

ART & EVENTS

WHAT'S NEW, NOTEWORTHY AND ENTICING IN THE CULTURAL WORLD



ANIMAL INSTINCTS

Artist Susan Hipgrave dusts off antique natural history books and lovingly re-works eccentric illustrations onto ceramic plates.



Susan Hipgrave and her intricately painted ceramic 'canvases', **from top:** *Falco lanarius* – Falcon (2012); *Pandion Haliaetus* – Osprey (2011); *Arara* – Brazilian Macaw (2012); *Bubo Zeylonensis* – Brown Fish Owl (2012); and *Circaetus Gallicus* – Short Toed Snake Eagle (2011).



Hipgrave, **above**, in her Redfern studio/home. Hanging on the wall are, from top left, Patrick Hartigan's *Where the Road Forks* (2008); Hipgrave's *Untitled* (2006); a work by an unknown Chinese artist, Beijing (2009); *No.16 Family Tree* (2003) by Sally Smart and Jake Walker's *The Athfields' House* (2011). **Left**: *Seeadler – Sea Eagle* (2012), an image taken from a 19th-century German reference book.

THERE'S SOMETHING ENDEARING about the flora and fauna that appear in Susan Hipgrave's artworks. A recent fascination with birds of prey found her painting eagles, owls and hawks in poses reminiscent of second-rate male catalogue models – head cocked, body tense, eyes focused intently on the viewer. "I'm drawn to the ugly in nature, the quirky, bold and bizarre," she says. Past subjects include parasites and fungi with absurdly bulbous protrusions.

Hipgrave uses found imagery, typically illustrations from within the dusty pages of obscure antique natural history books. She revives the images, enlarging the originals before drawing them in pencil on circular porcelain ceramic plates that operate as her canvases. The illustrations are then painstakingly painted, fine black lines on creamy matt porcelain. The work is resolutely monochromatic, a reference to her lifelong love for drawing.

The painting process demands patience and a steady hand. The fun, she says, is in sourcing the material, most recently working from a series of 19th-century German books in which she discovered oddly anthropomorphised illustrations. Rendered by naturalists attempting to communicate foreign environments and animals to a curious public, the pictures suggest that the brevity of the encounters required a certain amount of creative license. "Animals are drawn in poses like human beings, so a monkey sitting like a man, cross-legged on a chair," says Hipgrave. "Because they had never seen a monkey before, they couldn't quite imagine them as animals."

She peruses the catalogues of Sydney's State Library and Australian Museum for unusual images and rare books, a process she finds thrilling. "You can't believe you are holding this precious object, the original drawing, the only copy. It is quite extraordinary." While she paints on ceramics, Hipgrave is not a ceramicist. With a degree in graphic design, she spent two decades as an art director and managing a locations company before she decided to explore her personal creativity. A visit to a pottery supplies store drew her in to painting on ceramic surfaces. "I wasn't interested in firing and making the plates because I thought, well, artists don't weave their own canvases!"

As Hipgrave gains confidence, her work is becoming progressively more detailed, but conversely her subjects are becoming more assertive. It's all part of the natural evolution of things. **MADELEINE HINCHY**
For more information, visit susanhipgrave.com.