



Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise

Artist Silke Raetze discusses her residency with the Australian Museum sculpting exotic birds of the Papua New Guinea rainforest.
By Lisa Omagari

Silke, how did you find your time at the museum? The experience was amazing. The museum is such a terrific resource and place of wonder. You can find yourself quite lost amongst the collections. I focused specifically on the Birds of Paradise and this alone was such a rich area that I felt very lucky to have seen these creatures up close.

What struck you about these birds in particular? The Birds of Paradise are undeniably striking the moment you see them but it's only the male birds that are this way. Because these birds have evolved over time by means of competition, their extraordinary plumes have little function other than courtship. The more extravagant and exotic, the better luck they have with the ladies.

What was your artistic process? I made detailed drawings at the museum to try to really get to know the subject: the way the feathers interlocked, the shifting colours in different light. From these drawings I returned to the studio and created sculpted paper works, made through a process of drawing with ink, paint, written word on fine Japanese papers, and then finally stitched with cotton and metallic threads. They were then pinned, museum-style in box frames. I've also had some of my drawings scaled up and printed onto silk fabric, choosing this material for its sheer, fragile quality and sense of movement hanging from wall or ceiling.

So what will we see in the exhibition? It includes specimens, footage of the birds' choreographed mating dances, the millinery trade based on the plumage, the mythology of the birds and a display of the work that I produced as a result of my residency at the museum. I'm trying to convey a sense of the sheer beauty of these creatures, the exquisite, iridescent colours of their plumes, the extraordinary style of their feathers – and yet also their fragility. I feel very fortunate to have had my awareness and understanding heightened through my time at the museum.

Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise Australian Museum, 6 College St, Sydney 2000. (australian.museum.net.au). Until 7 Aug. See Museums