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ENTERTAINMENT

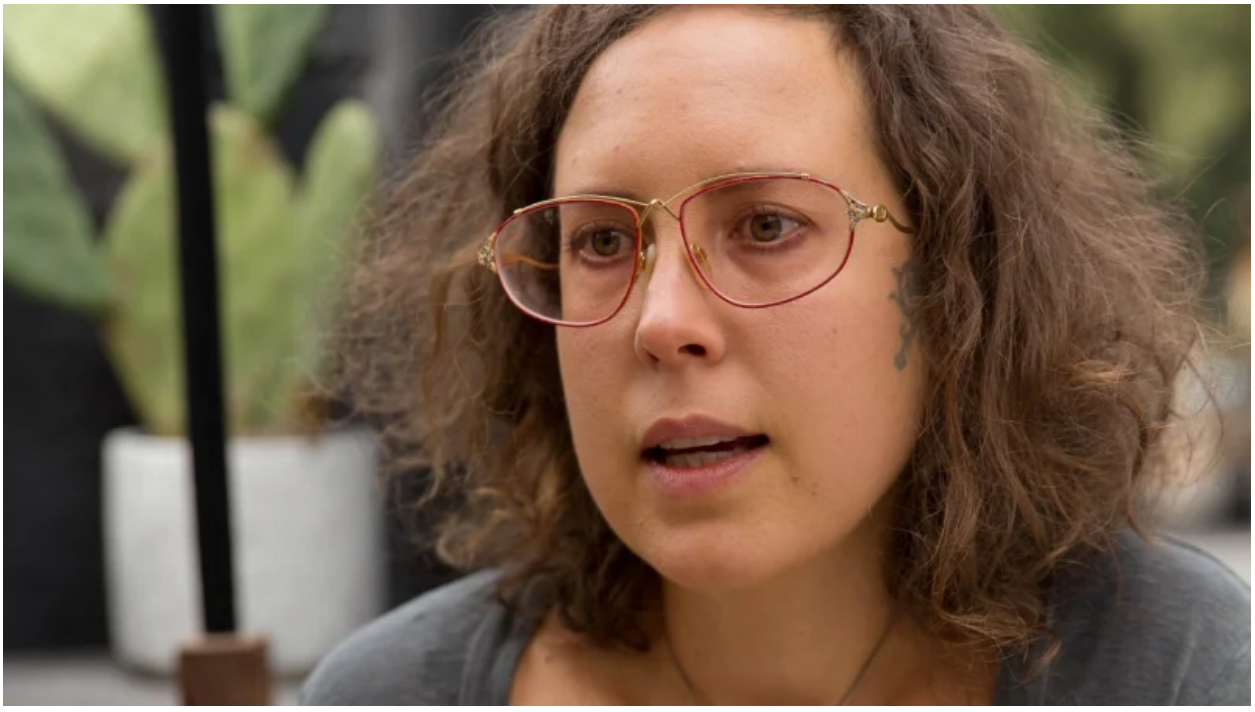
They say 'I hope someone taxidermies you': Julia deVille on death and hate mail

The Melbourne jeweller and taxidermist was a child when she felt her first dead body.

By **Lindy Percival**
August 1, 2017 — 3.15pm

They're a happy lot at Burnley's Serotonin Eatery. On an otherwise gloomy Thursday afternoon, faces are glowing and voices abuzz inside what the menu describes as the "happiest place in Melbourne". One young woman waiting in line for a table can barely contain herself. "Oh my God, I want to eat, like, everything on this menu," she tells her companions. Among the communal tables, potted plants and scattered cushions, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd been teleported to California.

A combined eatery and exercise venue, this so-called "happiness centre" seems an unlikely place to be meeting Julia deVille, better known for preserving dead animals in unsettling artworks reminiscent of a gothic fairytale. But the woman who, as a child, made her pregnant kindergarten teacher vomit by lugging a shark's head in for show and tell, is nothing if not surprising.

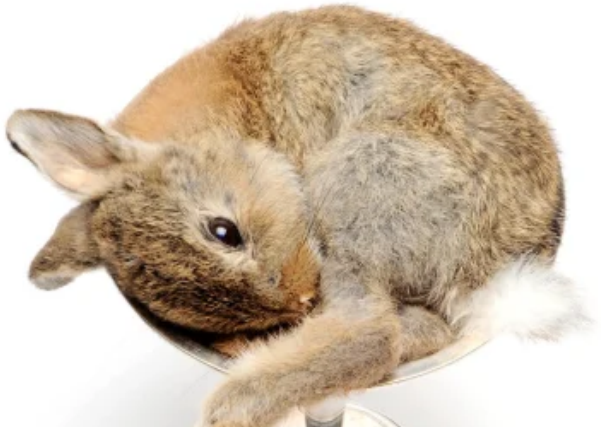


Jeweller and taxidermist Julia deVille reflects on death and mortal remains over lunch. STEFAN POSTLES

In an exhibition showing at East Melbourne's Johnston Collection, deVille's dead and decorated baby animals are laid out on a dining table: a stillborn puppy curled upon a willow pattern plate; a tiny chicken tucked up inside an antique ice-cream scoop; a bunny propped on top of a sterling silver goblet.

The juxtaposition of adorability and edibility is about more than aesthetics. DeVille, a vegetarian since the age of nine, wants us to think about what we're eating. In terms of sentience, she says, there's no difference between a dead puppy and a dead pig – "they're just as intelligent, and feel pain in the same way".

It's not so surprising, then, that this "plant-based" cafe is one of her regular haunts. Its menu overflows with feel-good, guilt-free offerings including "wellness smoothies", "smiling smashed avo" and "positive pancakes", all served up in "a rainbow of colour".



If it's all sounding a little happy-clappy, deVille isn't about to veer into zealotry.

"I'm not interested in converting people to veganism or vegetarianism, I just want people to be informed," she tells me. When she does chalk up the odd conversion, though, "it's really nice to know that as an artist, you're changing the way people think about more serious things than just decoration in their house".

Surrendering to Serotonin's pledge to keep mood and gut happy by regulating our "neurotransmitters and hormone activity", we make our selections. DeVille opts for a "nutrition bomb" – a large, colourful serve of broccoli, tomatoes, kale, nuts, seeds, pumpkin, sauerkraut and avocado. I opt for a warming bowl of soup of the day – a corn and coconut blend garnished with herbs and chilli and accompanied by gluten-free "sprouted" toast. "Hydration"

comes in the form of lemongrass myrtle and ginger tea for deVille and a "fruit bluice" of pineapples, raspberries, banana and oranges for me. No need to fear any "BAD-itives" here, and certainly nothing that once frolicked across a paddock.

Growing up in New Zealand, deVille was always "a big animal lover" and says the catalyst for her decision to become a vegetarian at such a young age was a visit to her uncle's farm.

"We were feeding the piglets and he told me he was fattening them up for his daughter's wedding," she says. "The penny dropped. I had no idea until then what it was I was eating."

Couple that with the dead horse hanging from a tree – shot when it was "no longer of any use" and slowly fed to the dogs – and a pile of dead lambs thrown onto the back of a tractor during one particularly severe winter, and it's no wonder deVille's vegetarianism started early. So too did her fascination with death, fed in part by the fox-fur stole worn by her beloved grandmother.

"It was a whole fox, and the mouth would open up to bite onto the tail, and it had legs and everything. I used to dress up in them and play with them," deVille recalls. "I kind of felt like they were alive and when I wasn't looking they'd be dashing around the house. I didn't know what taxidermy was back then, but I guess the seed was planted very early."

Peter, by Julia deVille.

Another defining moment was the time she wandered into a church with her "quite eccentric" father (a keen scuba diver and source of that show-and-tell shark's head) and found a coffin occupied by an elderly woman.

"My dad kind of encouraged me to touch her face and feel what she felt like, to get an understanding of the difference between life and death," deVille recalls. "Then when both of my grandmothers died, I was also allowed to see them and touch them. That again gave me a visceral experience of the body just being a vessel and that whatever that thing is that keeps us alive is definitely gone when we're dead.

"My grandmothers went from being these warm, soft people to cold, rubbery, and they didn't look like themselves. I was eight when my first grandmother died and maybe 12 when the other one died. I was sad, but I wasn't scared of the bodies."

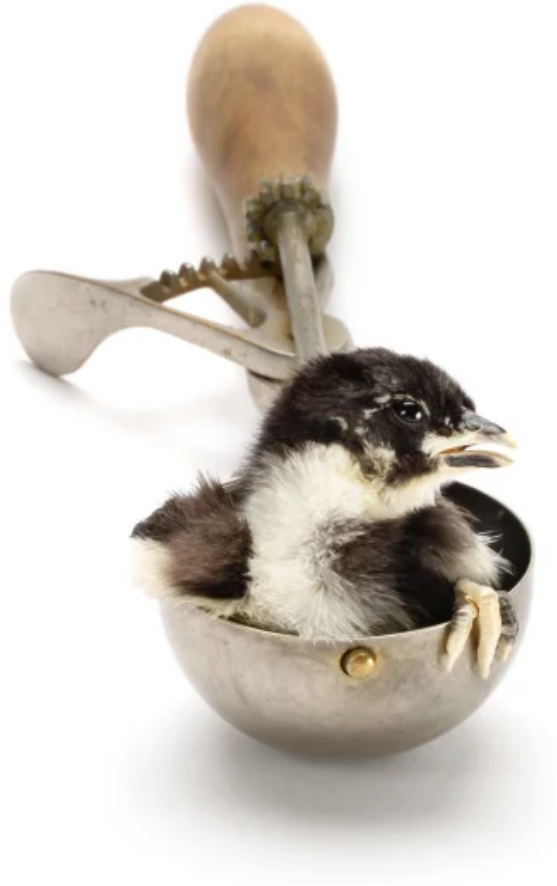
Neither was she particularly bothered about peer pressure. As a teenager, she followed her grandmother's fashion lead by wearing fox stoles to high school, which is where she reckons people "started to think I was a bit strange, maybe".

"I had done a lot of shocking things as a teenager because I'm probably quite eccentric too," she admits. "For my 18th birthday party, the invitations were white little girls' knickers that I got from op shops, with the instructions in red pen on the crotch. I don't think mum liked that shock value thing. But people still came."

When she went on to swap her real surname for the Cruella-inspired deVille, it was less about shock value than the fact that her real surname started with a B. "I don't actually like the letter B. I don't find it a very good letter to do graphically," she says. "It's kind of cumbersome, whereas with a D and V, they're much more elegant."

Unlike Disney's shrieking, dalmation-obsessed fashionista, deVille is more interested in live animals than dead ones. Her "ethical taxidermy" is a celebration of the life of the animals she preserves and decorates in "diamonds and rubies and gold".

"They're all things that people will regard as being precious and valuable, but to me the animal is far more valuable," she says. "If I need a diamond, I can order any diamond I want, but if I want a lamb, I have to wait till a stillborn lamb occurs. I can't just go and buy a lamb and kill it, because that's against what I believe in. It's raising questions about what we value and what really is precious."



Cookies & Cream, by Julia deVille. TERENCE BOGUE

It's a point that is often lost on viewers encountering her work for the first time.

"I've had anger and hate mail when people see my work ... They'll say, I hope the same thing happens to you, or I hope someone taxidermies you, or I hope you die."

Generally, she says, her critics are "young teenagers and probably in a place I might have been at that age and they see these images and react without realising that there is a thing called ethical taxidermy".

Perhaps unsurprisingly, she felt it was only fair that she donate her own body for preservation, registering with the Institute of Plastination in Germany, where donors' bodily fluids are replaced with polymer to create what it calls "human specimens" that are then displayed for medical research or exhibition.

"In a way, that's a bit of a joke because I don't care what happens to me when I die," she says. "I also have an agreement with MONA, because I have a work there called *The Cinerarium*, which is a burial ground. People can actually buy a plot in the museum and have their ashes put into one of my urns. Maybe I'll have half my body sent to Germany and the other half cremated and put in MONA," she says.

While others might blanch at the idea of discussing mortal remains over lunch, deVille's approach is disarmingly matter-of-fact.

"There's nothing more matter-of-fact than death," she says. "There are a lot of cultures that celebrate it and are far more aware of it. Even the Victorians had rituals ... they would do mortuary photos, do one last family photo with the person and make mourning jewellery. There was an allowance for grieving ... now it's swept under the carpet."

Surrounded as she is by death, I wonder if deVille believes in an afterlife.

"Not in terms of heaven. But I believe in reincarnation. There are certain people that you meet and you feel like you've known them already. I feel like I've known my mum for a very long time. We're very close. I've had a few different clairvoyants who've said that mum and I have had dozens of lifetimes together in different relationships. And that makes perfect sense to me. She's my best, best friend."

***Animal Kingdom*, including works by Julia deVille, is at the Johnston Collection until September 19. johnstoncollection.org**

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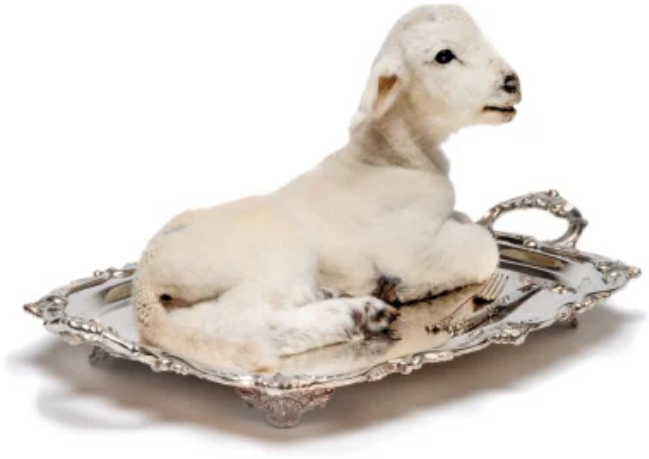
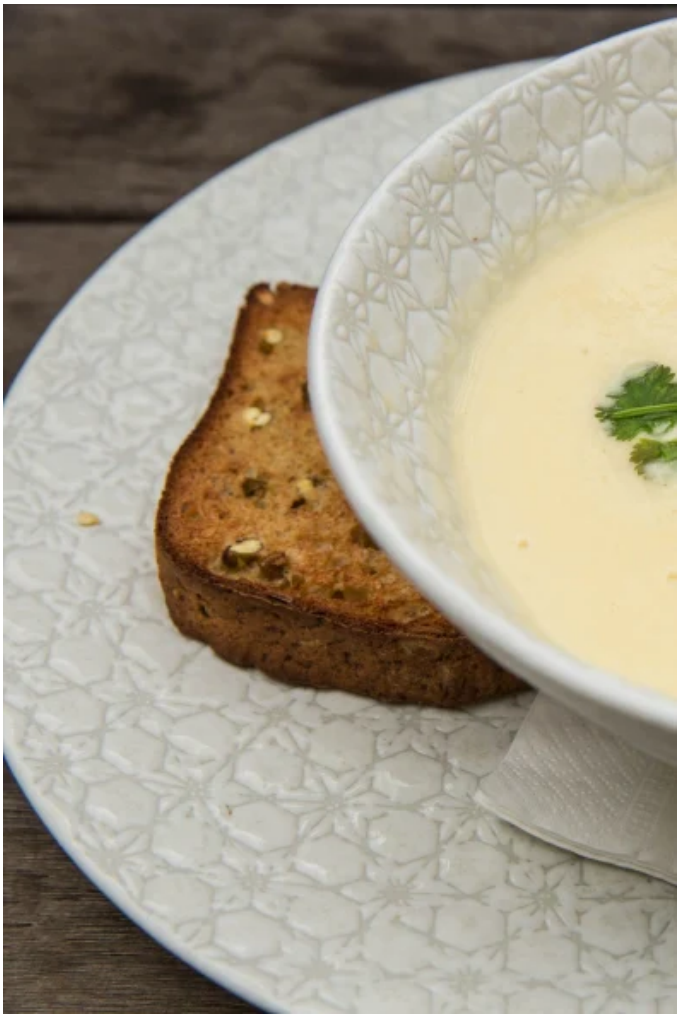
Cornflower, by Julia deVille. TERENCE BOGUE

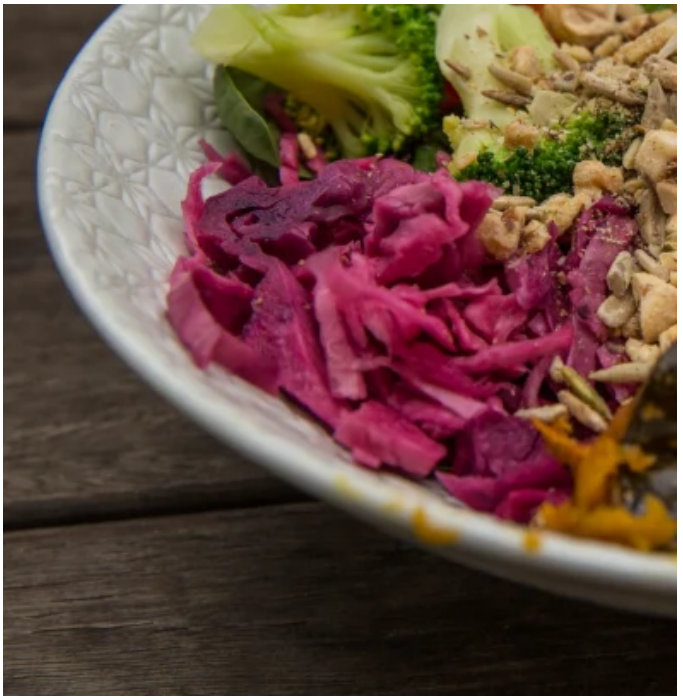


Elan Vital, by Julia deVille. TERENCE BOGUE

Orpheus, by Julia deVille. TERENCE BOGUE



Corn and coconut soup at Serotonin Eatery. STEFAN POSTLES



Nutrition Bomb at Serotonin Eatery. STEFAN POSTLES