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A FLIGHT OF FANCY

WITH FORAGED, FOSSICKED AND FOUND ITEMS FROM HER GARDEN, ARTIST ZORA VERONA CREATES MAGICAL NESTS WITH THE EXQUISITE GUIDANCE OF LOCAL BIRDLIFE

The dance of art and nature is perhaps the most profound expression of human creativity. In this space the artist is both inspired by, and an intricate part of, nature – the weavings of hopes for the future. Beauty, sustainability, wonder and respect are the foundations of Zora Verona's practice as a nest builder, a unique craft that brings together her skills as a weaver, creator and keen observer of the botany and birdlife that she adores.

Known to her community as Lori Kravos, the name Zora Verona is a creative identity that honours her ancestral story and brings further meaning to her practice. "My paternal grandmother was named Zora – light of dawn – and my maternal grandmother Verona – truth," says Zora. "What greater or more melodic truth is there than the birdsong heralding a new day? These Slavic women would not have had a chance to make art. In war times Zora wasn't even able to name her own children in their mother tongue, so I honour them today for their survival made real, and the careful tending of family that has enabled me to create today," says Zora Verona.

Canadian raised, Zora Verona has made art a considered practice throughout her life. In her early years, ceramics and papermaking featured her beloved botanical motifs with sustainable practice defining each moment of creating. Seeking to call Australia home more than twenty years ago, Warburton, in the Upper Yarra Valley, provided a soft landing place on a 16 acre property caressing the northern slopes of Mount Little Joe.

Inspired by her own lived history working in philanthropy and the arts, watching artists develop through programs at council, then through her work at the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, and more recently with Zoos Victoria, Zora Verona found herself sitting at the kitchen table in the early months of 2020 pondering how art could provide a balm to the uneasy feelings she was having as bushfires and the pandemic ravaged Victoria. "I looked around me, at the lyrebird scratching outside my window, at the birds playing in my garden, and the flora, fauna and found objects I had gathered on my daily walks and suddenly I had a moment of clarity...nests. A symbol of home and so intricate in their stories. I could make sustainable art sculptures honouring birds as artist and architect."

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A hundred years ago, homes would proudly display a 'Wunderkammer' – a cabinet of curiosities, where fascinations of natural history such as eggs and nests were gathered and displayed for visitors to admire. In museum collections around the world, nests have been preserved, some dating as far back as the early 1800s, but these are not easy to access and today nest collecting is illegal. "I felt a sense of purpose in recreating these nests so they could still be admired today. So I started with a book of photographs and my own 'cabinet' of found objects and I began to experiment. I couldn't find anyone else doing this so I had to learn as I went along and try to find ways – by observing birds in my garden and reading and studying, by learning weaving and basket-making skills from local fibre artists, and taking an online course with Craft School Oz. Nests are items of beauty and wonder. I struggle to do with my hands what birds do with beak and breast. I don't always know how to create as the birds do, but I gather materials as I walk in the forests, by the Yarra River, and on my property and I find nature offering the sincerest of solutions."

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"The layers of nests are fascinating. Often the inner lining has a felted texture. One of the ways a bird will create this is by pressing their breast into the fibres again and again, in tiny circles for hours and hours until they have a felted effect. There is a quote from Gaston Bachelard, a 19th century French philosopher, that I love: 'The house is a bird's very person; it is its form and its most immediate effort, I shall even say, its suffering. The result is only obtained by constantly repeated pressure of the breast. There is not one of these blades of grass that, in order to make it curve and hold the curve, has not been pressed on countless times by the bird's breast, its heart, surely with difficulty in breathing, perhaps even, with palpitations (Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, pg. 101).'

"As I created, I observed that a felting needle has grooves on the edge that mimic a bird's beak. It fascinates me what we have learnt from nature over tens of thousands of years, and what we are still learning."

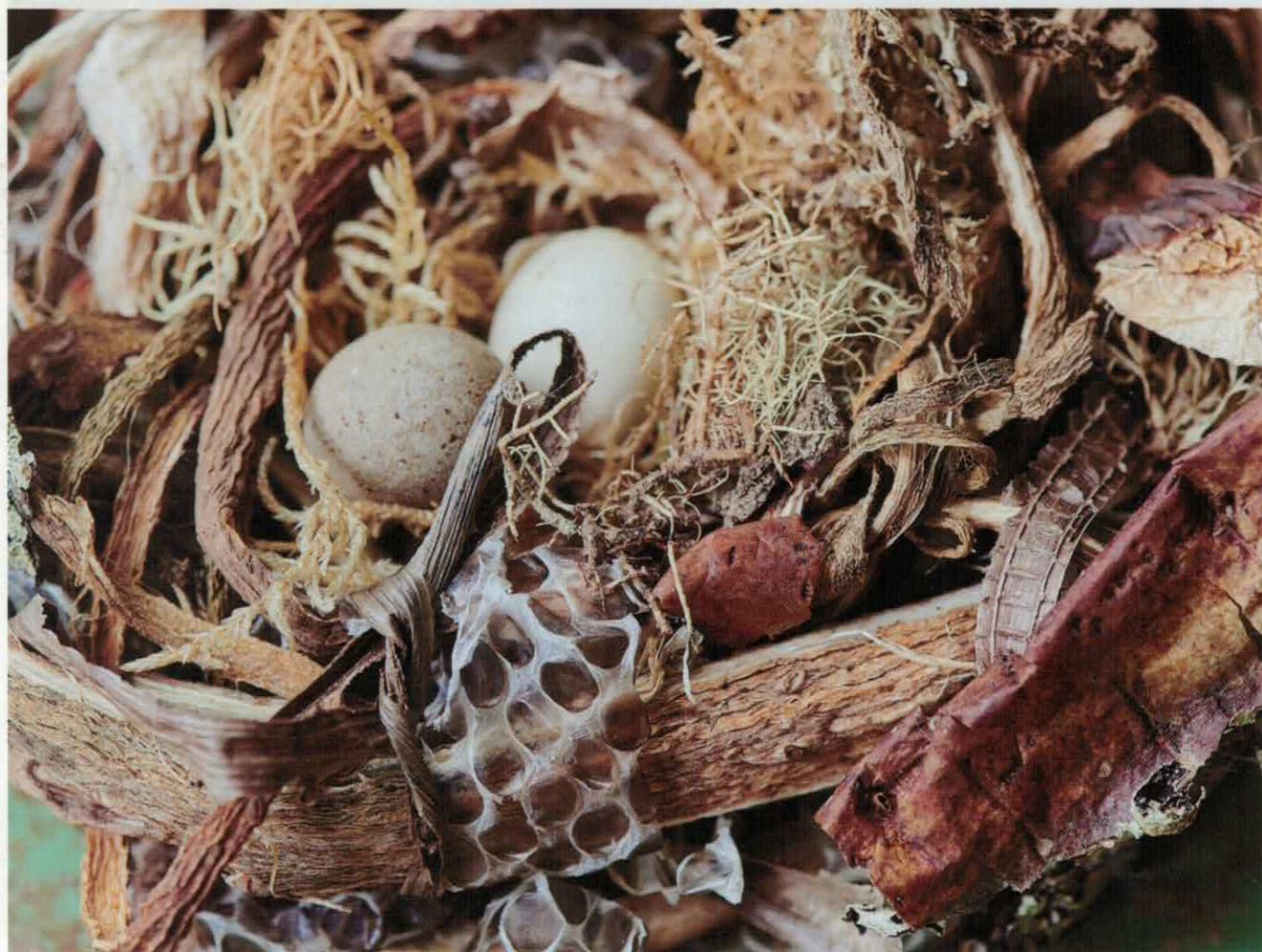
Through her creations Zora Verona wants people to appreciate the immensity of the architecture, and the strength and commitment required to make such delicate yet resilient structures. "Birds work with tenacity for hours, days, even weeks to nest build. Some use their own saliva to bind their materials to withstand the forces of nature. A bird will often make several nests until their mate accepts the right one. There is an intelligence in this as the discarded nests then act as decoys. Birds place things with purpose, like curators of space, and they embrace imperfection. They teach me it's okay to make mistakes and about resilience."

AN ARTISTS' MANIFESTO

What underscores or defines my work is inspired by Oscar Wilde's sentiments: "What we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us."

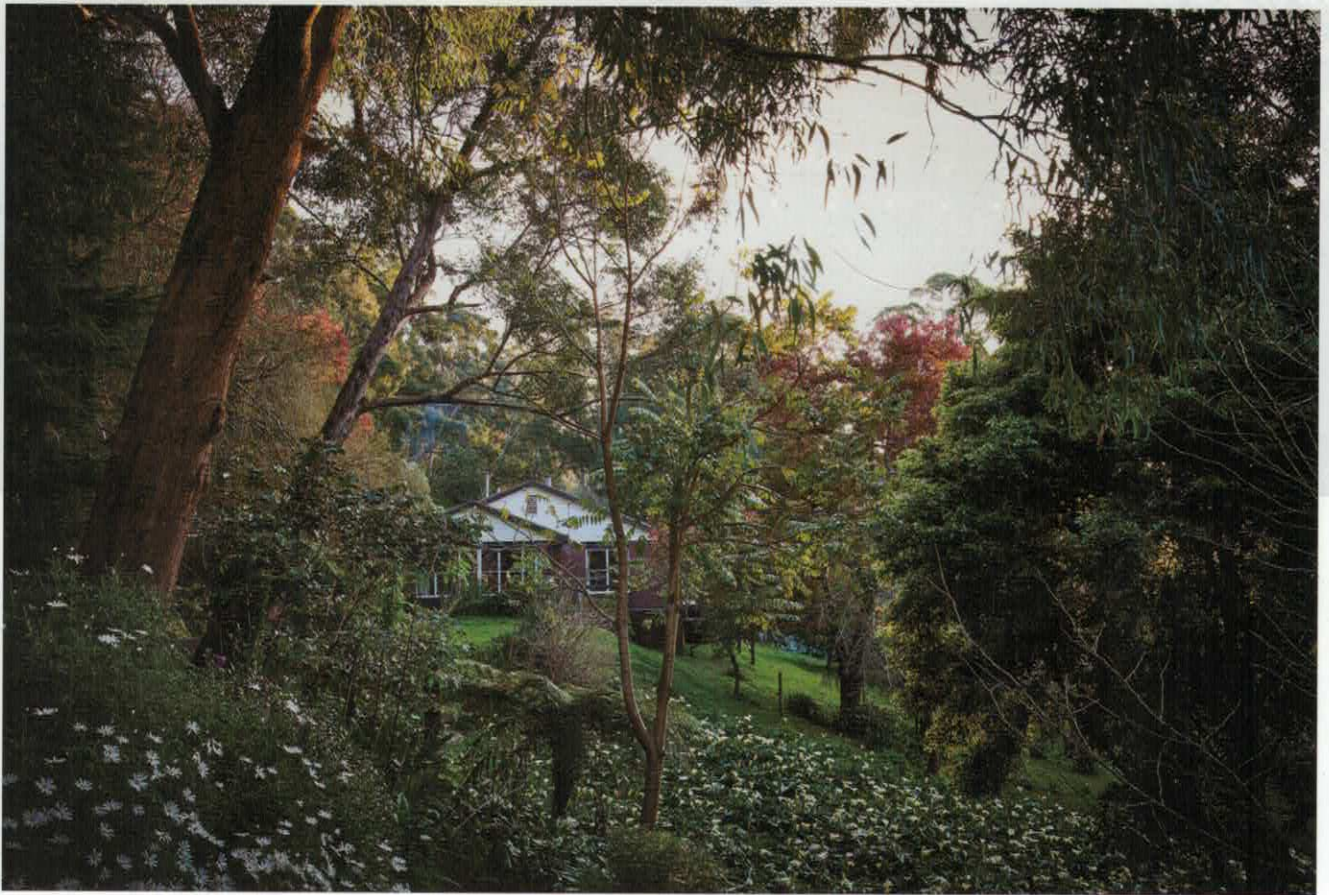
If art does affect the way we look at the world, it mirrors my vision to create sustainable art that guides the viewer to recalibrate their moral compass to nature as our true north. For too many, I fear that nature is a mere afterthought, so I create in the hope that 'the art of nests' can change perceptions. May each nest, the bird that created it and their unique story awaken an understanding that every species is worthy of our wonder, awe and most importantly, our protection.

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Sometimes Zora Verona will lovingly recreate nests from photographs of historic collections, but she also delights in working from instinct. Hours are spent pondering, gathering, shaping and returning to feel a sense of conclusion. Her nests can measure from ten centimetres to up to one metre in diameter.

"I am a forager and create as the birds do, using lichen and moss, horse hair and llama fleece, root fibres, native plants, leaves and twigs, seed pods, snakeskin, feathers and found objects in my work. I am committed to sustainable practice. I don't want to create more detritus and I believe there is beauty in decay."

At the heart of Zora Verona's work is the desire to observe and preserve nature. "I see birds make use of all sorts of materials and adapt to all kinds of conditions. I have many introduced species of plants in my garden and they all play a role in the birdlife. For me, it's not about returning my garden to native plantings but about ensuring food sources. Birds love messy gardens and I've allowed the leaf litter to fall, and the grasses to grow tall; they are both habitat and food...and foraging for me. The beauty and wonder of the natural world supports my heart, my soul and my creative practice every day. I am in awe." ■

Works for sale or by commission. Commissions can be a collaboration, celebrating the client's personal connection with nature, honouring their own treasure trove of found objects, or showcasing their favourite tree, vine and plants.

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