

# Explore

autumn 2011

nature culture discover



## Birds of paradise stories from PNG

### Artist

Silke Raetze

### On the agenda

saving the bush-stone curlew

### Science bytes

meet the scientists





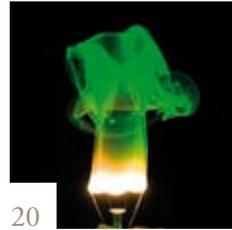
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Issue 1  
March to  
May 2011

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front cover: Wilson's Bird of Paradise, *Cicinnurus respublica*. Study from Museum specimen by Silke Raetze. Pencil, ink and watercolour. Image courtesy of the artist and Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay.

# ART MEETS SCIENCE



right: Silke Raetze.  
Photo Stuart Humphreys.

left: Black Sicklebill,  
*Epimachus fastuosus*.  
Study from Museum  
specimen by Silke Raetze.  
Pencil, ink and watercolour.  
Image courtesy of the  
artist and Michael Reid  
at Elizabeth Bay.



What attracted Sydney artist Silke Raetze to work behind the scenes at the Australian Museum? She spoke with Brendan Atkins about her ideas and work.

Sitting at a white bench in the Museum's ornithology laboratory, surrounded by plastic trays and specimens, artist Silke Raetze could be mistaken for a scientist.

And her accurate, colourful renderings of bird specimens – beautiful artworks in themselves – could pass for scientific works (think the Scott sisters and Sarah Stone). But such drawings are just the starting point for Silke's art projects.

'I like to combine separate ideas to create a surreal impact, a sense of unreality – but you really need an element of realism to create surrealism', she said.

## RESIDENCY

Silke has recently completed three months as artist-in-residence studying the Museum's collection of bird of paradise skins.

## Did you know that Charles Darwin studied [Birds of Paradise] for his theories of sexual selection?

‘I approached the Museum to see if I could make drawings from the specimens in the collection. At first I looked at stuffed and mounted specimens but they seemed so artificial and somehow less dignified in their dead state. It was only when I saw the trays of study skins behind the scenes that I felt a better sense of connection to the birds and a more authentic Museum experience.’

### DISCIPLINE

Trained at the National Art School in Sydney, Silke makes disciplined, detailed drawings to get to know her subject. ‘The National Art School teaches the value of drawing from day one, over and over – life classes, objects, studies – drawing and more drawing ...’

Her drawings – in pencil, ink and watercolour – seem to breathe new life into these empty skins, complete with their collection tags.

‘The tags are important to scientists, of course, because they identify the specimen, who collected it, when and where. And I find them fascinating too, often with their impeccable penmanship from a bygone era.’

‘One of my favourites is this impressive specimen, the Black Sicklebill [opposite], collected in New Guinea in 1945 by a Captain Neptune Blood.’

‘Another is Princess Stephanie’s *Astrapia*, named for Princess Stephanie of Belgium. She married Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria in 1881 and a tragic story evolved when a few years later her husband was found dead in a suicide pact with his mistress, who was herself barely 17 years of age.’

‘There must be hundreds of other fascinating stories you could unravel from the collection.’

### WINGS AND FEATHERS

So why draw bird skins at the Australian Museum, rather than say live birds at the zoo?

‘Of course a lifeless bird is easier to draw than a live one – I can take my time to study the structure and intricacies rather than just working with glimpses.’

‘I’ve been fascinated with wings for a long time and have often featured them in my work. To me they symbolise freedom and the ability to rise above situations.’

‘I first became interested in dragonfly and butterfly wings and how these creatures undergo a metamorphosis towards taking flight.’

But it was a painting workshop held in Peppimenarti, an Aboriginal community 250 kilometres southwest of Darwin in 2009, that led Silke to the Museum.

‘It was a wonderful experience to work alongside Aboriginal artists like Regina Wilson and Patsy Marfura in this isolated place, where creativity is an everyday communal occupation, a part of daily life.’

‘Walking around in the bush one day, I found hundreds of bird feathers in an area where feeding and nesting had taken place. I became totally engaged with their colour, form and structure.’

‘After returning from the Northern Territory, I wanted to develop this interest – and here I am.’

### EVOLUTION

Silke’s drawings are part of her evolutionary approach to art. ‘These birds are quite special. I find it incredible that the plumage of the males, their calls and choreographed dances have little function other than courtship.’

‘Did you know that Charles Darwin studied them for his theories of sexual selection? The birds have evolved uniquely in their isolated rainforest habitats, and that in itself is a thought-provoking concept that appeals to me – individualism through isolation.’

The personal perspectives in Silke’s artworks are left open to the viewer’s interpretation, yet are very much aligned with the Museum’s purpose of inspiring the exploration of nature and culture.

‘I aim to create this work so that I may in some small measure express the exceptional beauty of these creatures. But the process has been humbling, because anything I make will always pale in comparison to nature itself.’

‘This kind of nature, especially, I would never have had the opportunity to experience without the wonderful resource that is the Museum.’

### Brendan Atkins

➔ Visitors can see Silke’s drawings and a selection of finished artworks in the *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise* exhibition, opening 9 April.

Silke Raetze is represented by Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay.