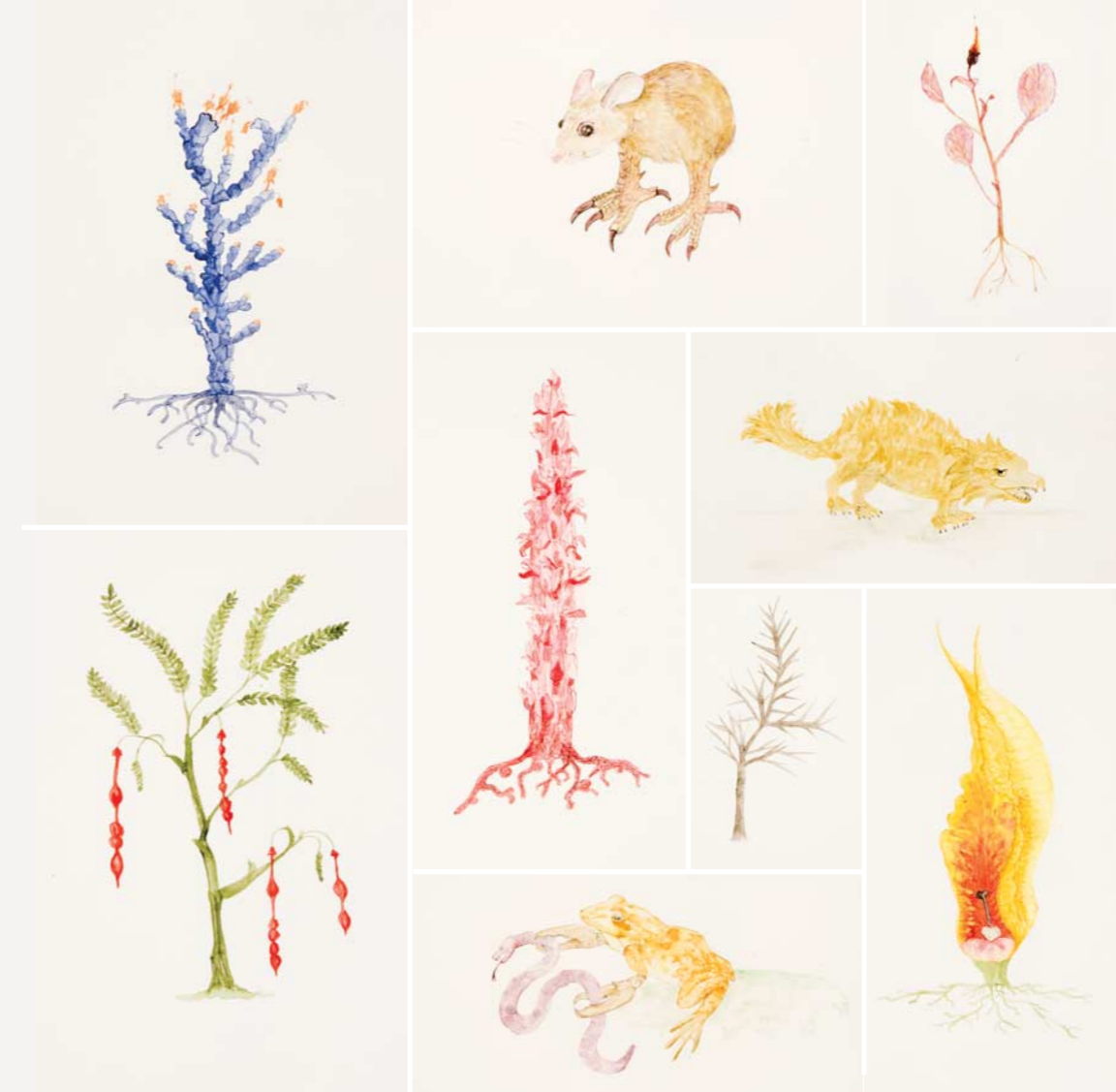




**stuffed (detail)** 2005  
silver-plated pewter  
30 x 15 x 9cm

cover images:  
**flora, fauna**, 2005  
watercolour on paper  
32 x 23cm



caroline rothwell

new worlds





**evolution I** 2005  
vinyl on Perspex  
122 x 122cm

There are remote regions on earth. There are many quarters of the globe the average human will never physically traverse. And there are areas which can safely be termed 'unspoilt'. But what there is not, is one inch of the earth's surface above sea level which can truly be described as undiscovered. It is this revelation that propels the practice of Caroline Rothwell who interrogates the human inclination to claim, conquer and consume. The dystopias she concocts within her sculptures, vinyl drawings and watercolours incorporate extinct species, fictional hybrids and weeds, reflecting on the artificial engineering of nature, the continuing legacy of colonisation and the recurring inclination of mankind to search, classify and inadvertently destroy.

Why does the notion of the frontier continue to fascinate us? Perhaps because there is no longer a palpable 'edge' to settled, colonised country. For modern, post-colonial generations, the discovery of new physical environments and ideological, utopic landscapes can no longer be relied upon to give meaning or purpose to our earthbound existence. The frontier, as such, has extended to other areas of achievement and conquest. New frontiers are now situated in the projections of technology, the dwarfing intangibility of outer space, the growing understanding of the inner space of the human body and the moral, ethical understanding of humankind. Distance now seems to engulf our relationship with nature, discovery, conflict and essentially 'the real'. Engaging with these entities becomes an increasingly abstract experience, as we forge our understandings from the constructed environments of documentaries, TV, print media, parks and zoos.

Rothwell's vinyl wall drawing, offers a strange, somewhat uninviting frontier, receding into infinity, devoid of all life except for a group of lonely Willow trees. The unforgiving rocky surfaces are rendered geometrically, as if by tectonic simulation, and the Willow refers to one of many colonial imports intended to recreate the romantic, pastoral landscape of England for new settlers, now wreaking havoc on the fragile ecosystems of Australia. The scale of this work makes it alarmingly plausible, this is a structure which could be entered, an environment which bears the hallmarks of 'nature' but one which has been rendered in glossy, commercial signwriter's vinyl. Material and process are inherent to Rothwell's practice. A slick, industrial, synthetic material, vinyl is usually cut by machine and used for conveying information. Conversely, these hand-cut vinyl drawings expose the irregularities of trial and error; scalpel nicks and wavering lines disclose the imperfections of human presence.

Rothwell's Perspex mounted vinyl drawings and watercolours begin a process of nature jamming. Gleaning imagery from diverse sources; botanical books on weeds, natural history museum archival displays, the National Geographic and 'first contact' diagrams of flora and fauna, Rothwell devises fantastical species and ambiguous narratives which mimic the naive exuberance of Disney, with a toxic edge. A mangrove-like tree is influenced by 'Lied Jungle Zoo', Omaha, a fibreglass forest featured in a nature magazine. A sensory void for the animals expected to inhabit it, its construction is essentially a conscience placebo for human beings. The Mangrove is topped with mismatched foliage, while a fairytale fatality stands in the undergrowth, half rat, half bird. The inhabitants of these verdant scenes seem contented enough, but on second look, their Grimm's Fairytale, post chemical fall-out eccentricities become apparent. The humble lizard sports a pair of dragon wings, the bird of paradise has inadvertently propagated with a vulture and a Hawk Moth has symbiotically joined the Australian Redback in a deathly embrace. In Rothwell's wonderland, all the mice wear a human ear.

These are allegorical, playful accounts, illuminating the shadowy tendencies of science and conquest through the language and materials of the urban habitat. In some ways, Rothwell is not only presenting a critique of our ecological misdemeanours, she has created an arena for our interpretation; what might we create if there were no rules?

In Rothwell's cast sculptures and quasi-botanical watercolours, she continues her quiet critique of mankind's 'naturalistic' impositions. Throughout history, power has remained a force situated and exercised at the level of life. This force emerges unexpectedly in the museological context, as institutions worldwide present expansive natural histories, a frozen world-view for the betterment of everyone. Victorian museums became vehicles with which to inscribe doctrines of power, knowledge and political presence throughout society, promoting an expansive West, imperial rulers of the material and natural worlds. This inflated sense of purpose impelled the need to capture, classify and display, transforming the problem of order into one of culture. The New Zealand Huia Bird for example, was so heavily sought after by museums all over the world, it was essentially commissioned to death, declared extinct in the 1920s. While the Moa bird, the Tasmanian Tiger and the Desert Bandicoot are among the plethora of species which have not survived over-hunting, over-preservation or impostors from alien ecologies.

Rothwell creates soft fabric casts which are filled with molten pewter and then ripped off to reveal the creatures destined only to gather dust within museum exhibits, alongside the futuristic visions of Rothwell's imagined sub-species. Rothwell's homage to the Tasmanian Tiger stands as an emblem of neglect and misdemeanour, the weave, creases and folds of the fabric cast, creating an absurd toy-like presence, a sad facsimile of the king of the Australian Bush. It's memory relegated to beer bottles and tourist toy wracks. Although these miniature, silver-plated dioramas and watercolours adopt the scale and materials of the cabinets and tomes of the Victorian era, Rothwell's process and approach to the 'real' subvert her points of departure, and her subjects are imbued with an uncanny contemporaneity.

Rothwell's brand of alchemy toys with our existential quests and trophies of order. Ecology becomes a site rife with icons of nationality, progress and control, as her melancholy amulets and twisted Arcadias undermine our perceived dominance over nature. In this exhibition, Rothwell redefines the myth of the wilderness for the twenty-first century. These are toxic but alluring heterotopias, presenting a fluid natural order, poised delicately between past and potential.

**Clare Lewis** 2005



**evolution II** 2005  
vinyl on Perspex  
122 x 122cm