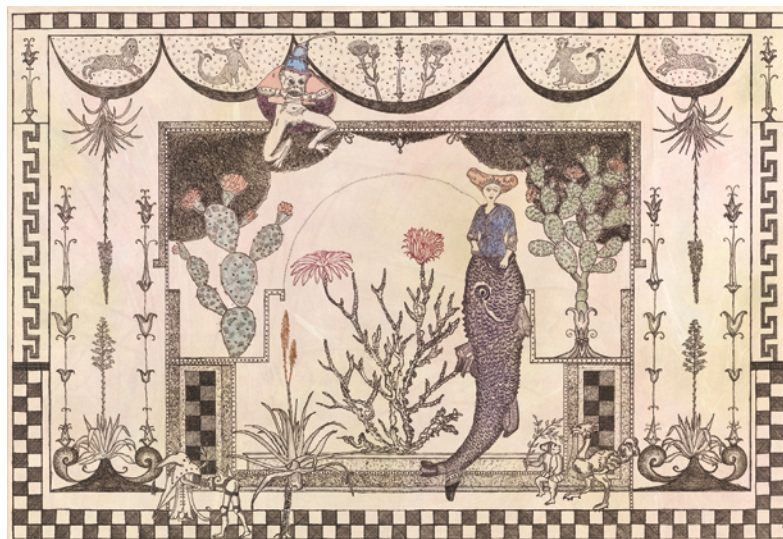


Desert Blooms Extraordinaire:

Dianne Longley and the
Fantastic Grotesque in Broken Hill

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Dianne Longley *Fantastic Grotesque – Fisher of Dreams* 2009, acrylic engraving on hand-coloured Rives BFK 300 gsm paper, 76 x 110 cm

Within the Australian imaginary the outback city of Broken Hill enjoys mythical status as an icon of exotic otherness. 'Silver City's' forbidding landscape, once the site of grotesquely rapacious mineral excavation, is being transformed into a site of tourist pilgrimage; this was the location for films like *Mad Max*, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, and in 2009, *Broken Hill* (the musical). This shift is symbolised by the town's artificial 'hill', a gargantuan slag heap, now sporting a flash new restaurant on top—silver service, of course.

Below, in the robust artistic life of Broken Hill, long defined by Pro Hart and his 'brotherhood' of bush brushmen, an unexpectedly rare gem is to be found; this is the Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery. With a



Dianne Longley *Fantastic Garden Succulent Grotto – Terowie* 2009, polymergravure print, inkjet chine collé on Hahnemuhle 150 gsm paper, on 400 gsm paper, edition: 12, 42 x 59 cm



Bronzes by **Dianne Longley**. Left: *Classic Cactus* 2009, bronze, oil pigment, 13.5 x 6.0 x 2.5 cm. Centre: *Friendly Succulent* 2008, bronze, oil pigment, 12.0 x 4.5 x 1.5 cm. Right: *Double Cactus* 2009, bronze, oil pigment, 11.5 x 5.0 x 3.0 cm

dynamic cultural program operating from a spacious heritage building, this venue proved highly appropriate for Dianne Longley's exhibition, *Fantastic Grotesque*.

Here, during two successful 2008 workshops in photopolymer printmaking and a subsequent residency, this Adelaide-based artist embraced the fantastical array of images presented by Broken Hill's environment. However, while many of Longley's new works explore the grotesque forms and textures of desert succulents and cacti, the exhibition proposes much more than a tourist's musings on local botany. In the large 2009 digital prints, *Fantastic Garden Succulent Grotto – Terowie* and *Fantastic Garden Hedging Plants – Silverton*, images of giant *agave* succulents thriving in these dry red environs are enlarged and washed with hot pink, citrus yellow and acid green tones, endowing their monstrously fleshy curves with an eerie foreboding; strangulation and impalement may well be lurking in these gothic gardens from hell.

While this mood of menace indicates a shift of register from Longley's earlier work, the exhibition also explores diverse approaches to the grotesque and fantastic through a broad range of media, including award-winning books and prints which accompany the new works. The artist's astonishing technical virtuosity encompasses a notably expanded iconography where her familiar pantheon of mythical and quirky creatures—drawn from medieval European bestiaries, menageries and 'drolleries'¹—now frolic, somersault and skulk with bizarre and bawdy beings from ancient Japanese mythology and contemporary *anime*. Punchinello meets Pokemon and pokerwork.

These parallel universes are vegetated by fantastic plantscapes rendered in various materials. In two 2008 intaglio prints with inkjet chine collé, *Unfolding* and *Steadfastness*, exotic plant forms are juxtaposed with acrobats and other otherworld creatures, while *From Darkness and Bridge* (2007) feature carved hands sprouting pokerworked flora from their (Jelutong wood) fingertips. A large acrylic engraving, *Fantastic Grotesque—Fisher of*

Dreams (2009) also occupies a surreal garden where a large fish devours — or gives birth to — a woman. This image re-appears in a 2009 series of monumentally scaled wooden 'prints', among which are flowering succulents 'writ large' (*Hedging Dreams [of Prickly Pear]*; *Flower of Destiny*). These wooden digital engravings were painstakingly created from vector files using CNC routing machine technology which cut line-images from Oregon veneer ply; they were then sanded, dusted, inked and re-sanded to reveal the grain.

Central to the exhibition is a 'botanical' sculptural installation inspired by the local bush. This 2007–2009 series of 29 miniature cacti and succulents, exquisitely carved from cuttlefish shell and cast in bronze and pewter, nods towards bonsai tradition but abounds with the weirdness, wit and wonder found in arid environments. Powerfully compact, these assorted forms and textures feature swelling bulbous 'cushions' (*Prickly Cactus*), delicately curling fronds (*Primordial Grace*) and 'conversations' between deadly spined cacti shafts (*Double Cactus*).

Despite its apparent harshness, Longley has fashioned local desert flora into ambiguous landscapes that are variously quirky, whimsical and naughty, and at times, profoundly confronting and even darkly disturbing. In this way these unearthly — yet strangely earthy — terrains of the marvellous offer many possibilities and meanings. While inviting us into her fantastic domains of the imaginary, the artist also reminds us that wondrous environments exist all around us, all the time. Anyone can enter — just mind the prickles. •

Reference

1. A. Dutkiewtz, 'Dianne Longley: *Fantastic Grotesque*', *Fantastic Grotesque*, Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, Broken Hill, 2009. Exhibition catalogue, 19 September – 1 November 2009.

Fantastic Grotesque – Dianne Longley was shown at Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery, NSW, from 19 September to 1 November 2009.