

Salvatore Zofrea – the late wildflower paintings

“Praised be you, my Lord,
through our Sister, Mother Earth,
who sustains us and directs us
bringing forth all kinds of fruits
and coloured flowers and herbs.”

Saint Francis of Assisi *The Canticle of the Creatures* (1224)

Salvatore Zofrea is a larger-than-life character in the Australian art scene. Although of modest physical stature, Zofrea frequently paints with gusto and passion on a huge scale as he makes works that pay homage to the monumental frescos of his native Italy. While he arrived in Australia as a nine-year-old child from his native Calabria in 1956 and has lived in Australia ever since, he has never abandoned links with his European heritage. Many of Zofrea’s cultural points of reference evoke Europe as he finds affinities with the thinking of Saint Francis of Assisi, takes inspiration from the art of Leonardo da Vinci and Piero della Francesca, and effortlessly quotes from Dante in Italian.

Zofrea’s new body of work, that stretches back about a dozen years, finds the origins of its imagery in Australian wildflowers. He encountered them around his studio in Kurrajong, on the lower slopes of the Blue Mountains about seventy-five kilometres north-west of Sydney, as well as in other places in New South Wales. However, as the series grew, conceptually it moved away from any literal representation of specific flowers, the seasons or the times of day, and embraced the complex cultural phenomenon of synaesthesia. Synaesthesia – from the Greek *σύν* 'together' and *αἴσθησις* 'sensation' – refers to sensory crossovers, where in sounds people perceive colours or scents may be interpreted as shapes and textures. Wassily Kandinsky was a synaesthete who in his art combined four senses: colour, touch, smell and hearing, while David Hockney sees music as colour, shape and composition and employs these when working on his opera stage sets.

Zofrea has been inspired by composers who in their work celebrated these sensory crossovers. Alexander Scriabin explored the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) where with synaesthesia he associated colours with the various harmonic tones and saw his music as also uniting with scent, dance and light. Olivier Messiaen was a composer who loved Saint Francis of Assisi and in his music incorporated birdsong. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Igor Stravinsky, Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy and Arnold Schoenberg all transcended the boundaries of traditional music to create sound that incorporated the other senses. The music of Scriabin, Messiaen, Schoenberg, Stravinsky and these other composers formed the background soundtrack for Zofrea’s most recent paintings.

Zofrea’s Australian wildflowers series had initially focused on specific plants and traced the cycle of the seasons and times of day. The new series of paintings and monotypes transcend the localised imagery and specific sense impressions to embrace a new quality of colour and energy. It is the closest that the artist has come to the creation of a Gesamtkunstwerk with meaning of synthesis of the arts, a comprehensive artwork or all-embracing art. Here he poses such questions as how do you paint the perfume of flowers, the sound of birdsong or the radiance of colour within a field of Australian wildflowers? In this new series of paintings, it is no longer a wattle tree or a grevillea shrub, but it becomes colour as energy as the artist creates form without form and takes things to another plane to become art. As in the *Canticle of the Creatures* by Saint Francis of Assisi, Zofrea celebrates all of the creatures mentioned, including the Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Stars, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire and the Mother Earth – all as abstracted beings who inhabit his paintings.

Speaking about the new paintings, Zofrea observes, “Flowers – mainly Australian wildflowers – now that they have lost their form, it is pointless to identify them as grevillea, banksia, bottlebrush or kangaroo paws, they are simply Australian wildflowers. They are untamed, they are wild. I had an

epiphany where I saw the real colour of Australia after the olive tones of Calabria. I love sound in Nature, hence Scriabin, Stravinsky, Messiaen and Schoenberg are all close fellow travellers.”

Zofrea, when speaking of his art making, frequently employs spiritual references or alludes to the teaching of Saint Francis of Assisi or other spiritual teachers. However, he does not view himself as an institutional theist. “I go to church once a year. People go to church when they need a guide on how to live their lives – I don’t need that. I can find inspiration in Buddhism, Sufism as well as Christianity and in many other spiritual teachings ... I would describe myself as spiritual, rather than as religious. My God is Nature, and I paint my unique response to it.” In recent years, he has been drawn to synaesthesia and theosophy, but does not ascribe to any defined doctrine and in his art he works intuitively. He notes, “I am just a link in creativity and the colour is in my mind already”.

Zofrea is an artist working in a contemporary idiom and not interested in historical resuscitations. His art is of our time and cannot be confused with the art of earlier periods, nevertheless, he draws on traditions of the craft of painting and in the materials employed that relate to ancient practices. One of these is in his use of lapis lazuli. It is a pigment prized since ancient times for its celestial blue colour. Medieval and Renaissance artists had the precious stone brought from Afghanistan and ground into a crystal powder and then mixed with a binder. This precious pigment was used on such surfaces as the blue garment of the Mother of God and not only possesses the purest tone of blue but, because of its crystalline nature, it stands out slightly in relief and catches the light to produce a luminous sparkle. Zofrea mixes the powdered lapis lazuli with linseed oil and uses this pigment to bring touches of the sacred to the Australian bush. In many of his recent paintings there is a luminous sparkle that dances around the picture space appearing like musical notation.

These paintings have a lyricism with the colour saturated surfaces rhythmically dancing to some celestial melody full of vibrance and deep reverence. Zofrea’s paintings of Australian wildflowers have a spiritual radiance that grows out of a sense of freedom with the artist surrendering to the spirit of the moment. They are an old man’s paintings, in the same way that we may speak of the late works of Titian or Tintoretto – they are large scale, dynamic and expressive paintings where the artist, with many decades of art practice behind him, paints purely and without constraints. As Zofrea recently observed, “Now I’m in my seventies, I am doing my best work ... I’m in love – I come to make love with my work and tap into the impossible. I never paint to a formula, I love scale.”

Sasha Grishin, 2025

All quotations from the artist are from an interview between the artist and the author held on 12 July 2025, at the artist’s Seaforth studio, NSW