

GUMNUTS AND SANDSTONE: MARIA FERNANDA CARDOSO

by Rachel Kent May 1, 2021



Maria Fernanda Cardoso with Eucalyptus Gumnuts Spheres (2021) Photocredit: Jillian Nally

Maria Fernanda Cardoso's sculptural works explore the beauty and diversity of the natural world. Born in Colombia and based in Sydney, Cardoso explores our complex relationship with the plants and animals around us, reversing traditional hierarchies of human dominance in favour of interconnectedness and reflection.

Inspired by her childhood growing up in Bogota, Cardoso's works of the early 1990s featured preserved frogs, lizards and grasshoppers strung together in geometrical arrangements suggesting life after death.

Subsequent installations utilised tourist souvenirs including dried sea stars and piranhas, purchased in San Francisco and Brazil, the former presented as suspended, woven formations in the gallery.

Since the mid 1990s, Cardoso's gaze has turned downwards to life unseen beneath our feet, and creatures usually outside our perception. 'People think we are superior as we are bigger, but there is more complexity as you go down in scale', she observes. 'It's not about how big but how complex a thing, its behaviour, and reproduction is.'

Fascinated by the flea, its anatomy and distinctive reproductive organs, she developed a major body of work inspired by the 19th century entertainment spectacle, the flea circus, between 1994–2000. Incorporating sculpture and installation, video and live performances, the *Cardoso Flea Circus* led to the creation of a wondrous 'museum' of animal copulatory organs; an exploration of the (male) sex of microscopic pollen grains; and the charismatic mating rituals of the tiny peacock (*maratus*) spider, with its iridescent fanned tail.

Like the animal world, plants have also been a longstanding focus in Cardoso's art. They include sweet corn, a dietary staple of Colombia, which she fashioned into sculptural arrangements and dried coils early in her career; and later plant and animal inspired works particular to Australia, her adopted country since the late 1990s.

Reflecting on her heritage as a Mestiza (mixed race) woman with Indigenous Colombian and Hispanic heritage, Cardoso notes that animals were sacred in traditional Colombian culture; and creatures such as lizards, frogs and snakes were abundant, given its pre-colonial history as swampland. 'A lot of my work', she now says, 'has been about finding my own cultural identity – about finding cultural artefacts, materials, and animals unique or specific to Colombia and my wider travels along the Amazon.' Despite the colonial process some 500 years ago, she notes, Indigenous culture and identity remains strong in Colombia today, expressed through food and costume. 'In my culture there is also a lot of craft: purses, baskets and mochilas (woven bags). My culture is a hybrid of wearing a mochila and European textiles.'

Following her 1997 move to Australia, Cardoso turned to the flora and fauna of her adopted country to seek out materials that were equally resonant. They included colonial by-products like sheep's fleece, as well as the feathers of the emu – the country's largest native bird, with a history spanning millennia.

Growth and form in nature, as well as repetition and difference, have been persistent themes in Cardoso's practice from the outset. They unfold across the most intimate scale, evidenced in her anatomical and reproductive studies; and they are the focus of her latest body of work exploring the variations and innate beauty of the Australian eucalyptus family and its woody fruits, or gumnuts. Cardoso first began to collect and arrange gumnuts during an artist camp and workshop project alongside the Tjampit Desert Weavers, an Indigenous social enterprise for women in remote communities in Central Australia, in 2008–09. Creating a pinned gumnuts installation for the resulting exhibition 'KURU ALALA Eyes Open', she returns to this material over a decade later in her new work.

Observing Australian plant life, Cardoso has also explored the unusual, sculptural quality of the bottle tree with its bulbous trunk that expands and contracts in times of rain and drought. The bottle tree is an adapted form that responds to a harsh and unpredictable environment. Similarly, gumnuts are woody and tough, rather than soft and fleshy, in order to protect their seeds through extreme climatic conditions and often extended durations before germination is possible. Connecting the bottle tree with Sydney sandstone blocks, in a spiral formation, is Cardoso's public commission *While I Live I will Grow*, realised for the City of Sydney in 2018. The artist notes that eucalyptus and sandstone 'belong together', their relationship reflected in the extensive stone plateaus of the Sydney Basin bioregion with its abundant gum tree species. Representing a 'way to connect with the landscape, and the life inhabiting it', Cardoso's ongoing exploration of Australian flora and fauna builds upon her early work and opens up distinctive new directions.

'Australian flora is so unique. We don't realise what is around us', she reflects today. 'The gumnut shapes to me are sculptures; they're ready-mades. If I were to make them as a sculpture, it would be such an effort; but the trees make them in abundance – so plants are the artist here.' This is not the first time that Cardoso has attributed artistic status to her non-human subjects. Observing the colourful male peacock spider dance enticingly before its larger, brown female counterpart, she identified – and celebrated – the world's 'first performance artist'.

Gumnuts and Sandstone, Cardoso's latest body of work, responds to the star-shaped geometry of gumnuts. It is augmented by a suite of sandstone 'drawings' in which abstract geometric lines are carved into three-dimensional stone blocks, recalling pre-Columbian designs, and abstract growth and flow patterns (waves, ripples, concentric circles). 'I have always been very attracted to forms in nature', she says. 'There is something mathematical about form that I find astonishing, and all the patterns that result. It's because my whole life, since I was a child, is about observation. I have been observing life and nature and noticing the diversity of things.'

Gumnuts offer a unique case in point, with their perfectly shaped four, five and six-point stars. Designed to protect, then release seeds so the tree can reproduce, they are aesthetic and utilitarian in equal measure. Reflecting on the role of art to expose hidden truths, Cardoso notes, 'Sculptors tend to work from the outside in, using a process of removal to reveal the form within. Life, in contrast, is programmed to work from the inside out, building and growing, and becoming – it grows from within and reveals itself.'

Patterns in nature follow the laws of physics, from flow to spirals and repetition, as Cardoso observes. 'My veins, for example, look like rivers. Star fish have five limbs and we have five fingers. There is a limited repertoire of growth plans in the world. It includes bilateral (left/right) symmetry, then radial symmetry, like fractals. I feel that through patterns and music you are connected to the universe.'

To create her new works, Cardoso gathers and sorts, then arranges and pins *Eucalyptus coronata*, *youngiana*, *kingsmilli* and *macrocarpa* seedpods in geometric configurations, either directly onto the gallery wall or supporting panels. Shapes, patterns and colouration vary immensely between the different varieties. Some are small and fluted, others larger and flatter; some are spiky and protruding, others tightly clustered and ornamental. Tonally, too, they vary from warm browns through silvery bush greys, some detailed with a golden-yellow ring inside the edge. On the wall, they transform into expansive fields of repeating forms, geometric patterning, topographical contours and spatial relationships. There is a strong optical quality to the works, which also suggests the warp and weft of textiles.

Presented together, the gumnuts look the same, yet all are slightly different. Forms repeat in nature, at different scales, but each plant is also unique – a quality that Cardoso draws our senses to ever so gently, with wonder and skill.

Text by Rachel Kent, 2021