

Nervous System

15 November - 18 December 2024
114 Commonwealth Street, Sydney

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.

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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