

For the past three decades, artist Maria Fernanda Cardoso has blurred the line between the natural world and human artifice, demanding that we look more closely at nature.

# Natural-born artist

Maria Fernanda Cardoso with *Eucalyptus Gumnuts Spheres*. Jillian Nalty



“People love to be afraid of nature. They are fascinated by fear but not love.”  
— Maria Fernanda Cardoso

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Maria Fernanda Cardoso has never seen a division between nature and culture. For the Colombian-born artist, you can't extricate the natural world from human life.

As a schoolgirl Cardoso would walk with her father in Las Colinas de Suba, a group of hills in the north-west of Bogotá. Recalling the memory, she lights up from within. The hills were alive with frogs, lizards and snakes, which enjoyed god-like status before European colonisation.

“The lizards were bright green. I would catch the snakes, catch the frogs, catch the insects ... I used to make cubby houses from moss and it was heaven, it had this fantastic view of the savannah of Bogotá, patches of green,” Cardoso, now 58, says. “The soil was a metre of black. Now, Bogotá has about 10 million people. The green landscape of my childhood no longer exists. It was the most beautiful agricultural land.” She pauses for emphasis. “Gone.”

We're talking on a bench in the upstairs terrace of the Sydney house she's shared for 18 years with her husband and collaborator, artist and academic Ross Rudesch Harley, along with their children, Felipe Jupiter and Alfonso Macarroni. Beyond a patchwork of suburban rooftops, the Pacific crashes over the Malabar headland.

Coastal scrub gives way to sandstone cliffs, the golden surfaces and craggy edges that recur across Sydney, a reminder of the modern city's Triassic-era origins. “These cliffs, they are sculptures,” she says, gesturing in their direction. “People don't realise you don't have sandstone everywhere.”

Cardoso, one of Latin America's most acclaimed artists, has been asking her audience to look closer since the 1980s. Look, her work says, at this kernel of corn, the fleshy curves of a potato. Pay attention to the perfect symmetry of butterfly wings, a seahorse's curly tail, or the ballets choreographed by spiders when people aren't looking.

Her résumé is distinguished. She represented Colombia at the 50th Venice Biennale with *Woven Water* – thousands of blue starfish that hover in the air like clouds – in 2003. In the same year, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney showed her career retrospective, *Zoomorphia*.

Now she's preparing for *Gumnuts and Sandstone*, a solo show at her Sydney gallery, Sullivan + Strumpf. Warm and gregarious, with brown eyes and cropped dark hair, she wears a charcoal pinafore over jeans and running shoes. She leads me excitedly through her garden studio, between towering cacti, a Queensland bottle tree and deep-green elephant ears. A series of sandstone works, newly ready for the show, stands under a shady canopy.

Before she shows me her workspace we sit by a pool, a mottled oasis where frogs croak among the reeds. The surface of her table is covered with gumnuts: *Eucalyptus coronata*, a Western Australian species that resembles a four-point star, and *Eucalyptus youngiana*,

a sturdy capsule with a striking ribbed casing.

Cardoso tells me that she first started working with gumnuts when she was invited to take part in a 2008 residency in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in Western Australia with the Tjanpi Desert Weavers. With the weavers' help and permission, she started collecting seedpods from the *Eucalyptus macrocarpa*, native to desert country. They became the basis for an installation, *Gumnuts* (2009), that showed as part of *Kuru Alala Eyes Open*, an exhibition that toured until 2012.

In her studio she directs two assistants, who meticulously arrange gumnuts in a grid formation as part of the installation *Eucalyptus rhodantha and macrocarpa gumnuts on wall* (2021). The simplicity of the work is deceptive. The white space is carefully calibrated to make hidden patterns visible, to dazzling effect.

“[Gumnuts] have different shapes and variation – I am attracted to their formal beauty,” she explains. “Australian animals and plants are tough. Eucalyptus can survive many years until they [reach] the right conditions to release their seeds. As a sculptor, it is a traditional thing to make sculptures out of wood. But in this case, the sculptures already exist, and I collect them and present them.” She smiles: “It is a little bit like they are ready-mades.”

Cardoso was born in Bogotá in 1963, the daughter of architects Alfonso Cardoso and Eugenia Mantilla de Cardoso, who was the first woman in Colombia to receive the country's National Architecture Award. She grew up during a relatively peaceful moment in the country's history.

“There was a peace treaty in the '60s,” says Cardoso, whose father's family supported the centre-left Colombian Liberal Party. “In the '50s there was [the civil war] La Violencia. [Across] the whole country, there were atrocities. The Conservatives used to play soccer with the Liberals' heads. That's what my father told me. In the '80s, when I was a student at university, it got really bad again.”

Cardoso, who identifies as *mestiza*, of mixed Indigenous Colombian and Spanish heritage, studied architecture and visual arts at the Universidad de los Andes. In 1987 she received a scholarship to complete her master's in New York City: “I thought I had won the lottery!” She originally enrolled at the Pratt Institute. “I hated it,” she says bluntly. A friend attended Yale – “They had huge studios, natural light” – and she promptly transferred. At Yale she studied sculpture and installation and fell in with a group of artists that included a young Matthew Barney. “My peers were amazing,” she says.

There Cardoso made a fateful visit to the biology department. “They were growing Indigenous corn – red, yellow and variegated,” she tells me. “I was a poor student, on scholarship, so I was like, ‘Free materials – awesome!’” Back in the studio, she started watering seeds of corn on squares of paper, to make *Corn Drawings* (1987–89). For *Corn Cob Coil* (1989), now part of the collection at Tate Modern, she threaded corn cobs together to resemble a thick rope.

*Corn Cob Coil* combines the formal elegance of minimalist sculpture and Arte Povera, the radical Italian art movement that was fascinated with overlooked materials. But

it owes its circular patterns and repetition to pre-Columbian visual culture. Corn, Cardoso says, played a central role in Colombia before Spanish colonisation in the 1500s. “They tell us that Indigenous tribes built with straw, cultivated corn and potatoes,” she says.

“[According to myth] humans were made from the dough of corn – it is that important. “We didn't have European masters in our museums – we had pre-Columbian art, Catholic art,” she says. “So, our influences were pretty bizarre.”

Some of Cardoso's early work used animals to explore death, a fixture of life in Colombia, and the relationship between mortality and vitality.

In *Dancing Frogs* (1990), for example, she arranged preserved frogs sourced from a biological supply company in a circle that resembled both the Crown of Thorns, a Catholic image that reflects ideas of suffering and sacrifice, and pre-Columbian sacred symbols. Their arms and legs are splayed outwards, as if mid-motion. Two years later she made *Amazon River (Piranhas)*, installing 170 piranha fish, mouths agape, at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. She bought fish scales from souvenir shops in Manaus, a Brazilian port city, recasting the piranha as a symbol of fantasies and anxieties about the Amazon.

“Back then, it was like: it is scary, dangerous, wild, piranha fish will kill you,” she says, making the parallel with popular conceptions about Australia. “You see all of these documentaries, ‘the most dangerous’, ‘the most poisonous’. People love to be afraid of nature. They are fascinated by fear but not love.”

The work that made her name was the *Cardoso Flea Circus* (1994–2000). She was living in Los Angeles, teaching at CalArts and making work from marine animals and shells and starfish, when she had the urge to reconnect with creatures from her childhood. “I had already worked with frogs, lizards and grasshoppers – they are small, and I like little animals,” she laughs. “My cat had fleas, so fleas it was.”

When she was a child, an uncle had told her of a flea circus he had seen in New York, a form of popular entertainment first championed in 1820s London by the Italian showman Louis Bertolotto. After an obsessive period of research, she started building props on a 1994 residency in Banff, Canada. “There was a magician who claimed to know how to do a flea circus, so I used to call him and say, ‘Will you teach me please?’” she says. “I was being a sculptor, but in miniature. I pulled apart watches to make little chariots. I made a safety net with metal mesh. I made a trapeze.”

In 1995, the *Cardoso Flea Circus* premiered at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, where Cardoso had briefly relocated. It showed everywhere from the Centre Pompidou in Paris to New York's New Museum before debuting at the Sydney Opera House for the 2000 Sydney Festival, alongside Harley's live projections.

“I started with 50 fleas and then by the time we did [it] at the Sydney Opera House, we had 1500 fleas jumping all at once,” says Cardoso, who, for a time, fed her fleas with her own blood. “We had 30 sold-out shows,

9000 people saw it in person. Old people, young people. People didn't know it was art.”

Artists have long made art about nature, but Cardoso always understood art as nature. She met Harley, an Australian, on the Banff residency and moved permanently to Sydney in 1997. Cardoso says that she gets to know a place through its animals. Remembering that her great-grandparents owned Australian sheep on their potato farm, she learnt to shear in a 140-year-old shed at Gundowringa, a homestead near Goulburn.

“[Sheep] were fundamental to the colonisation of this country,” says Cardoso. “I would just shear, shear, shear in geometrical patterns.” The resulting work, *Sheep* (2002), showed at Washington's Art Museum of the Americas and demonstrates the artist's visual intelligence. Sheep hides – which are more familiar as fluffy jacket linings, couch throws or Ugg boots – are embossed with a grid and re-imagined as an art object, a facet of nature that's unnatural on Australian land.

After that, she returned to fleas. “The flea has genitalia that's one of the wonders of the insect world,” she says, grinning. “Copulation lasts six to eight hours and they have two penis rods that are coiled together.” She enrolled in a PhD to create the *Museum of Copulatory Organs* (MoCO). She magnified insect appendages – snail spermatozoa, a fruit fly's sex organs – with an electron microscope, reframing them as ethereal sculptures cast in glass and resin. She presented the results as part of the 18th Biennale of Sydney in 2012.

“I was very careful to be rigorous, so scientists would take me seriously,” says Cardoso. “It was a complete balance between art and science. It sits right in the middle, so I got that respect.”

Cardoso attributes her view of the world to her grandfather, whom she describes as a “mad scientist”. If science centres human knowledge, Cardoso does the opposite. She enthuses about the Maratus, a native jumping spider with a technicolour abdomen, the subject of an ongoing series called *Spiders of Paradise*, in which she records their mating rituals using high-definition cinematography and a laser vibrometer.

“I was so surprised by how tiny they are, how sophisticated and masterful they are,” says Cardoso. “The male has to be loud, has to be skilled, musical in his gestures, there is this language with their legs, with their calves – they wave them, they fold them. They are performance artists, visual artists. But what surprises me is, how do they know they are being seen?”

I ask Cardoso if her work feels more urgent three decades after she started. She grows quieter, more circumspect. “If I think about it I become very sad,” she says.

She tells me she's sustained by the life in her garden. “It was a sand dune with a piece of turf, watered and fed artificially and now it is a wild place with its own environment,” she says, glancing at the cliffs again. “I want to show how beautiful, fascinating, complex and rich our world is. And hopefully that bond gets communicated. Rather than complain about how we're damaging, depleting, I want to say, ‘Just stop, look, admire, connect and value.’” ●