



Clockwise from left: *Bird of Paradise* (black sickle bill) (2011); artist Silke Raetz and her earlier collection *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise; Hoodwinked* (roses) (2011).



ART

NATURAL ORDER

*A local artist explores our obsession with youth, beauty and the inevitability of change.*

Pinned to an inspiration board in artist Silke Raetz's studio, under a Venetian mask and beneath a study of blooms, is a postcard of *Winged Victory*. "I don't know if there's anything more beautiful than that image," she says, unpinning it to admire the exquisitely sculptured draping on the second century BC marble sculpture. "She doesn't need a head: she's perfect."

It was her fascination with ancient Greek and Roman sculpture that inspired the Sydney-based artist's latest body of work, *Elegant Surrender*. "They were a bit damaged and neglected over time, like the *Venus de Milo* without an arm, and they still seem so poised and beautiful ... I like that idea that actually those imperfections are what make something beautiful."

The notion of beauty informs most of Raetz's work. "I'm intrigued by it, what it is that we think of as beautiful and what we strive for, even if it's verging on the absurd." Her 2009 collection *Tender Trap* featured a limbless, sometimes headless, female figure, while this body of work zooms in on headless torsos filled with flowers and feathers and bodyless heads reappropriated as vases. For

all their delicately rendered beauty, they are startling works. "Probably about a year ago, I went: 'I think I might be a surrealist,'" she laughs. "I like putting things together that might make you rethink something or that might go towards expressing something that's a bit more truthful. If I am trying to deliver it in a realistic way, then it forces [the viewer] to think: 'What's going on here?'"

The flowers and feathers add to the metaphor of consumable beauty. "I'm also interested in the natural world and the natural order of things, that idea that everything decays and change is inevitable. That makes sense to me and we seem to fight against that a lot of the time, especially women, and that doesn't make sense to me because it's going against what is the natural order of things. We're always fighting against everything that is natural in that regard. It's understandable, we've always pursued the fountain of youth, but I don't know if there's happiness there."

Raetz says her exploration of these themes come from the reality of being a modern woman. "I feel like I'm in a constant state of questioning. I probably question too much, because it's the nature of what I do, and sometimes it worries me that other people don't question at all. They just accept and take on board these things that they've been prescribed to do, what they should do [and] how they should look." She adds: "I think maybe that's what artists do, they are trying to make sense of the world."

The petite, pretty Raetz doesn't shy away from what are obviously very personal reflections. "I believe work should be personal," she says, softly but firmly. "What



*Elegant Surrender* (golden wattle) (2011).

I have to draw on is my personal experience, and if I can get as close to something that is honest and truthful in my experience, then I feel like it's solid." AS

*Elegant Surrender* is on display at Sydney's Michael Reid Gallery from August 3, 2011.