



# THE CURATORIAL INQUISITORIAL

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## EXHIBITION REVIEW

*The Nature of Memory*

Jess Dare

7 March to 24 March 2013

Gray Street Workshop

The small gallery space of the Gray Street Workshop immerses the viewer in the plant inspired works of Jess Dare immediately, tightly surrounding them like a surreal garden. In such close proximity to these pieces I was instantly drawn into their intricate detail. These close encounters emulate an intimate interaction with nature, filling me with child-like wonder as I became absorbed in their complexities and beauty.

Dare's body of work explores the fleeting nature of memory through fragile glass and botanical forms. In her artist statement Dare highlights her attraction to the miniature and her fascination with minute details, fitting for a jeweller. Her works are therefore of a smaller scale, delicate and meticulous, awe-inspiring, as encounters with nature often are.

Dare dedicates this exhibition to her late grandfather, an avid gardener whose poetically written journal features in the display. Following his death several of her relatives became obsessed with their gardens, feeling closer to him and his memory through this interaction with the earth. There is a common human need to hang on to memories and moments by creating physical manifestations.

Just as plants cannot live forever, memories cannot be conserved, they fade or become skewed over time through the opinions and retellings of others. Complex connections also form between memories, twisting, branching, reaching and curling like shoots of a vine.

Visible upon entry to the space, Dare's *Xylem Neckpieces* reflect this complexity of memories beautifully. Displayed on the wall, these neckpieces feature stems branching out or curling into knots. They appear to be crafted from small cylinder segments of brass joined together, the ends making their hollowness visible, like a shoot of bamboo. Coated in white powder they almost disappear into the wall, like fading memories. While my eyes enjoyed their coiling and bifurcating forms, I did find myself wondering how these large, rigid-looking pieces would feel around my neck or if they were intended to stay on the wall despite their title.

Extending this series the *Xylem brooch series* feature a range of branching twigs, small leaves on curling shoots and small thorn almost like protrusions. Even with this pallid palette these brooches look alive, each brooch capturing certain characteristics of the botanical world. The *Drawn epicormic brooches* push this series even further, containing the most appealing tiny white sepals holding striking red glass buds, like drops of blood on a frosted twig.

The *Epicormic brooch series* and *Epicormic neckpieces* feature black coated brass and copper also with lampwork glass. Displayed on the opposite wall to the white series, these black stems include small coloured glass buds or berries of eye-catching shades of yellow, orange, red or green. The jet black and bright colours of these works suggest to me more piercing memories than the ghostly white of the *Xylem* works. Like all of the other brooches, the dramatic but charming *Epicormic brooches* would be a truly prominent feature when worn.

While in the space, I found myself repeatedly drawn to the single display case containing Dare's *Conceptual flowering plant series*. These pieces are incredibly delicate, crafted skillfully from glass. Dare utilises a range of colouring effects to give each one a unique look, ranging from the vibrantly coloured through to the transparent. This effect increases their delicacy and captures the unpredictability of losing memories.

The exhibition also features a section of wall covered with a collage of photographs of plants, adding an incredible splash of colour to the fairly reserved palette of the majority of the show. Predominantly close-up shots, viewing these images of lilies, seed pods, bright green leaves and a variety of flowers is like experiencing a whirl-wind tour of the botanic gardens, thoughtfully arranged with a careful balance of colour. Displayed in front of this collage is a long (almost floor length) string of green beads, each one shaped like a seedpod. Each piece almost blends into the background but on close inspection appear so real one would expect them to feel soft when touched.

Sitting on a plinth in the far corner along with Dare's grandfather's journal is the work *Testing time*. Reminiscent of the work of Fiona Hall, this group of botanically transformed test tubes fragiley grows from their vintage wooden test tube stand.

Passion for the inhabitants of the plant kingdom appears to be shared throughout the generations of this family. The structure, detail, shape and even titles of the work (some of which I had to Google) demonstrate the depth of Dare's understanding, admiration and knowledge for the natural world. Her skill as a jeweler, working with both metal and glass, is also apparent even to my untrained eye. It is therefore not a surprise that *The Nature of Memory* has had such success winning Fringe awards and the Art Gallery of South Australia has purchased a *Xylem Neckpieces* for their collection. As it explores memory and nature Dare's work presents a high calibre of beauty, design and skill. Viewers will get lost in their own memories and thoughts as their eyes follow these tangled, twining, reaching forms.

**Alex Tuffin**