

Nervous System

15 November - 18 December 2024
114 Commonwealth Street, Sydney

Caroline Rothwell's 'Nervous System' is inspired by the complex and interconnected circulatory systems that underpin biodiversity, plant architecture, weather cycles and human infrastructures. Using her unique processes, these new works evoke a strange chemistry through slumping and stitched forms in metallic and carbon finishes. Incorporating cast bronze sculptures, assemblages, animation and relief paintings, Nervous System reveals the delicate balance of ecosystems.

Through references to water flow, clouds, pipes and data, Rothwell urges us to consider the connections between the colossal systems that regulate our Earth and the intricate structures and webs that connect all living beings, challenging our human centred ways.

EXHIBITION TEXT



Dystopian Ornamentation

Rothwell is an artisan, a sculptor and a polymorph, harnessing her unique processes of making through slumping and stitched forms, painstakingly built-up relief surfaces and the subtle tracing of ornamentation across media and space. Like an old master re-imagined, Rothwell paints truths for us in space with allegory and alchemy, framed through the lens of dystopian ornamentation.

When I spoke with Rothwell in her Rockdale studio, she had a seemingly empty phial stoppered on a shelf behind her. When I enquired about the curious vessel, she stated that it was filled with 'Paris air' (collected when she was in the city earlier this year). I delighted in this playful and somehow poignant trinket of her time spent in a great cultural centre. Like that vessel, there is an alchemy at play in the vessels of *Nervous System*, with every work aesthetically and physically imbued with both overt and hidden meanings.

Rothwell's *Nervous System* is a 'Wunderkammer' or cabinet of curiosities. The collection evades categorical boundaries; it is yet to be defined. The further one looks, each work unfurls with innumerable references to interconnected circulatory systems that underpin biodiversity, plant architecture, atmospheric cycles and human infrastructures. Yet, what is clearly defined is a spirit of curiosity - *Nervous System* is an invitation to consider, whilst feeling simultaneously provoked and delighted.

The idea of the cabinet of curiosities presents a lens through which to consider the practice of ornamentation, as something which embellishes yet ultimately contains and reveals. A feature of this exhibition, and Rothwell's practice at large, is the real beauty in the juxtaposition between detailed perfection and unabashed rawness. She holds an enduring intuition to know when to stop; to leave something confidently unfinished.

Adam and Eve (after Dürer), 2024, exemplifies this signature approach. Exuding a lustre evocative of intricately carved jade stone, this verdant beauty arrests your eye as colour and pattern dance across its ornamented surfaces. Beneath this chroma crush is a painterly confidence that reveals the artist's hand without hiding the imperfections of the process. *Nervous System* continues to reveal its complexity through material mixology. Rothwell layers meaning and mystery once again. Highlights of her media include particles of Margate hagstone, bushfire

carbon, sulphur from Whakaari / White Island, Aotearoa / New Zealand, Bunya leaf, copper metal leaf from Paris, cast bronze and a vacated bird's nest. Combining these disparate materials, Rothwell constructs an ephemeral cumulus of material meaning, arresting the intrinsic place and time of each specimen.

Within the exhibition itself, groups of works demonstrate Rothwell's ability to oscillate between varying polarities. For example, the sister works *Thyrus (alternate)* and *Thyrus (whorl)*, 2024, are imbued with tension; at once comical, painful, man-made, natural and unsettlingly beautiful. Each feature a found crutch, one propped gingerly against a wall, the other suspended tenuously from the ceiling. Both are adorned with sculptural plant growth, emerging like a magical staff, further situating the work beyond classification, into the artist's complex construct. In *Nervous System*, we see Rothwell's deft ability to balance between what is defined and undefined, material and immaterial.

Nervous System embodies the liminality of meaning, veiled as it were, with metaphors and mysteries to be revealed. Rothwell ceaselessly subverts literal meaning, alluring us through visceral evocations to dissolve into her nervous system. Guided by feeling as logic, and process as creation, *Nervous System* is itself an intricate web of woven references, with pervasive themes at its core. A plethora of dystopian ornamentation where everything sits in the balance, the exhibition is an unnerving premonition at the nexus of awakening.

By Natasha Smith

About the artist

Caroline Rothwell (b. 1967, UK/Australia) is a multidisciplinary artist with a research driven practice looking to the intersection of art, science and nature. She works across two and three dimensional media in the expanded disciplines of sculpture and installation and has an exhibiting history across national and international museums, biennales and art fairs. Rothwell looks to archive, history, data and site to consider multi-species interconnection, environmental care, technology and the future.

Rothwell has a BA from University of the Arts London, UK and MFA in sculpture from Hunter College, City University of New York, USA and University of Auckland, New Zealand. She currently lives in Sydney, Australia.

Rothwell's work has been exhibited in Ross & Rothwell: in the same boat (2024), Ngununggula Regional Gallery: *The National 2021: New Australian Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia; *Know My Name: Australia Women Artists 1900 to Now*, National Gallery of Australia (2021); *Antipodes: Cut Apart*, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University (2016); *Fragil*, Cuena Biennale, Ecuador (2016); *Dark Heart*, 2014 Biennial of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia. Rothwell was awarded the Loti Smorgon Sculpture Terrace commission at Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in 2016 and Economist Plaza, London commission for Contemporary Art Society, London in 2009. In 2020, she collaborated with Google Creative Lab to create Infinite Herbarium, a participatory ML Web App and multi channel video series which has shown at Sydney Botanical Gardens, MCA and at Artificial Evolution & Sustainable Futures, Art Taipei, Taiwan. In 2024 Rothwell was a Creative Australia resident artist at Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris and in 2025 she will show alongside Patricia Piccinini at a new regional gallery Yarrila Arts and Museum, NSW.

Rothwell's work is held in numerous collections in Australia and internationally, including the National Gallery of Australia; Art Gallery of New South Wales (Australia); Art Gallery of South Australia; Shepparton Art Museum (Australia); University of Queensland Art Museum (Australia); State Library of Victoria (Australia); City of Sydney (Australia); Artbank (Australia); Lyons Housemuseum (Australia); Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; OMI International Arts Center (USA); Auckland Art Gallery (New Zealand); University of Auckland (New Zealand); and the University of Cambridge (UK).

CAROLINE ROTHWELL

