

Digs under nature's surface

Exhibition explores the dark forces besetting the natural world and our part in it, writes **Jessie Stoelwinder**

As we destroy nature, we are inevitably destroying ourselves in the process.

This is the message Eva Fernandez is hoping people will take away when they view the Art Gallery of WA's milestone collaboration with the Janet Holmes a Court Collection.

The Botanical: Beauty and Peril explores not only the exquisite beauty of the natural world but also the dark forces that threaten it.

From indigenous artwork to historical pieces, fire photography and three-dimensional installations, the major exhibition is a call to action to revere and protect our WA ecosystems before it's too late.

Local artist Fernandez features heavily in the showcase.

Her photographic series Flora Obscura explores past

and present vegetation at the Midland Railway Workshops; a commentary on how industry has impacted the natural environment.

She has also created an installation at the entrance to the exhibition featuring symbolically laden pieces of Victorian furniture in various states of deconstruction with native flora bursting from them.

While strikingly different, both series share an overarching concept, Fernandez explains.

"My work as a whole is concerned with the negotiation and exploration of the space I exist in," she says.

"That is particularly in context with the complex history and cultural legacy of colonialism."

While imagery of flowers often only shows the aesthetic side of nature, a big portion of The Botanical paints some shocking scenes.

Fernandez says it is vitally



Eva Fernandez with one of her installations for Botanical: Beauty and Peril at the Art Gallery of WA, which is a collaboration with the Janet Holmes a Court Collection. Picture: Steve Ferrier

important to represent both sides of the topic.

"It's really good to have a conversation that represents lots of different voices and aspects," she says. "Some people just celebrate the beauty of flowers, which is amazing, while others talk about the dark or menacing background to the botanic world."

"The exhibition as a whole looks at environmental issues and the destruction of land; what we do in order for progress, and the consequences of that."

Fernandez hopes people will walk away with lingering thoughts about what they can do to help the environment.

"My work celebrates the beauty of nature but, at the same time, there is a very strong message behind it," she says.

"We are exploiting nature



Jill Churnside, Country in bloom, 2017, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Picture: State Art Collection, Art Gallery of WA. Gift of Rio Tinto, 2017

and destroying it. We bulldoze land, uproot forests, destroy delicate wetlands and disrespect indigenous sites for things like coal mining.

"We are inevitably destroying ourselves in this process."

"Let's appreciate the beauty

but let's take action towards environmental issues.

"Art is a powerful medium to communicate these messages."

The Botanical: Beauty and Peril opens today and runs to November 4.



Brian Robinson's ... and meanwhile back on earth the blooms continue to flourish, 2013, wood, plastic, steel, synthetic polymer paint, feathers, plant fibre and shell. Picture: State Art Collection, Art Gallery of WA. Purchased through The Leah Jane Cohen Bequest