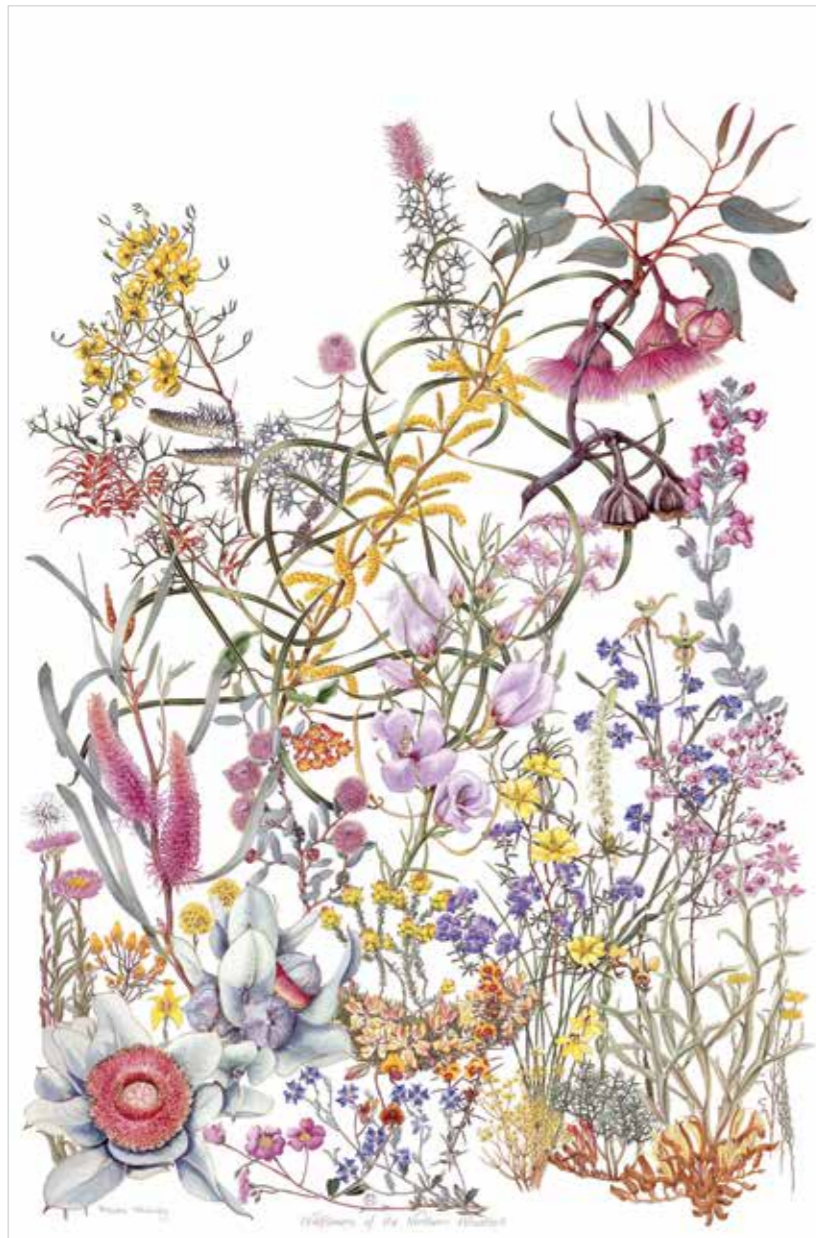


NIKULINSKY NATURALLY

AN ARTIST'S LIFE

Edited by Ted Snell

 **FREMANTLE PRESS**



LEFT *Wildflowers of the Northern Wheatbelt*, 1990, watercolour, pencil & gouache on Arches hot press paper, 68cm x 1m



RIGHT *Wildflowers of the Southern Heathland*, 1990, watercolour, pencil & gouache on Arches hot press paper, 68cm x 1m

Foreword

Philippa Nikulinsky is one of the most popular artists working in Western Australia and she is highly regarded nationally and internationally. Awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2016 in the general division, her citation was, '... for significant service to the visual arts as a botanical painter and illustrator, to professional associations, and as an author'.

Philippa has made a major contribution to the state through her work in raising the consciousness of our community to its extraordinary biodiverse environment. As Western Australia's foremost botanical artist, she is an advocate for our state's unique and diverse flora, exemplifying its intrinsic beauty and importance.

This book charts Philippa's career and documents the extraordinary bodies of works that have been generated from her focused determination to chronicle the indigenous plants of this state.

In the words of Professor Kingsley Dixon:

... the artistic works of Philippa Nikulinsky loom large as a modern day Florilegium Magnum Opus. Few botanical artists have captured the vibrancy and pulse of the plant life of western wildflowers and botanical landscapes as Philippa. Her works reflect the light, diversity of form and colour which, to us appears as a kaleidoscope of beauty but to the plants is the never-ending evolutionary arms-race to survive

and reproduce on landscapes that have some of the harshest conditions on earth.

As a botanical artist and illustrator, Philippa Nikulinsky has promoted the flora and fauna of Western Australia to an international audience. This has been both for the benefits of science and for lay audiences. Her work has been educational in understanding natural history, evolution and biodiversity. Academics and students alike at the University of Western Australia have gained benefit from her exceptional work with the School of Plant Biology and University Extension. The University recognised these outstanding achievements at its meeting in 2018 when it agreed to confer upon her the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa).

This book has been launched in tandem with a major exhibition of Philippa's work titled *Nikulinsky Naturally* at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery on our Crawley campus. The University is pleased to be able to honour such a significant contributor to Western Australia's cultural life.

Professor Dawn Freshwater
Vice-Chancellor



Philippa, 'basic camping' with HiAce on south coast. Photo: Alex Nikulinsky

Contents

1	<i>Preface</i> Hans Lambers
5	<i>That Girl from the Bush</i> Angela Nikulinsky
29	<i>I am an Artist</i> Ted Snell
51	<i>Science into botanical art – Philippa Nikulinsky</i> Kingsley Dixon
57	Plates
114	Index of Works



1 Darwin Online, Darwin, *Beagle Diary* (1831–1836), [page] 709, viewed 17 January 2019, <<http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=EHBeagleDiary&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>>.

LEFT *Xanthorea thurstonii* before and after bushfire, 2017–18, pencil & watercolour on Kozo paper, 7m x 42cm

Preface

Hans Lambers

I had met Philippa Nikulinsky before, but our friendship started when both of us were on magnificent trips in the Great Sandy Desert in June 2002. What does one do, if one sees the only car for the day travelling in the opposite direction? We did what one does, and stopped to say hello. To cut a long story short, we had lunch with Philippa and her husband Alex Nikulinsky under the shade of some gum trees, and shared our food and experiences. What a terrific experience that was!

When we met in the Great Sandy Desert, Philippa Nikulinsky was capturing the natural beauty of Western Australia, but not everyone fell in love with that beauty and biodiversity as Philippa had. Charles Darwin, one of the most revered and admired natural scientists of all time, wrote in 1836:

We staid (sic) there eight days & I do not remember since leaving England having passed a more dull, uninteresting time. The country viewed from an eminence, appears a woody plain, with here & there rounded & partly bare hills of granite. – One day I went out with a party in hopes of seeing a Kangaroo hunt, & so walked over a good many miles of country. – Every where we found the soil sandy & very poor; it either supported a coarse vegetation of thin low brushwood & wiry grass, or a forest of stunted trees. – The scenery resembled the elevated sandstone platform of the Blue

Mountains: the Casuarina (a tree which somewhat resembles a Scotch fir) is however in greater proportion as the eucalyptus is rather less. In the open parts there are great numbers of the grass-tree, a plant which in appearance has some affinity with the palm, but instead of the crown of noble leaves, it can boast merely of a tuft of coarse grass rushes. The general bright green color of the brushwood & other plants viewed from a distance seems to bespeak fertility; a single walk will however quite dispel such an illusion; & if he thinks like me, he will never wish to walk again in so uninviting a country.¹

What Charles Darwin despised, Philippa admired and captured in her magnificent artwork. Future generations will only quote Darwin to contrast his ideas about Australia with his many insightful observations on other matters, but they will remember Philippa's stunning artwork.

Philippa Nikulinsky has provided invaluable services to the community through a wide range of activities as a very talented botanical artist. She began working as an illustrator of natural history in the mid-1970s, specialising in plants from harsh environments, especially the Great Sandy Desert.

Philippa's magnificent illustrations have been included in many books and magazines. They have opened the eyes of many who appreciate her paintings



Mistletoe Bird, Bamboo Springs, Mulgool Station, 2014, pencil & watercolour on Arches hot press paper, 1m x 68cm

Preface

and drawings for the beauty the southwest Australian biodiversity hotspot has to offer. Whenever I post or share one of her drawings on the Facebook page of the Kwongan Foundation, I read high praise about the beauty of her drawings, and often comments that what Philippa captures far exceeds what any photo can show. The images are invariably stunning, and many of her numerous admirers express that view repeatedly.

During most of her lifetime, Philippa has used her talents to promote the conservation of the unique Australian flora. Among her earlier books is *Banksia menziesii* (1992), full of fabulous images that convey a message well beyond their artistic beauty. With Professor Steve Hopper, she co-authored *Life on the rocks: the art of survival* (1999). Her contributions go much further than just art; they strongly support awareness and conservation of our unique Western Australian flora. Her passion for and contributions towards conservation have been acknowledged by the Kwongan Foundation for the Conservation of Australia's Biodiversity, which made her an Honorary Patron of the Foundation, one of very few.

Not long ago, Philippa donated a cover painting for an important book, *Plant Life on the Sandplains in Southwest Australia, a Global Biodiversity Hotspot* (2014), whose main aim was to raise awareness and secure UNESCO World Heritage Listing for the Kwongan, a region in the southwest with our poorest soils and our richest flora. Much of the

kwongan and *Banksia* woodlands, both of which Philippa loves and captures in her paintings, has been cleared for agriculture and urban development. That is the main reason why our southwest is a biodiversity hotspot. These hotspots are defined as areas 'where exceptional concentrations of endemic species are undergoing exceptional loss of habitat'. Having a biodiversity hotspot on our doorstep comes with a tremendous responsibility. Philippa understands that better than most. That is the exact reason she generously produced that beautiful painting for the book out of her love for Western Australian plants and her devotion to conservation issues, and she did not wish to receive any payment for this activity. That cover added tremendously to the recognition of the book, in more than one way.

As Western Australia's finest botanical artist among a large group of very talented colleagues, Philippa unconsciously plays the role of ambassador of our flora, conveying its beauty, uniqueness and inherent value. In doing so, she also embraced the value of our flora for science, and raised awareness of the value of our native plants for horticultural purposes. Considering her significant contributions, as detailed above, Philippa was rightly considered a most deserving recipient of the Member (AM) in the general division of the Order of Australia. Her contributions continue to go far beyond what can be expected of someone who recently 'retired'.



Out bush with LandCruiser at Rudall River, Great Sandy Desert, 1980s. Photo by Alex Nikulinsky

That Girl from the Bush

Angela Nikulinsky

- 1 P. Nikulinsky, Field diary, Great Sandy Desert, 10 June 2018.
- 2 Interview with A. Nikulinsky, 9 August 2018.

THE TRUCK FACES OUTWARD

Cooler night, heavy dew, 80 per cent humidity. Could see the gathering of the birds. After coffee, went to the first waterhole, hundreds of pied and black-headed honeyeaters, taking off and landing with a whir. Some crimson chats, as well as the usual thousands of zebra finches and budgies. I then walked across the plain to see some magnificent grevilleas and the hakea trees, fired me onto the picture.

Sat all afternoon away from camp, thinking and planning with no distractions... The life here is so amazing. Again, I appreciate how we have the time to sit and watch, even in the heat. Another lovely wash in the bore water – sparkling, clean and no smell. Alex says it's running at close to 60L/minute. Water in the desert and everything comes alive. Well worth the effort to get here.¹

A white Toyota LandCruiser is parked nose-forward in the driveway. It is the definitive sign: Philippa and her husband Alex are heading out bush. Inside, large plastic tubs of food, bags of clothes, camera gear, toiletries, art supplies and the rest, are spread across rooms of the house. It smells like dinner time; big batches of meaty bolognese sauce, destined to be preserved in jars. This is the Nikulinsky version of an instant camp meal, not a freeze-dried pouch to be seen.

Fresh fruit and vegetables are washed, dried and stored carefully to ensure they last both the trip out and the time away. Philippa places a paper towel between every lettuce leaf, bunch of spring onions, dill, parsley and coriander. She wraps each piece of fruit in a paper towel to ensure they aren't bruised when travelling on rough roads (the paper towels are reused in camp). Soft vegetables are stored in cloth bags, while hard fruit and vegetables are placed into boxes. Throughout the year Philippa finds cheap apples, plums and peaches to stew and jar. If not in the kitchen, you may find Philippa holding a worn exercise book in one hand, a pen in the other, systematically placing a tick against items already packed, and surveying the list for what is still left to organise.

Meanwhile, Alex arranges the hardware. Vehicles, spare wheels and tyres, tools, solar panels, tables, chairs, shelter, repair kits – collecting around 400 litres of water in various containers – and hundreds of bits and pieces (wire, soldering irons, tape, switches, lights). This comes together bit by bit in a disorganised, jolting way, 'The only way I can actually do it,'² says Alex. Once the departure date is set, Philippa is eager to hit the road and she is often ready several days before they leave. During this time, Alex admits he often finds a range of essential tasks to complete:



First field trip, 1970s. Photo by Alex Nikulinsky



Around Australia trip in Fiat, 1973. Photo by Alex Nikulinsky

*Say the trip's five weeks off, I think, 'Ah yep, plenty of time' – instead of doing the important things like getting packed and getting stuff together, I decide, 'Oh this project needed doing before we leave' so off come the wheels off the trailer and bearings get changed.*³

Such preparation, however, is vital. Visiting Western Australia's remote places demands self-sufficiency; one simply cannot pop to the shops for bread and milk. And if a vehicle breaks down in a remote area, having the right tools, spare parts and know-how to make repairs can be a matter of survival.

Philippa and Alex have travelled together for decades, with up to four trips a year. Their way of camping evolved both from the needs of and responses to each trip, and by the constraints of their vehicle of the time. Alex writes how their initial purchase of a car helped to kick off Philippa's professional career as a painter:

*Having lived in the city since her college days, Philippa had been surrounded by suburbs, pruned trees, trimmed lawns and cultivated exotic plants... with our car we happily sailed forth... these outings reawakened in Philippa an awareness of the native bush and wild plants.*⁴

Back in the 1970s, they squeezed into a Fiat. Later they upgraded to a HiAce van, but it wasn't until the purchase of

That Girl from the Bush

- 3 Ibid.
- 4 P. Nikulinsky, *Western Australian Wildflowers in Watercolour*, Introduction by A. Nikulinsky, p. ii.
- 5 P. Nikulinsky, *Cape Arid*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 2012.
- 6 P. Nikulinsky, *Field Diary* (camp date and location unknown).
- 7 P. Nikulinsky, *Banksia menziesii*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 1992.

four-wheel drive vehicles, at first one LandCruiser then one each, that going bush took on its current configuration.

Alex's truck is the designated 'sleepy car' housing a purpose-built (as is everything) bed platform with storage underneath. It tows the kitchen trailer which provides shelving, storage, cooking elements and refrigeration. Shelter attaches to the sides and back of the truck along with fly wire walls. Philippa's truck is 'the rover' and is always ready to leave camp at a moment's notice. Philippa and Alex both describe their camp in functional terms: comfortable, but a working camp, with enough chairs, surfaces, shelter and space to ensure work can continue through swarms of flies or mosquitos, the inevitable wind and rain and in any season. 'It is extremely difficult to draw or paint when the wind is howling, blowing gritty sand, or, in another season, sleeting rain.'⁵

Eventually everything is ready and the trucks are absent from the driveway, with one of their four sons left to mind the property until they return.

FIELD TRIPS

Journeying isn't just driving to find new places but revisiting places of memory and discovery. On every visit, it is different and the same. The plants change according

*to the season and the spot timeless. Our ashes and heap of wood there from last year. Undisturbed.*⁶

In the introduction to her 1992 monograph *Banksia menziesii* (Fremantle Press), Philippa writes, 'One of the joys of being a botanical artist is the necessity for field trips into the bush; I don't need much persuasion to travel to be among the subjects of my work.'⁷ Though usually an enjoyable experience, her field trips are not holidays. Nor are they simply travel. To do her work, Philippa goes bush to *live in* a space.

There are some exceptions. During the 1980s and early 1990s Philippa took Victorian botanical artist Celia Rosser on day and overnight trips to assist in the collection of Western Australian *Banksia* species for her books, *The Banksias*. While adventuring throughout the state – from Esperance up to North West Cape – Philippa and Celia developed an enduring friendship. From Celia, Philippa learned how to preserve specimens with refrigeration. Celia's method was to collect specific bits of the plants to store in sealed polystyrene tubs ready for the plane trip back to her studio, where she would promptly make colour notes and start work on the paintings. More recently, in 2003, Philippa was commissioned by *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew) to produce paintings of the rare *Leschenaultia acutiloba* and *Leschenaultia tubiflora*. She took an overnight trip



LEFT Philippa & friend Helen Jensen standing next to fence with poppet head behind, 1950s RIGHT Philippa, first year of high school, 1950s



Philippa Nikulinsky, *The Enterprise Mine*, late 1950s, ink, 38cm x 28cm

to Hopetoun, 600 kilometres to the southeast of Perth, to photograph and collect specimens to paint for the magazine's cover artwork.

Philippa's approach to her work is by total immersion in the Western Australian environment. She doesn't go bush to find and pick a specimen to draw, she goes to a place to *be there*. 'It takes time to get to know a place – a week sometimes to *feel* a place.'⁸ Even before she gets in her truck, she is connected with the landscape, religiously watching the weather, looking for cyclones, fires and tropical lows to help decide where she will visit next.

If Philippa wants to go north, the timing must be right to avoid the heat. Hot days, 'when you just have to strip off and sit pouring water over yourself, that's not a joy,' she admits. On a trip to Shoal Cape, located in Stokes National Park on the south coast in March 2015, Philippa was so hot she felt sick, lightheaded and headachy: 'I poured water over my head and clothes. The bees came and sat on me sucking. One went between my toes and I thought I was very brave for just sitting, watching and feeling.'⁹

While out bush, she makes regular satellite phone calls to her son Philip, who gives a detailed update of the weather conditions. Knowing where it has or will rain is essential for safe road travel. Philippa and Alex don't take unnecessary risks, often calling shire contacts to confirm that roads are open. What some may class as 'bad weather', however, isn't a deterrent. Living in the weather

That Girl from the Bush

8 Interview with P. Nikulinsky, 18 November 2018.

9 P. Nikulinsky, *Field Diary*, March 2015.

10 Interview with P. Nikulinsky, 16 December 2018.

11 Interview with P. Nikulinsky, 18 November 2018.

12 P. Nikulinsky, *Banksia menziesii*.

13 Ibid.

14 P. Nikulinsky, unpublished personal memoir, 2018.

makes her more aware of how precious everything is: 'How plants adapt and "lean" to the wind and spread and fight for the sun and spread their roots wide to get any water. I'm living with them and so I can paint them as they grow.'¹⁰

Long-time friend and occasional travel companion, John Laurie, is always on standby in case of emergency. He monitors the progress of their trips and if required can initiate rescue procedures to notify emergency services. While out bush, Philippa and Alex contact him weekly to tell him where they are and where they are headed.

Philippa describes field trips as her soul food. 'Field work is important, it is the impetus for any creative stuff I do. Part of the creative process is looking, feeling, seeing.'¹¹ For *Banksia menziesii*, she made countless return trips – often solo – to an area north of Eneabba. In 22 individual paintings, Philippa illustrates the complex life cycle of the species. Each painting is accompanied by a short piece of prose detailing her interaction with the observed transformations of the plant whereby, 'each step fulfils its part equally in the whole'.¹² Philippa speaks not to the species, but to her chosen plant. She asks questions of it, describes its changes and comments on how it performs as part of the surrounding ecosystem. In the book, Philippa notes she and visitors to her studio at the time shared a sense of discovery when viewing the *Banksia* series – 'each found some individual understanding of the experience.'¹³ Originally, she planned to title the book *Zen and the Art*

of the Banksia indeed the Zen character of the book was recognised in Japan.

Philippa's love of discovery and of the arid lands of Western Australia was cultivated during her early days growing up in Fimiston, the mining centre southeast of Kalgoorlie. Her father Gregory worked first as a sampler on the Perseverance Mine then trained as an engineer. His job as underground manager came with a house on the Enterprise lease. Philippa describes it as a very desolate place to live, surrounded by slime dumps and slag heaps; a place of noise and dust, the latter being the bane of her mother Josephine's life, with dust storms inevitably occurring on washing day. The poppet head was right outside Philippa's window and the noise of the mine – the winder bell, ore tipping into the bin and trucks driving past – was constant.

From around age 10, every week Philippa would enter the art competitions in the local newspaper and a collection of these works was once exhibited in the newspaper office window. She always did lots of drawing at home. At school art supplies were limited, with one sheet of paper, an HB pencil, basic watercolours which she and her classmates would take out of the cupboard and return after each session. After third year she had a school holiday job over in the mine office drawing underground maps and charts.¹⁴ In her spare time, she would ride her bike to explore the bush. During the wildflower