Cover Image:
Kate Rohde
Coral vanitas 2008
mixed media
208.0 x 118.0 x 80.0 cm
The University of Queensland Collection purchased in 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Kaliman Gallery
Kate Rohde is a young artist inspired by old things. In 2005 she travelled to Vienna, Austria, where she encountered the world’s largest collection of taxidermy in the Museum of Natural History. In this museum, many of the thousands of stuffed birds and animals – including those long extinct – are displayed in elaborate glass cases. Rohde was fascinated by the unnaturalness of this so-called natural history and the deathliness of the museum taxidermy. Ever since, her artwork has addressed the themes of death, nature and the museum.

Rohde makes her own ‘Baroque’ display cases and crafts her own menageries complete with fantastic and sometimes hybrid specimens. In Coral vanitas 2008, Rohde references the culture of collecting in Renaissance Europe by including coral. Coral was a treasured object in Renaissance Europe. Believed to hold special powers, coral appeared to be both plant and animal. Mediterranean red coral – sometimes referred to as red skeletons – was often carved into elaborate scenes or figures. This desire to out-do or surpass nature is an aspect of Renaissance collecting culture that intrigues Rohde. She too tries to exceed nature: her animals are often more colourful and the plants more exotic. She sets these subjects within elaborate dioramas – the ‘frozen moment’ recreations of natural environments often found in museums – that strive to look natural but really just draw attention to their artifice.

Standing among Rohde’s lively display of coral and flowers are tiny human skeletons. They remind the viewer that all attempts to exceed nature are futile and that all life ends in death and emptiness. Northern European painters in the Renaissance painted still lives that were symbolic of life’s transience and the futility of vanity. Such still lives – often including skulls and rotting fruit – were known as vanitas, a Latin word that translates as emptiness. Vanitas also included sculptural works or tableaux made in Europe in the 18th century, which were exhibited in display cases not unlike Rohde’s.

In Coral vanitas, Rohde sets symbols and reminders of death in sharp contrast to the soft white bunnies – the ultimate symbols of new life – and the brightly coloured spring plants and flowers. But are they regular bunnies? Red growths rise from their heads like sinister antlers. Are they mutant bunnies and the skeletons the remains of miniature humans or perhaps even aliens? Author of the book The Gothic 2007, Gilda Williams argues that the Gothic always brings together two things that were meant to be kept apart. The collision of Rohde’s benign bunnies and macabre skeletons is an example of such a Gothic encounter.

Activities

- Look closely at the display case that Kate Rohde has sculpted. How do you think Rohde has made the case? Display cases are usually meant to be invisible protectors of an artwork or object. Why do you think she has chosen such an elaborate design? Does it remind you of anything?

- What do you collect? Write down three things that you collect (or would like to collect). Make an artwork where you combine these three very different things into the one Gothic image or object.

- Stage a debate to argue for and against the ethics of taxidermy. Is it more appropriate for some birds and animals to be collected and preserved in this way than others? Is taxidermy an art or a science? Should museums continue to use taxidermy and dioramas in their displays?

- Make your own artwork in response to a visit to a museum. The museum may be a natural, cultural or art museum and your artwork may be two, three or four dimensional.

- Give Kate Rohde’s Coral vanitas 2008 a new title, one that succinctly describes your reaction to the work. You might like to be inspired by contemporary music or film that you would describe as Gothic.

- Research other artists who reference the museum in their work. You might like to start by looking at the work of Fiona Hall, Narelle Jubelin, Janet Laurence, Mark Dion, Marcel Broodthaers, Claes Oldenburg, Hiroshi Sugimoto or Susan Hiller. Consider whether these artists reflect a Gothic sensibility in their work.