

# **Knowing and Knowledge: The Interdisciplinary Research of Visual Artist Renata Buziak**

**By Dr Victoria Cooper**

Renata Buziak's current body of creative photographic work is underpinned by a long-term exploration of the natural environment through the experimental process she names *biochrome*. One major aim for her research was to remedy an apparent need for an engaging and aesthetic conversation highlighting the beneficial qualities of medicinal plants and their deep connection within the Aboriginal cultures of North Stradbroke Island (Minjerrabah) in Queensland. Concentrating on the visual nature of decomposition and the regenerative action of microorganisms through her *biochrome* process, Buziak reveals a world of unseen cultures that underpin the life cycles of medicinal plants and their environment. From the primordial 'soup', microbes have been integrated into all living systems: the soil and earth, the rivers and seas, the air and all living creatures. Every corner of human and nonhuman existence relies on the presence of these unseen yet vital organisms. In many ways, they define our origins, who we are, and what we will become.

In her research, Buziak consulted with scientists, the Quandamooka Peoples of Minjerrabah and other local residents of the island to assist with identifying and collecting the local medicinal plants. Important to this work is the knowledge within the Aboriginal story line that tells of the age-old relationship of these plants with health and wellbeing. Essentially, this work is the outcome of Buziak's empirical study of the natural phenomenon of decomposition, where aesthetics and the photographic process build on scientific and Aboriginal knowledge to present an alternative perception of these plants and their integral relationships with humanity.<sup>i</sup>

In its early development, the process of photography was recognised as a useful medium for visually recording, communicating, and archiving information. Anna Atkins's publication, *Algae of the British Isles: Cyanotype Impressions* (1843) is considered to be the first published photographically illustrated book. This publication was the outcome of a study conducted by Atkins to investigate the potential of the cyanotype process to accurately illustrate plant material.<sup>ii</sup> Through the direct contact of these plants with paper coated with cyanotype chemical and their exposure to sunlight, a white image is formed of the essential external (and sometimes internal) structure of the algae. In this way, Atkins was able to record directly from nature the physical structure of collected algae plants along with their taxonomic details. Today, Atkins's cyanotypes are not just objects for scientific scrutiny, but

are appreciated for their aesthetic qualities; as such, they can be found in many art galleries as well as museum collections.

As with Atkins, Buziak also experiments with photographic materials to record botanical specimens for the purpose of communicating knowledge about these plants to a wider audience. Although there are similarities with Atkins, Buziak's research work explores the process of decomposition of a plant rather than preserving its original structure. The photographic material becomes the supporting medium for the decomposing microbes, while simultaneously recording the visual traces of these unseen life forms. Buziak then creates photographic documents during the decomposition process. She also records her sensory observations by time-lapse imaging of the plants as they slowly decompose. From this resource, she then selects images that have for her an aesthetic appeal as representations of the poetics of life, death, and renewal. The bioart of Buziak is created in collaboration with the non-human. Rather than disturbing or interfering with the natural processes,<sup>iii</sup> a symbiotic relationship is formed between Buziak and the microbial world that deeply informs and drives her visual research. Ultimately, as with Atkins's illustrations, Buziak's *biochromes* challenge the accepted boundaries that have typically separated the disciplines of art and science.

Where Atkins strove to document the seen structures of plants, Buziak's work documents the presence of unseen others—microscopic life forms that are integral to the healthy functioning, of not only plants, but also the life cycles of the entire ecosystem. To present both a metaphysical and corporeal experience, she has integrated time-lapse work into animated video presentations. To extend this total bodily connection for the viewer, Buziak has collaborated with sound and movement artists,<sup>iv</sup> seeking their response to her visual work.

In capturing the decomposition or deconstruction of these plants, Buziak seeks to highlight the 'beauty' of the unseen cultures that underlie and generally elude our everyday perception of life and living. From her research that links scientific knowledge and Aboriginal wisdom with her aesthetic 'knowing', Buziak presents a creative and evocative discourse to extend our perception of, and relationship with, the natural world.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Buziak seeks to bring together knowledge not just from the metanarrative of science but also through Aboriginal story and from personal experience. In many ways, the intentions and deliberations of her work arguably reflect the discourse presented by Carolyn Merchant in the 1990s challenging science as a primary source of understanding Nature. See: Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983). Other seminal writers, theorists, social scientists, and philosophers that underpin my discussion on the decentralisation of science and relocating it alongside cultural knowledge include Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98), Margaret Atwood (1939–), Donna Haraway (1944–), Deborah Bird Rose (1946–), and Bruno Latour (1947–).

<sup>ii</sup> Geoffrey Batchen discusses that Atkins’s intention for the cyanotype work was as a form of “data, as precisely repeated, invariably differentiated information derived from a common master and disseminated in image form”. See Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 156–59.

<sup>iii</sup> Many artists working with biological processes and life forms often transform or subvert the natural cycle to invent new materials or hybrid forms, notably, the bodily interventions of Stelarc (1946–) and the experimental tissue engineering in the visual arts exemplified by SymbioticA at the University of Western Australia.

<sup>iv</sup> The sound artist was Vanessa Tomlinson and movement artist was Jan Baker-Finch.