

2020 ADELAIDE BIENNIAL OF AUSTRALIAN ART

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MONSTER THEATRES

Julia Robinson Interpretive Resource

Myths| Morphs

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Julia Robinson

Julia Robinson (b. 1981) is based in Adelaide, the city in which she was born and raised. Her works of art explore universal themes of growth and decay but through the particular lens of European folklore. Robinson is fascinated by curious social behaviours surrounding morality and mortality, such as superstition, ceremonial rituals and the customs of cautionary tales.

Robinson's sculptures and installations reflect these interests in a material sense too. She frequently borrows from European historical costuming and Elizabethan-era sewing and pattern-making techniques to create her sculptures. The results are highly detailed, fastidious and labour-intensive installations that combine elements from ceremonial costumes with references to animals and plants or abstracted forms that allude to the human body.

Having found inspiration in these careful processes of adornment, Robinson doubles down on the idea of curiosity. First, we are drawn to the details of her work – its intricate textures and surfaces. We are curious to understand *how* her work has been made. Then, we are struck by its uncanny subject. Past works of Robinson's have drawn upon Ukrainian rituals of spiritual renewal, Scandinavian ceremonies celebrating the abundance of nature or noisy Cornish processions where horns and trumpets are used to welcome in the month of May. The combination of surface and subject in her artworks create a fertile mix of the old and the new, the strange and the familiar, the real and the imagined.

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Julia Robinson with her work *Beatrice*, 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Monster Theatres, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; photo: Saul Steed.

Beatrice (2020)

Robinson's installation *Beatrice* defies categorisation. Is it a plant, an animal or a fantastical beast?

The inspiration for *Beatrice* combines two allegorical figures. The first is the mythic Greek sea monster Scylla. Having once been a beautiful sea nymph, Scylla was transformed into a treacherous sea monster by bathing in poisoned waters. With writhing tentacles, a female torso and a ring of barking dogs at her waist, Scylla is described as a chimera – a creature combining two or more parts of an animal. The second figure is the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Rappaccini's Daughter*, written in 1844. Rappaccini, the father of a girl named Beatrice, was a scientist whose botanical experiments were barbaric and seen to contradict the natural order of God. This meant Rappaccini had tampered with nature. He had created a garden full of deadly plants. Beatrice grew up tending the poisonous jewel-like purple flowers of her father's garden, making her resistant yet toxic to others. For Robinson, the figures of Scylla and Hawthorne's Beatrice are twinned; both women are the making of a malicious creator and both are the embodiment of death.

Robinson's *Beatrice* is a chimera of its own. The writhing tentacles of Scylla meet the poisonous purple plants of Rappaccini's garden. Set against the strict plant taxonomies of the Museum of Economic Botany in the Adelaide Botanic Garden, Robinson's chimera evades classification. And in crafting the monstrous mess of plant-like limbs, Robinson becomes a Rappaccini of sorts. She is the creator of a new species, splicing together a hybrid creature that defies the rules of nature.



detail: Julia Robinson, Australia, 1981, *Beatrice*, 2019–20, Adelaide, silk, thread, felt, steel, brass, gold-plated copper, foam, cardboard, pins, fixings, dimensions variable; © Julia Robinson/Hugo Michell Gallery.

Early Years and Primary

Myths and Morphs

Responding

Look closely at *Beatrice*. What do the forms, colours, and textures of the sculpture remind you of? As a class make a list of all these things. Are there common observations? Which parts most remind you of an animal, plant or vegetable?

If *Beatrice* was alive, how might you think it would move? Would *Beatrice* be friendly or do you think this hybrid would be one to avoid?

Superstitions often prevent good or bad actions, for example breaking a mirror may bring you seven years bad luck. Research other superstitions designed to bring good or back luck. Invent your own unique superstition.



detail: Julia Robinson, Australia, 1981, *Beatrice*, 2019–20, Adelaide, silk, thread, felt, steel, brass, gold-plated copper, foam, cardboard, pins, fixings, dimensions variable; © Julia Robinson/Hugo Michell Gallery.

Early Years and Primary

Myths and Morphs

Making

Robinson is a creator of new species, splicing together a hybrid creature. *Beatrice* is a chimera, an organism that is made of cells from two or more organisms. Draw your own chimera by joining two organisms together. You might combine a plant and an animal or join two different animals or two different plants together. Create a 3D version of your chimera using textiles, clay or plasticine. What is the name of your new hybrid?

Make a ceremonial costume that celebrates your natural environment.

Robinson draws inspiration from belief systems including myths, fairy tales and European folklore. Select your favourite fairy tale and create a work of art inspired by the moral in the story.



detail: Julia Robinson, Australia, 1981, *Beatrice*, 2019–20, Adelaide, silk, thread, felt, steel, brass, gold-plated copper, foam, cardboard, pins, fixings, dimensions variable; © Julia Robinson/Hugo Michell Gallery.

Secondary

Myths and Morphs

Responding

What does mutation and hybridisation mean? Are these good or bad?

Investigate grafting techniques used in nature. What are the benefits of tampering with nature in this way?

Create a written response to *Beatrice*. You may like to write from the perspective of the sculpture or imagine *Beatrice* has come alive and is in search of an environment to live. What are its predators? What does it eat, how does it move and what sounds does it make?

detail: Julia Robinson, Australia, 1981, *Beatrice*, 2019–20, Adelaide, silk, thread, felt, steel, brass, gold-plated copper, foam, cardboard, pins, fixings, dimensions variable; © Julia Robinson/Hugo Michell Gallery.



Secondary

Myths and Morphs

Making

Grafting is a horticultural technique where tissues of plants are joined so they can continue to grow together. *Beatrice* features lots of grafting cuts in the “stems” of the tentacles, leaving open the possibility of the installation to be further hybridised. Complete some observational drawings of plant species in the Botanic Garden or in a garden of your choice. Draw additional stems or tentacles that could be added to Robinson’s sculpture.

Robinson is inspired by Elizabethan-era sewing and pattern-making techniques to create her sculptures. Investigate Elizabethan-era garments and other historical textile techniques. You might like to begin by observing works on display in the Gallery, take note of the attire worn by people in historical paintings. Sketch these details and use them as a starting point for creating your own work of art.

Beatrice represents the two allegorical figures, the Greek sea monster Scylla and the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Rappaccini’s Daughter*. Robinson has included symbols such as the purple fabric to represent the poisonous purple flowers in the narrative. Select an allegorical figure (a character who represents an important moral or ideal). Create a sculpture which illustrates the key elements of this figure’s story, rather than a literal representation.



detail: Julia Robinson, Australia, 1981, *Beatrice*, 2019–20, Adelaide, silk, thread, felt, steel, brass, gold-plated copper, foam, cardboard, pins, fixings, dimensions variable; © Julia Robinson/Hugo Michell Gallery.

Julia Robinson

Resources

Websites

“Julia Robinson”, Audio track 11, Audio Guide for The National 2019, *Museum of Contemporary Art*, 29 March – 23 June 2019, <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/826-the-national-2019/>

Julia Robinson, artist website, <https://julia-robinson.net/>

“Julia Robinson”, Hugo Michell Gallery, last update 5 April 2019, <https://www.hugomichellgallery.com/portfolio/julia-robinson/>

“WE: Pierre Mukeba, Julia Robinson, Darren Siwes, James Taylor”, *Greenaway Art Gallery Projects*, South Australian Living Artists Festival, 25 July – 26 August 2018, <http://gagprojects.com/index.php/exhibitions/we/>

Videos

“Lecturer Profile: Julia Robinson”, *Adelaide Central School of Art*, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/50753234>

Articles and Books

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This resource has been written and developed by Belinda Howden, Dr. Lisa Slade, Assistant Director, Artistic Programs and Kylie Neagle, Education Officer.

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