

Susan Hipgrave

Australia

Victorian ornithologists and botanists would have heartily commended Susan Hipgrave's remarkable series of hand-painted plates. The meticulous execution (each extra-fine brushstroke adding an important detail), the resulting life-like renditions and the consistent format (monochromatic black on white; identical one-size ceramic plates) adhere to the ethos of scientific study. Susan's ability to focus is well matched by her possession of a steady hand. However, it soon becomes clear that all is not quite as it seems. Susan departs from a straightforward replication of flora and fauna by concocting strange hybrids or by exaggerating features, such as piercing eyes to convey the extreme visual acuity of an eagle. For spectators, an interactive experience awaits: birds, caught in the moment, watch us, ready to strike or to fly away; clusters of twisted vines and treacherous spikes draw us in. 'As my work with natural subjects becomes more detailed, so my subjects become more assertive,' the artist states. 'When I'm contemplating a new piece, I start by going through my collection of natural history books until I find something that "speaks" to me. I work with it in terms of size and placement, and then begins the slow and meditative practice of putting paint to porcelain. I obsess about how

fine a line I can do; ultimately, I love seeing all the little black lines that I've painted come together to create an image.' Despite the striking maturity of her work, Susan has been working in ceramic art for less than a decade. For many years she worked as an art director/designer in advertising. Then, in 2005, 'sick with shingles, I walked into a shop that was running ceramic painting classes and it was immediately obvious that it was something I had to do'. While she has worked with earthenware as well as porcelain, her medium has always been the plate. 'My art is contained, so I can pack it up and travel easily,' Susan notes. 'We have a house on the south coast, so I spend much of my time there, painting in daylight.' Her creations work well both on a small scale (a single plate) and a large scale (her first exhibition – a strikingly spectacular window display at the GRANTPIRRIE gallery in Sydney – showcased several plates placed against a dark backdrop). If there were an issue with Susan's hand-painted works, it would be that once you have admired one, you compulsively want to collect them all.

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3. A 'Cytinus Hypocistus' plate: the painstakingly detailed illustration appears almost 3D, thanks to a precise accumulation of light/dark lines and shadows.

4. Susan's works have great impact when grouped: (from top to bottom) 'Brugmansis', 'Cytinus Hypocistus', 'Asclepiad' and 'Parasitic Balaphoreae' plates.

5. A black and white affair: an inspirational botanical drawing, a container holding extra-fine brushes and a pot of black ink.



1. Victorian-style ornithology revived: a 'Mare Aquila – Sea Eagle' plate.

2. Susan Hipgrave browsing through her shelves of inspirational books.



6. Susan's artworks add drama to any wall: (clockwise from left) 'Nest of European Jay', 'Eolophus Roseicapilla - Roseate Cockatoo' and 'Arara - Brazilian Macaw' plates.

7. Susan at work in her exquisitely appointed Sydney home.

