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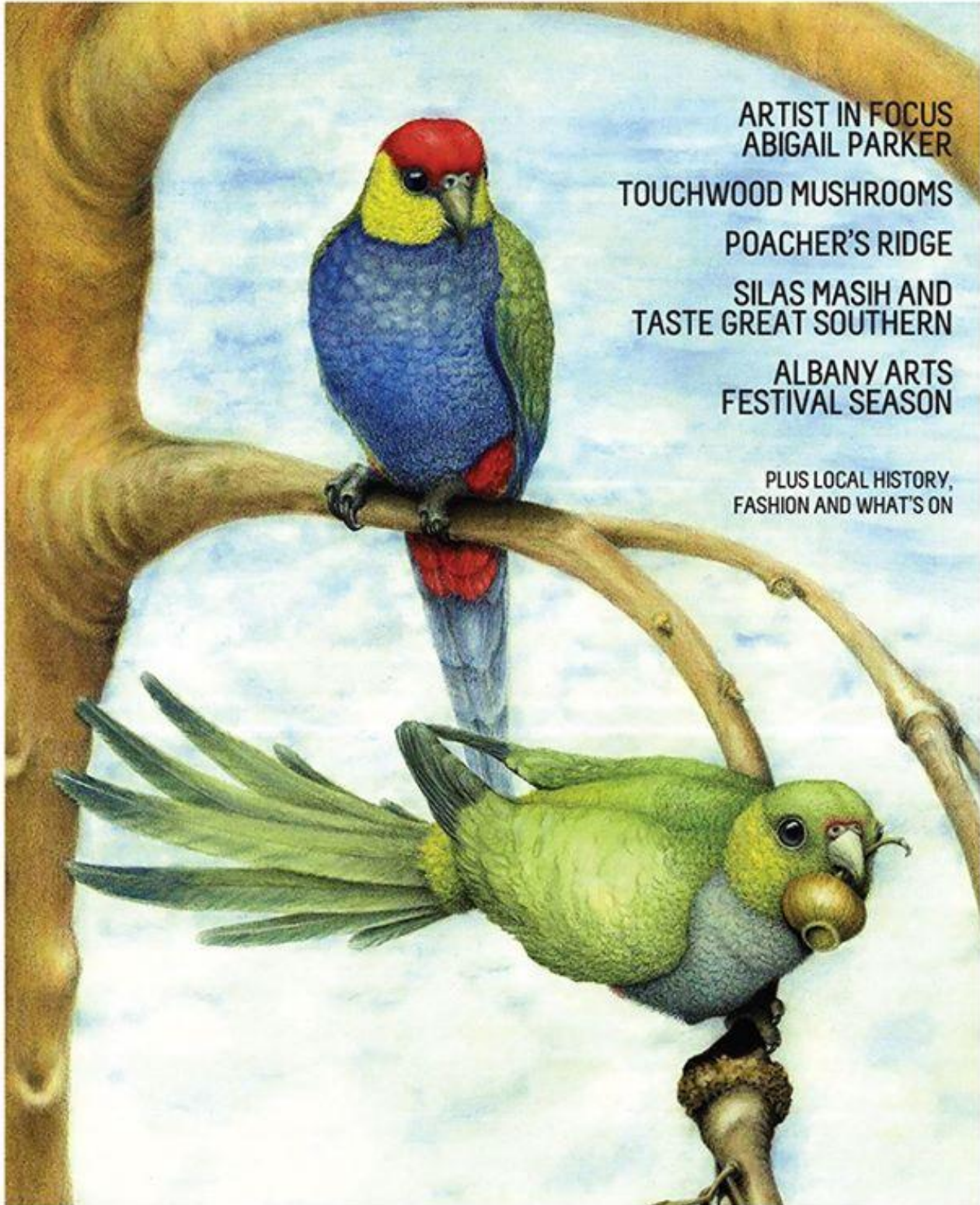
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Aurora

Issue 29

GREAT SOUTHERN Lifestyle, People, Happenings

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ARTIST IN FOCUS
ABIGAIL PARKER

TOUCHWOOD MUSHROOMS

POACHER'S RIDGE

SILAS MASIH AND
TASTE GREAT SOUTHERN

ALBANY ARTS
FESTIVAL SEASON

PLUS LOCAL HISTORY,
FASHION AND WHAT'S ON

THE FAMILY OF LIVING THINGS

The Art of Abigail Parker

STORY GILES WATSON | PHOTO LATA WRIGHT

Ferns arch the way to Abigail Parker's studio, dappling its windows with their shade. Redcap Parrots and Rosellas cluster around the feeders, and as I walk inside with her, a magpie is carolling, pausing only to drink at the birdbath. A lizard lives under the doorstep. It is like walking into a sanctuary; the walls of her studio hung with paintings and drawings of her extended family of living things. Their eyes are the first thing I notice: the gleams in the corneas of birds which give me the feeling they may turn to preen and shuffle their plumage any moment. From every corner, they gaze at me unafraid, like the living, trusting birds in Abigail's garden.

Facing me are three nocturnes, painted in oils. Two of them show Tawny Frogmouths, parents and a fledgling, staring wide-eyed straight at me, the way frogmouths do when they are startled out of their camouflage, yellow irises flashing severely above pursed and downturned bills. There is often something comical about artists' portrayals of frogmouths, but these are more mythic, radiating a wild intelligence. Abigail wants us to imagine they are saying, "Hey, why aren't you paying attention to me? Why aren't you helping me? Why are you killing me?" She points to the mother frogmouth. "She's teaching the baby to be grumpy too." Between them, there is a Brush-Tailed Phascogale, painted in the same style, but its enormous eyes bulge with something more fearful. Its back is turned, and its feathery tail curls into the foreground. If I blink, it may skitter into darkness.

Opposite, the mood is different: watercolours on pencil, little stories of moments in the lives of birds. She starts "by doing a rough line drawing of the shapes" refining this into a

full tonal underdrawing. The graphite drawing is then worked back into with watercolour paints, and finished with watercolour pencils "filling in the minute details." One completed work, called 'She Loves Me', shows three Western Whistlers encircled by the trunk and boughs of a Eucalyptus tree. The female perches high on a twig, and beneath her, the male, his black mask, white bib, and open bill announcing his attraction. Another male has his back to us, watching enviously. What looks like a pair of Redcaps is actually 'Father and Son', the older bird resplendent in his full adult plumage, his feathers folded neatly, whilst his offspring cavorts, swooshing his tail, juggling a gumnut. A Scarlet Robin seems to lean out of his frame, eyeing me curiously. We find ourselves enthusing about the feet of birds: the way parrots have two toes forward and two backward, whereas most birds have three up front, and how barn owls' toes are reversible.

It is these minute details, I realise, which make Abigail's birds so compelling. She tells me that some of the birds and mammals are painted from her own natural observations, but others – the rarer creatures – are meticulously researched. She often compares multiple photographs, collating different details – a head from here, feet from there – into a working whole. The same is true of her exquisite studies of Australian orchids, fifteen of which are hanging in another corner – enamels, cowslips, donkeys – the detail is thrilling. Beside them hang a bevy of blue and red-winged wrens, which in this context also look like little animated flowerings – plucky little males in showy, belligerent poses, flamboyant as orchids.

Despite this technical skill, Abigail has not been painting all her life. She persevered

with Art at school in England despite the constant exhortations of her abstract expressionist teacher that she should “loosen up”, gained an A-grade at A-level, and then promptly became a primary and special education teacher, leaving her painting far behind. Eight years later, she was in Singapore, then Australia, running a farm with two hundred milking goats. Looking around me, it seems absurd that such latent skill should have been so long undervalued. Her advice to budding artists, borne out of this experience: “Have the courage to not let other people make you lose confidence. Find your own path and once you find something that fits you, don’t let yourself be intimidated into trying to be something that you’re not, because it won’t work anyway.” True in life as in art, I am thinking.

But there is much labour and dedication between the seemingly effortless perfection of her paintings. Above one of her working surfaces, there is a painted colour-wheel, and I am reminded of how Ferdinand Bauer, the botanical illustrator aboard Matthew Flinders’ Investigator, made reference to charts covered with thousands of numbered colours. Abigail explains that she studied colour theory – “Green-yellow, orange-yellow, what’s cool and what’s warm” – and now I can see that behind the lively freshness of her birds and orchids, there is also something like a science.

And then there is the love of nature, which always abides. “When I was growing up, Dad was a farm worker, and we didn’t have any money, but we always had nature. I’d go and play down the lane with the frogs and do tom-boy things, because in those days you could go and wander and come back at tea time. Everything was nature and gardening, but now it has found an arty outlet.”

RIGHT: *Rock-a-bye Tawny...* (Tawny Frogmouth – *Podargus Strigoides*).
Brush Off (Brush-tailed phascogale – *Phascogale wambenger*). *Eager*, (Red winged Fairy Wren – *Malurus elegans*). BELOW: Abigail Parker at work in her meticulous and beautiful studio.



FOCUS



The outlet flows around me even as we speak. There are three new half-finished paintings of rosellas, already bursting into life and colour, their decorative plumage carefully sketched in with acrylic paint – she tells me she will try charcoal next time – to be covered later with oils. She says she “struggled with the head” of one of them, and jokes that it has had “a lot of surgery”. It looks perfect to me, ready to flit out of the canvas. Abigail has an exhibition soon, and these fresh oils will be in it.

Then there are drawings: rough sketches for new works which will take her inspiration in a fresh and poignant direction. She has drawn a series of little cartoons of numbat mothers and their joeys, and behind them, the bushland is in flame – scenes of desperate nurture in the midst of destruction. Another set of sketches are divided into two halves, showing landscapes in their healthy and drought-stricken states. Our conversation drifts inexorably to the recent catastrophe in the Stirling Range – all those endemic species ravaged by a fire so scorching there is nothing even left to rescue – and my eyes wander back to the accusing gazes of the frogmouths. They seem to say, “You can no longer afford to neglect the family of living things.”

The last painting I notice shows a magnificent curve of wave breaking on an Albany beach, the water webbed with froth and sunlight in its upsurge, and crashing into foam at the apex. Beyond it, in calmer water, out towards the islands, a whale cavorts, flipper held skyward. The only vast seascape in the room, Abigail’s vision is encapsulated in it, just as it is in her painted stories of smaller, more intimate lives. Minute or gigantic, this is the family which sustains us – the wilderness and the beauty we can’t afford to lose.

Abigail Parker will be exhibiting her paintings and jewellery with fellow artist Susan Randall at Discovery Bay 12 Feb to 26th Feb, 2019.

www.gailsgallery.weebly.com

LEFT TO RIGHT:

Robin Redbreast, (Scarlet Robin – *Petroica boodang*).

She Loves Me, (Western Golden Whistlers – *Pachycephala occidentalis*).

Eastern Promise, (Eastern Queen of Sheba – *Thelymitra speciosa*).

Little Honey, (Bee Orchid – *Diuris laxiflora*).

BELOW. *The Wave*, (Humpback Whale playing off Middleton Beach).

