

BY LENORE NICKLIN

MARIA FERNANDA Cardoso could be mistaken for just another anonymous Bondi Beach flat-dweller, but internationally she is known as Professor Cardoso, queen of the fleas. A 34-year-old Colombian-born, Yale-educated conceptual artist, Cardoso runs a flea circus. Last month a video installation of her work went on show at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. In July, she and her troupe of 300 fleas will appear live at the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

She is the practitioner of what was all but a lost art. In the 19th century, flea circuses were all the rage in the courts of Europe – the fleas performed before and indeed, according to some, on top of the crowned heads of Europe. The fleas of those 19th century circuses were human fleas (*Pulex irritans*, which today, thanks to Pea-Beu, do not exist). Cardoso uses fleas from cats and kangaroos. She is ring-master, trainer, prop-builder, costume designer, friend, and sometimes lunch.

Fearless: Performing in a very small big top, the fleas dance, lift weights and walk the tightrope. Brutus, the “strongest flea on Earth”, pulls a locomotive 160,000 times his own weight. Fearless Alfredo is a high diver who jumps into a tiny thimble of water. “He sees a dark area and goes for it,” explains Cardoso. Flea ballerinas, dressed in micro-tutus, dance to the rhythms of the tango. Two fleas are shot out of a cannon and land on a safety mesh. Another pair have a swordfight using tiny swords made from part of an emu feather. For the audience, the show not surprisingly produces a crisis of belief. Did they really see what they thought they saw?

Cardoso came to Australia two years ago to be with her Australian husband, Ross Harley, a lecturer in the theatre/film department of the University of NSW. They met in Canada, where both were artists in residence at an arts museum in Banff. Their three-month-old baby, Matthew, was the reason for Cardoso's non-attendance at her show in New York last month.

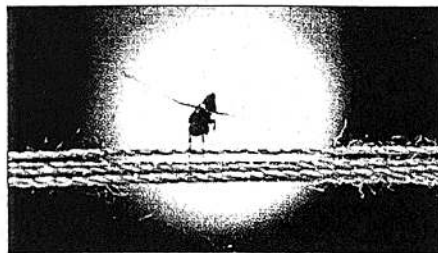
Before running away with the circus, she exhibited widely in major museums and galleries in Latin America, the United States and Europe. She was visiting professor at CalArts, San Francisco, from 1991 to 1993. Academics wrote learned papers about her installations: “[Her] work has always had a metaphysical dimension which leads towards a contemplation of the environment,” wrote one.

Born in Bogota, where both her par-

ents were architects, she grew up in a comparatively peaceful Colombia. “It was before the civil war started,” she says in softly accented English. “You can live in the big cities but in the country it is pretty wild.” After graduating from Bogota University she went to Yale to get a master's degree in sculpture. Her work has always involved animals. To make her sculptures she used frogs, lizards, grasshoppers, snakes and fish – dead ones.

A 1990 sculpture titled *Dancing Frogs* shows 50 upright “dancing” frogs in a 1.5-metre diameter circle. Where did the frogs come from? “I'd order 100 frogs by mail order – and ask for sizes two-and-a-half to four inches long [6.35cm-10cm]. They are preserved in formaldehyde and are still movable.” To make another sculpture, she once ordered 3000 starfish through the mail.

After working with frogs, fish and snakes, Cardoso itched to try something new and began training fleas and building trapezes and tightropes five years ago. It took her a good two years to become a competent flea-trainer, she says. She first heard about flea circuses when she was seven from an aunt and uncle who told her about one that existed in New York. “I could see it in my mind,” she says. When



she started to research the subject she discovered that while there were some mechanical flea circuses, there were no longer any live ones. She had to teach herself by studying the book written by a famous flea impresario called Bertolotto. “I have a poster of his from the 1830s,” she says. She tried to find human fleas, checking with laboratories all over North America, but they had all disappeared. Cat fleas were the next best thing, and since she has been in Australia she has been successfully crossbreeding cat fleas with kangaroo fleas.

Crossing borders with fleas is not easy, she says. When she took the circus back to Canada she had to get a special permit and pay tax (“the paperwork took forever”). Last year, she returned to Bogota to put on a show. Her mother, who originally had thoroughly disapproved of

the project – “she said, ‘Don't do it, they will bite you, it is unhygienic’” – was much impressed. “She saw how popular it was and really liked what she saw, and now sells the video for us in Colombia.”

Cardoso works only with female fleas. “The males are smaller and just don't have the same stamina – the females are stronger and more reliable,” she says. She uses incredibly fine copper wire to make the harnesses for her performers. Traditionally, a gold wire was used but gold was too expensive. One of her props is a little whip. When she cracks the whip and says “jump”, the fleas jump.

Jumping, of course, is what fleas are very good at. “They have very strong back legs,” says Cardoso, who is extremely allergic to mosquito bite, but untroubled by flea bite. “They can jump the equivalent of a 100-storey building and scientists have done a lot of research into the

leap of the flea because it is quite extraordinary – they have an elastic protein which is like a spring. They don't get tired. A flea can jump for 72 hours non-stop.”

Despite their talents, Cardoso's Californian fleas were not allowed into Australia. Customs was quite firm about it. She still has a studio in San Francisco where an assistant looks after the colony and keeps

them in training. “Fleas live for only three or four months – I try to immortalise them by keeping the names.” After two years of rehearsals and much experimentation, she presented her first flea circus at the Exploratorium, an art/science museum in San Francisco, in 1995. “I can perform for only 15 people, but hundreds of people came and there was a big crisis with people getting angry because they wanted to see the fleas. So we used videos so they could follow the action and it was projected on a big screen in a theatre next door. There was a lottery to select the 15 people who could see it live.”

Feel: In the beginning Cardoso wore jeweller's goggles during a performance, but now she can slip a flea into harness just by feel. She says that in Australia when you say you have a flea circus, people say, “Oh, we'll have you round for our next party.” She says it is not quite so simple and that tens of thousands of dollars are involved in setting up the equipment, the lighting and video cameras. Occasionally fleas do escape. During a performance in San Francisco a flea wearing a harness was passed around the audience with a magnifying glass. Suddenly there was a harness, but no flea. People were down on all fours looking for it, but Houdini had made a clean getaway. ■

AFTER WORKING WITH FROGS, FISH AND SNAKES, CARDOSO ITCHED TO TRY SOMETHING NEW

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