

# POSTSCRIPT



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**J**ean Cocteau called art 'science given flesh'. The trope is apt when botanical art is considered as the intersection of lean, factual science and sensuous, seductive painting. Botany does not need art to make itself visible. The very language of diagrams suffices. But botany got art. Art literally entered the picture when botany co-opted the skills of specialist artists to serve its own descriptive objects. Diagrams blossomed into plant portraits. Linear signs became beautiful facsimiles of reality.

Plant representations convey many meanings. But what they yield depends on what we ask of them, on our frames of reference, general knowledge, and the contexts in which images are studied. Consider Vivienne Koorland's collage, *South African Flora IV*. It is comprised of twenty protea images, immediately identifiable as flowering blooms. But what does the artwork mean?

Koorland found mass-produced reproductions of proteas, cut them out, and taped them to paper over a book cover. Her acts were significant: cutting is a brutal, dislocating process; taping imprisons things. The protea flowerheads, devoid of reference to their natural environment, are isolated on white paper and controlled by assertive masking tape. They resemble botanical specimens on herbarium sheets, faded remnants of their original splendour.

The artwork provokes speculation on the part of the viewer. Unlike much botanical art, the image is not goal-directed. The artist entrusts the spectator with the responsibility of interpreting her work, but she directs this visual scrutiny and intellectual inquiry by embedding clues in her construction.

South Africans at once identify the flowers as proteas. Botanists know them as *Protea grandiceps* (Red Sugarbush), *Protea cynaroides* (King Protea, South Africa's national flower), and *Leucadendron argenteum* (Silver Tree). Mere identification, however, does not resolve the matter of interpretation, and the viewer must go on to ask art many questions: Why did the artist choose these forms? Why were the blooms arranged in this manner? Why confer this title? We supply answers partly from information we are given, and partly from our own perceptual acuity and imaginative insights.

In this case, the artist was born in Cape Town and in her youth Koorland became familiar with local flora by accompanying her great-aunt (a horticulturist) and grandmother on field trips. Although she observed floral beauty, she grew up and studied in a repressive society where classification was a loaded term, controlling all socio-political and economic activity. In such a context, Koorland's later creative acts are not innocent. Her proteas, unmistakably flowering plants, can also be read metaphorically, as life forms, isolated, controlled, and classified.

*South African Flora IV* thus reminds us that systems are not in themselves threatening or benevolent. It is our application of systemic structures that destines them to be either damaging or beneficial. Texts, whether written or visual, are not eloquent monologues, but dialogues requiring the active participation of readers and viewers. Interpretation is a game of logic and speculation. The result is discovery – if we allow the images of art and science to saturate our senses and stimulate our minds.





PLATE 127

Vivienne Koorland, *South African Flora IV*, 1991–1993, card and tape on book cover,  
54 cm x 40,6 cm