

LITTORAL

Littoral was a long time in the making, a product of many years of research by several people and careful planning by the curator Vivonne Thwaites, yet it is a small and simple exhibition — a perfect one, allowing for the stringency of its budget. A larger and better-funded show would deliver a multitude of aesthetic pleasures but could hardly compete for completeness. In this exhibition the 'littoral' not only is the theme of the works, it is embodied by the totality of their assemblage, so that, walking into Carnegie Gallery in Hobart, one enters the littoral.

The entrance to the gallery is at one corner, facing a brightly illuminated EXIT sign on the opposite wall. That crass Occupational Health and Safety configuration makes the long room more of a chute or sluice than a littoral. However, in this instance it has served the curator well, for the room's dynamic is taken up and the rush through space restrained by the display. Two phalanxes of glassed and framed works on paper, by Judy Watson and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, hold the entrance corner within their grids, and a second line of defence, a heavy fender of black stones and upright array of spears, by Julie Gough, projects into the gallery on the same side, halfway down the room. Their combined weight and militant order shores up the gallery's cubic space, by contrast with other works that drift lightly in the tide.

The effect of the organic assemblage and the tidal movement through the gallery of the works of art is that the viewer becomes part of the interaction between sea and shore. The glossy floor is reflective, so that we move in and out of zones of muted light and indeterminate understanding. Walk back and forth across the entrance corner to view the banks of Lesueur's and Watson's drawings — Judy's return to the same kind of work that had been undertaken by the French artist-explorer who visited Tasmanian shores two hundred years ago. Circle around Gough's installation — and wonder whether its enigmatic marriage of church, hearth, and embattled shore could suggest that life involves an on-going skirmish at the frontier? Skirt Aadge Bruce's environmental death trap: a pile of transparent plastic bags and colourful plastic coils that floats like a jellyfish at the exhibition's centre. Wade through the silvery light of Beverley Southcott's film-projection. She has photographed shallow waves slowly advancing and retreating across sand; they now wash back and forth over one's feet on the wooden floor. Move up close to see the intricate detail of Chris de Rosa's marine print; then step back several feet (into Bruce's flotsam) to take in its majestic height. Last in this circle around the littoral, Toni Warburton's *garland/watercourse* is reminiscent both of Aboriginal necklaces and of Lesueur's sensitive visual exploration of the amorphous creatures of the sea. She has seen something in Lesueur that could be explored further. There is indeed a striking resemblance between his unusual colours and lively compositions and the graceful, original designs of the late rococo and Biedermeier periods: wash back in thought to Chris's seaweed print on flowered lino.

Lesueur is the other dimension in this show and, as an exemplar, is an integral part of the littoral it envisages. Two hundred years ago, as an artist on one of Napoleonic France's ambitious scientific expeditions led by Nicolas Baudin, he explored the Australian coast on the *Géographe*. Lesueur's life story and his 1,500 study drawings

from the 1800-1804 expedition seem to have given rise to the first, embryonic idea for this exhibition. All six artists have possibly responded to Lesueur along the way in shaping their art of the littoral. Vivonne Thwaites explains *her* interest, which took her to Paris on a research scholarship in 2006:

‘Throughout July I walked each day, over the Ile St. Louis, past the Université, down Rue Jussieu to Rue Cuvier, and into the Jardin des Plantes and the Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle. The places and street names were redolent of the Baudin voyage, which left Le Havre on 19 October 1800 and navigated its way around Australia before the *Géographe* returned to Le Havre in 1804 with “countless cases of minerals, dried plants, shells, fishes, preserved reptiles and zoophytes, stuffed or dissected birds and quadrupeds, seventy large boxes filled with living plants....” The expedition secured the largest and most valuable natural history collection of its time.’

In the Library at the Jardin des Plantes, each morning, she looked through folders of Lesueur’s ‘gem-like’ paintings, the majority of which ‘were of undersea life – bright and curious’. At the Centre Georges Pompidou, in the afternoons, she was drawn by the twentieth-century work of the surrealists. They too, explored the border between the (barely noticed because accepted) formulas of the mind and inchoate aspects of the natural world.

‘Although Lesueur was not seeking to shake traditions, the urgency to capture the colour and shapes in the marine environment, and the sheer strangeness of the creatures, allowed him to use his full palette and drawing skills and to celebrate, with loosely brushed paint on paper, the extraordinary diversity he encountered....’

What Vivonne responded to in the drawings was their beauty mixed with wonder. I have not seen the many preparatory drawings she saw but recognise the truth of her perception. The quality of stark wonder is less apparent in the few relatively clumsy early drawings I have seen, which do indeed suggest that Lesueur painted in strict obedience to the scientific directive to ‘paint what you see’ but without confidence that he truly ‘saw’ the nebulous creatures before his eyes. The trauma of those first encounters seems to have become decisive for his art when the memory of that agoraphobic early struggle to see entered his finished paintings, informing them with a strange ‘jewel-like’ beauty. The sublime terror of first encounter extended beyond the threshold of familiarity — after he acquired a natural historian’s savvy about how to look and what to represent of the living creatures he represented — and gave his work a scintillating brilliance of colour and pattern and a fixed, Medusa-like presence that somehow served to characterise the eccentric movement of life. Those later images recollected in tranquillity were based on the first, loosely-brushed observations. A quality of deep respect is always present in the drawings Lesueur made of the fish, the corals and pulsing gelatinous jellyfish that were hauled up from the sea to be noted quickly, there and then on the deck of the ship, before their life and colour faded.

‘[T]he small jewel-like watercolours by Lesueur bring the viewer right up to the boat and into the wonder of what was being captured during the voyage. A large proportion ...were painted immediately a catch was hauled up from the ocean.’

After Lesueur teamed up with one of the expedition's zoologists Peron, in an intimate friendship and professional association that ended only with the death of Peron in 1810, the enigmatic medusae were to be the special theme of their combined work.

Lesueur could be said to have a connection with the surrealists who, a century after the age of global exploration, sought to re-activate the feeling of sublime terror and excitement in the face of the unknown that had been lost through ordered, full-scale scientific measurement and understanding of the natural world. Vivonne brought to the exhibition-in-the-making the history of her own observations, the dual challenge of the littoral and the surrealists' and Lesueur's wonder.

The idea of the littoral has directed much scholarship in the past half century. My strongest memory of the idea is from the history professor Greg Dening, who imagined cross-cultural encounters in fluid terms as an indeterminate zone, such as a beach — which was where, historically, many first encounters in the Pacific were made. As the sea regularly floods the shore, so peoples regularly meet, mingle and inform each other while, in some ways, they also draw apart and remain distinct. The idea resonates with the most intimate relations between members of a family and, at the opposite extreme, the fraught encounters of strangers. If the exhibition *Littoral* at first sight appears to deal more with what is fraught and unaccommodated (Lesueur's first experience) than with the familiar (his jem-like, aesthetic resolution of the sublime encounter), the latter proves to be just as strongly evident in the works of art.

Most if not all the six artists produced work specially for the show, and most of their works combine personal associations of tidal reassurance with environmental fear. The catalogue texts indicate some of the lived background. Throughout the year, winter as well as summer, Chris de Rosa swims across Horseshoe Bay, Port Elliot, in South Australia, through the sea grass. Her print's lacy seaweed pattern, net-like and dark coloured, grows across the larger-than-human sized surface (like cancer cells) and is arrestingly beautiful in company with a pastoral, rose-scattered linoleum pattern. The artist explains *Liminal lace* as an image of 'calenture': 'a delirium suffered by sailors on early voyages. Gazing out on the ocean, suffering from the privations during a long voyage, sailors imagined they were seeing the green fields of home'. The curator recalled that one of Lesueur's expedition drawings overlaid a European cityscape with jellyfish.

Julie Gough's *Manifestation* with its hearth, chairs, spears and black stones (in the context these seem like the fuel for a massive fire) could manifest her own, inner, littoral as one who has both European and Indigenous family connections. At a universal level, it speaks for all who inherit two or more cultures. Historically, it could refer to the indigenous domestic fires seen from the watchful ships of European exploration and the bale fires by which major events were telegraphed across Europe in ancient times. Toni Warburton's watercourse of associations also refers us to the human littoral. Her haunt has been Sydney Harbour's upper reaches, where salt and fresh water mingles, and her activity has been that of a beachcombing archaeologist dredging up exquisite corpses: sieve, funnel, tambourine drums complete with skin, metal funnel, crumpled drying-rack for dishes, punctured plastic foam cup, plastic

wrap, string &c. Like the sea, her art has been to change these lost bodies into something wondrous, to string and loop them in pretty colours of baby blue, pink, grey, cream, white and brown.

Judy Watson came into the exhibition fresh from a residency at the University of Queensland's Heron Island Research Station. In that World Heritage listed area scientists have been measuring coral bleaching (the death of coral), the impact of changed sea temperatures on seabird populations, and the effect human rubbish is having on creatures of the sea: as, for instance, turtles who are ingesting large quantities of clear plastic bags, probably mistaking them for jellyfish. The residency connected in an intriguing way with Watson's art where an interest in water has been persistent. In *Littoral*, her sketch drawings of shells, coral, kelp, are accompanied by two, typically ambiguous, watercolours where transparent washes of colour, edged, overlaid, juxtaposed and transposed like the sea and shore, convey messages 'almost subliminal ... to be discovered in the layering of the surface and the imagery that floats mirage-like on it' (to quote Margie West).

Beverley Southcott's screen-based *Re Seas* has an effect rather like Jean Paul Sartre's epiphany as he stared at the roots of a tree, transfixed within an uncalled-for experience of seeing them outside understanding. During ten minutes, we watch the clear waves lip slowly forward and float back over the sand, an hypnotic repetition of movement that is imperceptibly influenced by a pattern of ridges and angles in the sand over which the sea slides. At one stage in the loop the retreating water reveals circular lumps of sand – their oddness, though inconspicuous, is sufficient to break the trance, interrupting one's enjoyment in the cradle of rocking sea by their signal that something may be out of order.

Aadje Bruce's work stands out as particularly elegant, taut and uncompromising. It seems appropriate that the random assemblage of clear plastic and plastic tags should be so bright, beautiful and disarming for it gives a clear ecological message that the chief danger to the natural world is us.

I have been around the exhibition twice, in slightly different ways, and introduced several ways in which the works show themselves when seen in a group. Individually, they do not close upon such tight meanings, and even in concert open many different possibilities from those I have outlined. Vivonne Thwaites is the first to point out the openness that characterises the artists' ways of working. Art is not didactic. It is not good science, railroaded along clear lines of thought. Its invitation and appeal is that it holds out opportunities for reflection, and responds variously to individual ways of looking. The exhibition, small as it is, should not pass unseen. Its ideal forum would be Tasmania's innovative Ten Days on the Island festival, whose audiences are prepared to experience fresh ways of seeing the world and art. Those who do not travel to Tasmania to see the exhibition, should at least get the catalogue, which has some of the best essays ever written about Lesueur and the littoral by the curator and the scholar Jean Fornasiero.

REPRODUCTION: X17

