

Sue Wickison's flower pictures go far beyond prettiness. In the past few months they have earned a silver medal from the Royal Horticultural Society in Britain and been stored for acquisition by Kew Gardens in London.



DIANA DEKKER

Drawn from life

LATE last year, botanical artist Sue Wickison held a solo exhibition at New Zealand House in London. It was her first overseas exhibition and led to an invitation to hang her work at the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) in London and then, last month, at the Savill Garden, Windsor Great Park, to celebrate the garden's 75th anniversary and the opening of its revamped New Zealand section, which houses nearly 3000 native New Zealand plants.

The three shows have established her in a rarefied artistic world. At the RHS she was awarded a silver medal for her work, an honour only a handful of New Zealand botanical artists have achieved.

Sue, who lives with her husband and their two teenagers in Ohariu Valley, has a modest profile in New Zealand. That's about all any botanical artist can expect to attain here, where, as she laments, people are more likely to invest in an abstract painting than a time-consuming, scientifically accurate picture of a plant. People such as Audrey Eagle, whose two volumes on New Zealand native plants have been nominated for a Montana award, can spend a lifetime on individual paintings and have their names barely known.

In Britain, though, there is a tradition of botanical illustration which has become very popular as an art form. At the pinnacle of purist, scientific painting is the RHS. Little did Sue know when she set up her exhibition, mostly depicting endangered native plants, in New Zealand House that her hard work would pay off so well. Not necessarily financially — the cost and logistics of getting it there took their toll — but in terms of her profile and satisfaction.

At the New Zealand House exhibition she was introduced to the keeper of the Savill Garden who invited her to show there from mid-April to late May as part of a series of events publicising the New Zealand garden, the only country-specific garden in the huge Windsor Great Park complex and the largest collection of New Zealand plants in Britain.

The Savill Garden visitors' centre is new and, with its leaf-shaped roof made from oak from the Windsor estate, architecturally acclaimed. "You have to be impressed. It's a fascinating building and a superb location for an exhibition, airy and innovative. People have to walk past the exhibition to get to the garden. I was so excited about the prospect."

She was asked to concentrate on contemporary pieces for the exhibition and

returned home after the RHS event to paint them. It was a new direction for her, combining botanical accuracy and meticulous water-colour painting with a modern approach to design. She painted, for example a few leaves of flax, as if they were graceful sculptures — "taking the essence of the flax to give room for interpretation". "They were pushing the limits of traditional botanical art. They wouldn't have been acceptable

at the RHS, but the general public like it."

A week after her exhibition opened, Prince Andrew officially opened the garden and she was presented to him and asked to show him around her work.

Another visitor was the curator of the library and art collection at Kew, who particularly admired two paintings, of a native daisy and a pohutukawa sprig. The flowers in each are on one side of a dramatically

horizontal background, with only a petal for balance on the far side.

"Kew normally buys scientific works, but because she liked those pieces she is looking for corporate sponsorship to buy them to go into a new gallery housing botanical work."

SUE may have reached a new level of recognition as a botanical artist in Britain but she is, in a way, retracing her steps. She was born in Sierra Leone, where her interest in plants was fostered as a child by her father, a teacher, amateur botanist and artist who worked for the British Colonial Service.

Later, she took a four-year course in illustration at Middlesex University followed by a nine-year career as a botanical artist at Kew.

“

If art has a meaning and a use, it makes it more important, more socially useful.

A Winston Churchill Trust travelling fellowship took her to the Solomon Islands to collect, photograph and illustrate orchids. One of the new orchids she discovered, *Coelogyne susanae*, was named after her. Her illustrations are included in a clutch of popular botanical and gardening books and she has painted images for more than 50 stamps for Pacific countries, including New Zealand.

Sue met her husband in the Solomon Islands and they settled in Wellington 13 years ago. The reason? They had never met a New Zealander they did not like, she says, and they appreciated the focus on the outdoors and environmental issues. She felt women were positioned well in New Zealand "and it was a mixed-culture country, and apart from that it was a very beautiful country".

She hopes to contribute to environmental awareness through her botanical paintings, especially of endangered natives, through the Department of Conservation website.

"If art has a meaning and a use, it makes it more important, more socially useful. I want to be able to give something back by raising the profile of natives. People know, but I don't think it hurts to have it reiterated."

She also hopes to raise the profile of botanical art in New Zealand.

■ An exhibition of Sue Wickison's work, *Natives in Print*, is at Kura Gallery, 19 Allen St, till Wednesday. Today and Sunday, 11am-4pm, then 10am-6pm.



Sue Wickison's work has established her reputation in a rarefied artistic world.

Picture: MAARTEN HOLL

NEW FROM SIMON JAMES DESIGN - in store now



NZ DESIGN & MANUFACTURE

Portfolio *by design*
creative furniture solutions

Showroom 119 Jervois Quay, Wellington
Phone 04 803 3096 Fax 04 803 3095 Email sales@portfoliobydesign.co.nz

www.portfoliobydesign.co.nz