



19 MAR, 2020

Weaving a tiny web of intrigue

Daily Telegraph, Sydney

Museum of
Contemporary
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ARTSEditor

FEW people would call any kind of creepy crawly “completely charming”. But Maria Fernanda Cardoso does. And the celebrated Sydney artist will use a \$50,000 fellowship to photograph *Maratus* spiders in the midst of their most risky sexual gambits.

Whether they make you shudder or not, *Maratus* spiders are unarguably spectacular. Incredibly tiny at just 5mm long, they boast iridescent, vibrantly-patterned abdomens that they display like peacocks.

The *Maratus*'s mating ritual is a high-stakes performance in which the male stands to be abruptly eaten by the female, whether she allows him to become her lover or not.

Cardoso refers to the male spiders as “the first performance artists”. If so, the females certainly make them suffer for their art.

Using her new fellowship, Cardoso will capture the spiders twice. First she will commission citizen scientists around Australia to corral live specimens.

Second, she will capture the spiders with a camera — Australia's only Visionary Digital BK Plus Lab system, located at the Queensland Museum. The camera represents the latest technology and enables even the tiniest creatures to be photographed in almost molecular detail.

The resulting series will go on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, which is Create NSW's partner in awarding Cardoso the second annual New Dimensions fellowship. The inaugural winner last year was Denis Beaubois.

Cardoso is a celebrated artist who has worked with objects from nature ever since her arrival in Australia from Colombia in the late 1990s. Emu feathers, starfish, earthworms, seahorses and taxidermied frogs have all appeared in her aesthetically beautiful, painstakingly-crafted work.

In 2003 the MCA honoured Cardoso's work with the solo exhibition, *Zootopia*. In the same year, her art was shown in the Colombian pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Cardoso was born in the Colombian city of Bogota, where her parents — Alfonso Cardoso and Eugenia Mantilla de Cardoso — were distinguished architects. On weekends the young Maria Fernanda would go with her father and sister into the bush, where they studied nature through magnifying glasses.

“We'd be looking at fungi and mini orchids and snails. (My father) was really in tune with the natural world,” Cardoso says.

But life in Bogota was far from idyllic. Cardoso recalls the bombings, murders and assassinations during the drug cartels' reign of terror in the 1980s.

“It was like, every day. It was like, it will affect you one way or another. There was this time they blew up a shopping mall and my father was on his way there,” Cardoso says. Hearing of the explosion, Alfonso Cardoso turned back and survived. But the trauma was all around.

“When I grew up you will see dead people from time to time by assassinations. You will see dumped bodies and things like that,” Cardoso says.

The artist used taxidermied animals in much of her earlier Australian work, saying this was her way of confronting death. But now, firmly settled in Sydney with her husband, children and the bountiful garden she has taken years to create, Cardoso is ready to photograph life.

“My work can be freer because I'm much happier. Living here is amazing, it's so peaceful,” she says.

As for those *Maratus* spiders, she will photograph as many species as she can find. She has already captured some of the spiders in her 2016 photographic series, *On The Origins Of Art I-II*. In 2018 the series was purchased jointly by the MCA

and London's Tate Gallery.

“They (*Maratus* spiders) are the first performance artists,” Cardoso says.



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Maria Fernanda Cardoso with her photos of the Maratus spider. Picture: Daniel Boud