BRENDA COLAHAN FINE ART
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Elizabeth Fortescue on Gabby Malpas' exhibition *GARDEN*

When Sydney artist Gabby Malpas received a book of Shakespearean insults for Christmas a few years ago, she didn't predict that the sexist put-downs would creep into her next body of work.

Trollop. Vixen. Strumpet. Hoyden. Spoken aloud, they are sonorous. They roll off the tongue.

You can almost hear Rowan Atkinson's egregious Elizabethan lord, Edmund Blackadder, bawling them in the tavern.

But has misogyny ever gone away, all these centuries after Shakespeare? The insults might be different, but the sentiment remains the same.

Sensing this, Malpas emblazoned the ancient slurs across her new ceramic platters against a backdrop of pretty botanicals.

So are the platters merely decorative? A little pointed? Funny? Or all three?

Elsewhere in this exhibition are Malpas' refined, meticulous watercolour paintings on canvas, a more robust support than paper for such large works. Many pay homage to Hillandale Gardens, owned by a friend at Yetholme in country NSW.

Oriental vases feature in a group of pictures, allowing Malpas to explore her Chinese heritage – an alien heritage for her, having been adopted as a child by a white New Zealand family before migrating to Australia as an adult and becoming a citizen.

Another series of paintings is titled After the Apocalypse. Is this what vegetables might look like after an environmental disaster? If so, they're charming but very, very odd.

Another series of paintings is called Great Southern Land: Migration Stories, which Malpas describes as an irreverent response to the racial hatreds that have permeated society in recent times.

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As an example, look for the horned beastie and the bony arm reaching out from the shadows in one of these paintings.

Beauty, whimsy and humour. They're all there in Malpas's exhibition. But look closely, and you'll see a hint of the troubles enveloping the world.

In this exhibition, Malpas felt it was time to express her dismay at the way things are. She has done so with subtlety and humour, which are hallmarks of her work.

"Quiet activism," she said.

"Maybe a bit louder for those at the back."

Elizabeth Fortescue