

hot right now style



Silke Raetze

In fine feather

This artist takes inspiration from the brilliantly coloured plumage of a lairy boys' club, writes Steve Dow.

It's a world in which the boys are pretty but competitive and the girls are plain yet picky. In the Papua New Guinea rainforest, the male superb bird-of-paradise, *Lophorina superba*, dazzles the curious ladies by springing up his black feather cape and blue-green breast shield and snapping his tail feathers.

Meanwhile, the male king bird-of-paradise, *Cicinnurus regius* – a crimson fellow with blue claws and two tightly coiled tail wires tipped with emerald green feathers – fluffs his white chest until he looks like a cotton ball. That'll woo his plain brown female counterpart, surely?

The German-born, Cronulla-raised and Woollahra-based artist, Silke Raetze, whose inked and painted paper sculptures are inspired by these male feathered beauties, knows a thing or two about courtship. Her last exhibition was a series of cross-stitch panels that told her personal tale of the trials of online dating.

Fortunately, she eventually met the right man online and married him 18 months ago. Stepping away from the cyber world, the blonde, bespectacled National Art School graduate turned her sights to her lifelong love of natural history and nature – though, once again, she found herself engrossed in sexual selection.

Spending many afternoons in the Australian Museum, studying and drawing dragonflies and butterflies, she had pestered the staff to allow her access to the museum's basement, where the cold and dark but very ordered archives of specimens are kept.

Thus began a three-month residency, drawing at a special desk or even out

in the gallery among visitors, prompting curators to invite her to contribute works to a new exhibition, *Rituals and Seduction: Birds of Paradise*, which runs from April 9 to August 7.

The result is a series of paper sculptures and drawings on paper, some of which have been scaled up and printed on silk, all available for sale through the Michael Reid gallery at Elizabeth Bay.

Raetze says she "could have spent years at the museum, just getting lost amongst it". She was offered different specimens mounted for lifelike display but preferred to work with draws full of birds as inert as the day they died.

Take, for instance, the black sicklebill, *Epimachus fastuosus*, a very long bird-of-paradise, the male's black plumage complemented by iridescent green, blue and purple feathers, which is currently listed as a vulnerable species due to loss of the mid-mountain forests and whose form is captured among Raetze's silks.

"They're all threatened to a point because of the destruction of their natural habitat," Raetze says. "They can only really exist in quite specific areas."

In the past, of course, there was a demand from a certain type of society lady who wanted the feathers, the more exotic the better, perhaps from a red bird-of-paradise, *Paradisaea rubra*. Madame, however, probably never gave much thought to how the feather in her cap made for a trade in killing pretty boy birds.

"The males became this way because the females are so choosy," Raetze says. "An extraordinary evolution has occurred. Even Charles Darwin looked at them and he coined the term 'sexual selection' because their [vibrant] feathers and plumes serve no function other than courtship and to impress the ladies."

See australianmuseum.net.au, michaelreid.com.au.



Touch of paradise ... (left) Silke Raetze with works in her studio; (above and below) Raetze's avian-inspired artworks. Photos: Tamara Dean

webwatch



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