

'The amazing Maria Fernanda Cardoso'

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Maria Fernanda Cardoso installing Woven Water at the MCA in 2003. CREDIT: EDWINA PICKLES

What was once a backyard swimming pool is now a murky pond with a budding ecosystem. In a corner of the overgrown garden rests a stone roughly hand-engraved with "TIME IS". The wild cacophony of nature continues inside with native flowers, a pair of preserved emu legs, butterfly wings, piles of rocks, animal skin, feathers and gum nuts scattered across benches, tables and side desks.

Maria Fernanda Cardoso once kept stick insects; they would crawl across the walls, flicking their excrement and eggs away. They are not the only obscure creature she has called a pet. "My studio is everywhere," the versatile artist says with a sweep of her hand that takes in her home overlooking Malabar Beach, on Sydney's eastern suburbs. It's a dark and drizzly day, and with its artful clutter her home makes me feel like I've walked into an antique or second-hand store – there's a sense it's full of treasures, you just need the patience and perception to discover them. The required approach is one similar to that Cardoso employs in her art – finding the extraordinary in the seemingly ordinary.

Framed in her house is a handwritten paragraph with the heading "Flea Copulation". Underlined is the quote, "the most elaborate genital armature yet known."

It was the Cardoso Flea Circus (1994-2000) – an installation where live fleas were trained to perform tricks including walking on tightropes, pulling chariots and jumping hoops – that

brought Cardoso to the attention of the contemporary art world (it is now in the Tate's collection).

Throughout her career, Cardoso has consistently looked to the world for her work, and made her work of the world. Her creations blend nature, art, science and technology in installations, sculptures and videos. She used deep-focus photography to capture the sex organs of flowers; she sheared hundreds of sheepskins in a geometrical pattern, dyed them, and created a mural; she made woven nets of preserved starfish; filmed the mating rituals of the minuscule Australian peacock spider and used emu feathers to create capes and hats that wouldn't look out of place on a runway.

Her art renders the familiar unfamiliar; making the small significant, the unseen seen. The everyday - fleas, stick insects, bones and chickens - suddenly become strange, beautiful, eerie and captivating. For Cardoso biology and aesthetics, human life and animal life, are indivisible.

"The beauty of life, I just find it overwhelming," Cardoso says. "There is so much diversity and we don't look. You can have such a joyful life if you just look a little bit closer."

The 55-year-old has established herself as one of Latin America's foremost artists with pieces exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Centro de arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, and in the Colombian pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In a major commission for MoMA she installed 36,000 plastic lilies in a 38-metre long wall. Closer to home, she is behind *Where I Live I Will Grow*, an installation of bottle trees and sandstone that was launched in Green Square in June; as well as art works for the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and in Darling Harbour and Wollongong. Spectrum art critic John McDonald describes Cardoso as having a "dazzling CV" and being "one of few contemporary artists of world stature to reside in Australia."

Born in Bogota, Colombia, Cardoso's mother and father were successful architects. She describes a "Renaissance childhood" full of visual art, science, literature, horse riding and hiking, museums, operas and galleries. The humanistic education cultivated the curiosity that drives her art, but it also made her a curiosity at the girls' primary and high school she attended.

"School was prison. It was deathly boring," Cardoso says as we chat at a cosy corner cafe, a short walk from her home and one of her favourites. "I didn't fit in. I was a nerd. They made fun of me. They called me *La Scientifica*, the scientist."

It was meant as an insult but for a young Maria it was a compliment, determined as she was to be a scientist. She read the encyclopaedia back to front and learnt deduction logic from Sherlock Holmes. Her ambition was fuelled by a grandfather who, according to the family mythology, was a mad scientist, an eccentric genius who conducted breakthrough medical surgeries and experiments.

Hoping to balance scientific and artistic interests, Cardoso followed in the footsteps of her mother and father and enrolled to study architecture at university. It did not take long for

her to grow weary of the rules and regulations governing the designs, and the freedom of the art students drew her envy. Without consulting her parents, she switched courses to train as a sculptor. She later won a highly sought after scholarship to complete postgraduate study in the US, studying an MFA at Yale.

"I'm free. Being an artist for me is about freedom. I do anything I want. Any thought I have I can pursue. Nobody tells me what to do, only myself and my curiosity," she says. It was during her university years that Cardoso discovered what would become, and remains, her creative calling card - art that uses unconventional organic material. It all started with a final assessment task, an air of intellectual experimentation, and a humble sponge.

"One day I was just cleaning a sponge and I looked at when the water hit the sponge and it just saturated all the little compartments and changed colour and I thought, 'that's it I'm going to do all my research on water,'" she says. "I call that now a mindful moment. When you just look very attentively and feel so in tune with what you are doing.

Cardoso became obsessed, sinking herself into understanding all aspects of water. Her exhaustive research process included science, literature, philosophy and art, and it's one she continues to employ today when she uses a new material. Before she starts creating, she says, she must feel that she knows everything there is to know; then she can carve a space to do something entirely new.

After water, came corn. A material, she says, that was a staple across the Americas and has a strong connection to Hispanic Colombian life. The seeds were donated to her by researchers working in Yale's biology department. Her studio became a cornfield, and she created a coil of hundreds of dried corn cobs.

"I had corn in a perfect moment of green, the perfect vitality and splendour, but then I couldn't preserve that moment, it would decay and become brown and die. It raised a lot of questions about life and death," she says.

Cardoso's fellow students were less thrilled when she turned to preserved animals including those native to Colombia, such as gourds and piranhas, lizards, frogs, snakes, crickets and worms. A scientist friend taught her how to breed house flies, and the smell of feeding them chopped pieces of liver wafted out from her studio.

There were no role models for what she was doing, she says. "How will you ever make a living?" one teacher asked. The US was then a country of painters, she says, the market for installation art was not large.

"I always thought that was the weirdest question because if you think about how you're going to make a living you just don't experiment and you don't take risks. You don't explore and you don't create anything new.

"I really didn't make any money for the first 15 years of my career. I survived but there was no market. It was so experimental. I managed to live frugally."

It was in 1992 that Cardoso first started researching flea circuses after remembering a story her uncle told her about the sideshow attractions where live fleas performed in a miniature big top.

"I remember, I visualised it. I saw it in my mind. It was white, with trapezes. I remember that image from my childhood and I thought, 'OK I'm going to do it.'"

It was in 1992 that Cardoso first started researching flea circuses after remembering a story her uncle told her about the sideshow attractions where live fleas performed in a miniature big top. Flea circuses were the hot ticket in the 1830s – starting with Signor Bertolotto's Extraordinary Exhibition of the Industrious Fleas which included a demonstration of the Battle of Waterloo that used more than 400 fleas. Their origins are thought to date back to 1578, when a watchmaker used a flea to draw, and demonstrate, his tiny watch mechanisms inspiring a trend among other horologists.

Two years after she started researching flea circuses and during a residency in Canada (where she would meet her Australian husband and frequent collaborator, Ross Harley, who is now the dean of art and design at UNSW), Cardoso was ready to turn the idea into a reality. But there was one problem - the stars of the show were missing. It was winter and there were no fleas in Canada. When Cardoso informed a scientist she planned on feeding the parasites her own blood, he withdrew his offer to help her breed the creatures. "I talked to the vets, I talked to scientists, I couldn't find a flea. I spent all my limited money in phone calls trying to find a supplier of fleas in the US."

Eventually, and after a customs battle, she had a friend bring 50 fleas from the US. The listed purpose of importation: Flea Circus.

It wasn't only the fleas that needed training, Cardoso had to train herself. The first breakthrough came when she harnessed a flea with her own hair, which she used to attach the insect to a miniature chariot. Her show would come to include escape expert Harry Fleadini; tightrope walkers Teeny and Tiny, and the strong armed Samson and Delilah, who lifted weights made of cotton balls.

"I did have to feed them, so I think I fed them twice a day. I just stuck my hand in and they would all jump on top of me and feed and become really fat and gorge and then I just shake them off."

Still in its infancy, the *Cardoso Flea Circus* was installed San Francisco Exploratorium, 1996. The fleas had just enough tricks for a short show, and a shy and shaking Cardoso performed in front of 22 people. Little did she anticipate her work would become a sensation, attracting media attention and visitors around the world.

"It was huge. There were people who couldn't get tickets so they had to do a lottery to get into my show," Cardoso says.

"Nobody knew I was starving. I couldn't pay rent but I was working full-time because I had to. Artists don't think about money we just want to do the project. That was a very hard lesson to have so much success but be so poor."

Cardoso worked with Harley, who was by then her husband, on the project and the pair would live the carnie life until 2000, continuously perfecting and expanding their show and touring around the world. In its heyday, they were selling out dozens of shows at the Opera House for the Sydney Festival in 2000, using 1500 fleas, with music, lighting and video projection.

"It was incredible. We had 30 sold-out shows. We worked so hard. We did three shows a day. Nobody knew it was going to be so big. That was amazing." But the carnie way of life proved draining.

"It took over my life. I became the queen of fleas and I became Professor Cardoso. It completely changed who I was," she says.

"The thing is I don't want to bore myself. I could have made it a commercial enterprise. It would be the same thing, repeat, which would have been the smart decision financially, but I was bored. I couldn't make it better and when you cannot make it better, it is time to move on. So I had to completely reinvent myself again."

It was the quote now framed in her home - describing fleas as having "the most elaborate genital armature yet known" - that inspired a new idea. It wasn't just fleas who had interesting penises, she quickly discovered. She would create a penis museum. There were years of rejection - she needed a space for her museum, funding, access to microscopists and research material. In a last-ditch effort to realise her project, Cardoso applied to study a PhD so she could receive funding and access university resources. The *Museum of Copulatory Organs*, another collaboration with Harley, premiered in a former workshop on Cockatoo Island as part of the Biennale of Sydney in 2012. The installation was laid out like a museum, with lit glass cabinets displaying blown up, anatomically accurate models of "genitalic extravagance".

Museum of Contemporary art director Liz Ann Macgregor says the work has "challenged the notion that contemporary art was only to be found in Europe and North America."

"What runs through all of her work is her fascination with the world of nature. She is one of a group of artists who are increasingly vocal about the impact of climate change but her interest in the natural world is evident from the very beginning. Indeed this fascination started as a child," Macgregor says.

"But the formal elements are as important – she plays with concepts such as minimalism and infuses them with cross-cultural references. Her work has a strong visual impact and is also meticulously researched."

Cardoso, who has two children, has now lived in Australia for more than 20 years. Despite her achievements she believes she would have had a far more successful commercial career

if she had remained in the US where there is a larger market for art. But the artist is devoid of regret.

"You do the best you can but you really can't play the game overseas. I manage to keep it simmering but it's never going to be," she says.

"But on the other hand, I would prefer to have a quiet life and have children and have a garden and be obsessed with my research and my project. There is an element of silence because if you live in the arts centre it is very noisy, you have to be listening to the who's who and networking. Here it is quiet and you can listen to yourself. I like that."

Maria Fernanda Cardoso's *Marriage of Plants* is on display at the Powerhouse Museum until January 20.