

Collected flotsam and jetsam of sea culture

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Littoral Burnie Regional Art Gallery, Tasmania. Until September 12.

VIVONNE Bay on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, is where Neil Thwaites, an eccentric electrical engineer, became lost on a bushwalk.

This was soon before his daughter was born, which is why Vivonne Thwaites, a curator of unusual art projects, bears her unusual French name. Scientific navigator Nicolas Baudin bestowed it on the bay in 1802 while sailing along the southern Australian coastline he named Terre Napoleon.

Littoral, Thwaites's present exhibition, evolved from the marine-biology art of Charles Alexandre Lesueur. He recorded oceanic and coastal sea creatures while sailing, from 1800 to 1804, on Baudin's voyage.

Produced for Hobart City Council's Carnegie Gallery, Littoral is now at the Burnie Regional Art Gallery. It includes 18 digital prints of Lesueur's fresh on-the-spot drawings and watercolours, held in the natural-history museums at Le Havre and Paris, plus his music score of indigenous chants sung at Timor and Sydney for the Frenchmen.

A single portrait drawing of a young Sydney Aborigine, who could have been a chant singer, is by the expedition's other artist, Nicolas-Martin Petit, whose specialisation was anthropological studies.

Thwaites commissioned six contemporary Australians to produce Lesueur-related works. All but Toni Warburton, who is based in Sydney and has long made shore-related ceramics - some of which are strung on to a giant necklace of attractively weathered flotsam on fisherman's rope - had collaborated on earlier projects.

Three are South Australian. Aadjie Bruce's loose floorpiece installation is composed of discarded plastic detritus. Chris De Rosa immerses us in open-work linocuts of seaweed collaged on to a field of flower-patterned

linoleum more than 3m high. (Every day De Rosa swims through the seagrass in her cove on the Fleurieu Peninsula.)

Beverley Southcott made a video projection of deceptively gentle incoming tides in Adelaide. Judy Watson, an indigenous Queensland painter, contributed watercolour studies of Barrier Reef coral, bleached by warming seas. Julie Gough, an indigenous Tasmanian, made a strange installation about interactions between strangers on non-European shores.

In Paris, studying the Baudin archives, Thwaites also visited the art museums and was struck by similarities between Lesueur's blobby, spongy creatures and the forms characteristic of early 20th-century surrealism. Salvador Dali, Man Ray and others were interested in the interface between science and art and favoured beach settings for their images of metamorphosis.

In an unusually interesting catalogue for the exhibition, Thwaites and essayist Jean Fornasiero emphasise the Baudin team's delight in capturing - with rapid, freely-washed colours - the short-lived vivid hues, sometimes phosphorescent, that quickly faded from "the luminous serpents" or "molluscs and other gelatinous animals".

In the 1840s, Lesueur returned from many years of natural-science work in the US at the utopian community of New Harmony, and realised that the shores at his native Le Havre had become degraded. He became a defender of the coastal environment; his late activism as well as his early marine-science watercolours lie behind Littoral.

Dense human populations have been degrading coastlines for many centuries. Southcott's huge video of gentle wavelets coming in to a suburban foreshore in Adelaide is mirror-imaged, and therefore becomes a toothless but relentless shark mouth gulping on the recently over-settled shore, where protective concrete and sandbags will never prevail.

Fisheries, too, have been continually destroyed for centuries, at first only locally, but in the late 1980s over-fishing reached a global tipping-point.

The fish we like to eat are disappearing fast: jellyfish are already considered a delicacy in parts of Asia; one day there could be only sea slugs, algae and other forms of slime in the ocean: Lesueur's kind of sea creatures.

Gough's Manifestation is the star turn of Littoral.

It's a tug of war performed by spears - made by Gough on Bruny Island, where Europeans first encountered Tasmanians - which are held horizontally, by chairs, across a dead fire. A shiny, reflective gallery floor evokes beach wetness.

Other spears fall diagonally into the fire where teatree stakes were cured; others, vertical, support burned-out chairs high above the ground.

Think of Dali's flaming giraffes or his elephants airborne on spider legs. Then remember the many accounts of first-contact attempts at communication: dances and songs performed in turn for and by the strangers, words exchanged. Laughter and anger.

At Shark Bay a blazing log was hurled at Baudin's people in angry exchange for an offered doll. Gough's tug of war chairs are uncomfortable to sit on, their seats studded with black-crow shells: one spells out the English word "forget", the other the Bruny Island word for "to remember", which translates with subtle difference as "to not forget".

Gough tells us that exchange is the greatest wonder of all: that there will always be natural and cultural degradation, but something else of value may evolve in the process.