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## **Vera Möller: 'My father thought going to art school was like wanting to become a communist'**

**The German-born artist explains why she first studied biology rather than art, how her scientific background informs her work, her love of the Great Barrier Reef, and why she is moving away from painting painstaking details of imaginary species**



by JANET McKENZIE

The sculptures and paintings of Vera Möller present fictional hybrids that represent the permutations that take place in an environment as a consequence of pollution, global warming, overfishing and tourism. Her engagement with the [Great Barrier Reef Foundation](#) reflects her commitment to environmental, scientific, political, ethical and philosophical issues that are inextricably connected. Coral bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef has prompted scientific activity on an international scale.

Born in Bremen, Germany, in 1955, Möller studied biology, microbiology and theology in Würzburg and Munich, before migrating to Australia in 1986. In Melbourne, she studied fine art at the Victorian College of the Arts and Monash University. Her rigorous art practice draws on her scientific studies, in which underwater photography occupies a key position. The sculptured works, and subsequent paintings, are prompted by the study of plant forms, but they are imbued with a haunting, animalistic character. Instead of collating and illustrating algae samples from Bavarian lakes, as was her practice in the 1980s, Möller creates new hybrid forms: surreal mutations of natural species. The invented “creatures” include coral forms, toadstools, cacti and succulent plant forms that are then carefully painted in spots and stripes. Her art practice is informed by her scientific study, but also by a love of gardening and the forensic observation of the coastline near to where she has recently moved, with her husband, the artist [Philip Hunter](#), on the Bass Strait in Flinders, near Melbourne.

Möller is keen on fly-fishing, which she says is primarily concerned with observation, providing a rich supply of surface-patterning from nature: fish, birds, snakes, insects, sticks and other plant forms. Her most recent painting departs from the forensically rendered “creatures” and embraces the fluidity of the underwater environment with grace and visual poetry. Her surreal juxtaposition of elements, a reflection perhaps of the interface between aesthetics and science draws attention to the environmental crisis caused by pollution and also to issues surrounding genetic engineering.

I spoke to her at her home in Flinders.

**Janet McKenzie: Can you describe the residency you had on Heron Island, off Gladstone in Queensland, with the Great Barrier Reef Foundation?**

**Vera Möller:** During my microbiology studies in Munich in the early 80s, I specialised in limnology, the study of inland waters or freshwater ecology. With the development of my art practice in Australia, in early 2000, I turned my attention to the Great Barrier Reef as a subject. This 2,300km-long coral reef ecosystem is the largest living thing on Earth, and can be seen from outer space. It is extremely vulnerable and in the past 30 years has lost half its coral cover. Last year alone it experienced severe coral bleaching in the northern part, in about 30% of its mass. There are many factors to blame for the damage that continues to occur. Global warming and the effects of climate change are clearly a major factor, as are the increased severity of cyclone activity, deadly crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks [when the density of starfish is such that they consume the coral tissue faster than the corals can grow], which are caused by pollution and rises in ocean acidity. Coastal development may also become a major threat.

After being introduced to the GBR Foundation in 2005 during a fundraising campaign, I developed a close relationship with it. The foundation raises significant funds for research that focuses on supporting the resilience of the reef. It commissioned me to develop a sculpture to mark its annual research prize awarded to reef research scientists. In addition, I continue to support this “Bommies Award” [a bommy is a submerged offshore reef] through gifting a hand-coloured, editioned print of an imaginary coral specimen every year, one that was specifically commissioned by the foundation. In 2013, the foundation offered me the rare opportunity to be the artist-in-residence on Heron Island, at the Research Station of the University of Queensland. During the time spent on the island, I was able to observe some of the research conducted at the station. In addition, I gave a lecture about my work as an artist.

At night, I could watch giant female green turtles arrive to lay their eggs on the beach and listen to the tens of thousands of black noddy terns, wedge-tailed shearwater (muttonbirds) and eastern reef egrets during their breeding season. You had to wear earplugs to be able to sleep. I did a lot of snorkelling around the fringing reef and was able to observe fantastic coral formations, colourful fish and other amazing species, sometimes disquietingly close to the circling reef sharks. Apart from learning so much about the reef and its inhabitants, I also worked on an underwater project. It was based on speculations about future mutations, in this case fictional species of marine invertebrates. This work formed part an ongoing cycle of projects, which had its origins in the [Kings Wood Forest](#) near Canterbury, Kent, in the UK, in 2009. I continued with versions staged in the sub-alpine heathlands of Skullbone Plains, Tasmanian Central Plateau (2013) and then Heron Island. Since then I have worked at Cape Schanck, close by, on Victoria’s Bass Strait coast, and currently on Mushroom Reef marine reserve, a basalt reef at Flinders, 300 metres from home.

In preparation for the underwater project on Heron, I had prepared miniature-sized sculptural objects in the studio. They had the appearance of imaginary marine specimens, fictional hybrids. Biologists on Heron described them as imaginary mutations of marine invertebrates. I set up “submarine scenes” by placing these very small sculptures in among the corals of the reef and elsewhere. I photographed them as species that either have not been discovered yet, or species that might have existed in the past. The aim was to invert display strategies familiar from domestic or large-scale public aquariums. Instead of flamboyantly coloured marine flatworms or a nudibranch placed in the artificial setting of an aquarium display, an inanimate object had been installed in a living environment. The resulting photographs do not exclusively focus the viewer’s gaze on the objects, but reveal small details of the setting, minutiae that normally evade observation. This continues to be an important purpose of these projects.

**JMcK: Fictional Hybrids owes a great debt to your scientific training. How did you come to study science before art?**

**VM:** As a teenager, I was very interested in biology, but I was also fascinated with art. During the early 70s I had experienced dazzling works brought together in a brand new, predominantly American, pop art collection at the Neue Galerie – Sammlung Ludwig in Aachen, the town where I grew up in West Germany. When it opened in 1970, it was one of the first museums for contemporary art in Germany and gave a panorama of what new art could look like. With friends, I would go and look at the great number of gobsmacking exhibits, we would discuss Duane Hanson’s *Supermarket Lady* (1969) and Nancy Graves’s *Kenya*, and *Mongolian Bactrian* (1969). I’m not certain, but I believe Ed Kienholz’s *The Portable War Memorial* (1968) was there, too. This was all a big deal. I had never seen anything like it. We would attend the gallery’s popular evening sessions to watch avant-garde films, or go to experimental music events.

The lasting influence that these experiences have had on me and my group of friends can’t be underestimated. I remember that my parents were shaking their heads at the time and could not understand what all the fuss was about. In fact, conservatives in Aachen were so opposed to the display of the collection and its associated activities, all presented in a city-owned historic building, that it became necessary for some professors of the local university, RWTH, to found a support group. Eventually, this tension and the need for expansion led to a move of the collection to an old umbrella factory, the new Ludwig Forum of International Art.

Four of my friends proceeded to study art in Düsseldorf. When my father asked me what my plans were for the time after completion of high school, I mentioned that I might like to go to art school, too. But he was unimpressed. In his view, this plan was as close to wanting to “become a communist” as you could get. He had reasons for his objection. Joseph Beuys had taught at the academy at Düsseldorf between 1961 to 1972, until he was sacked for a number of provocative decisions he had taken at the institution. A founder of the Green party in Germany, Beuys was on a collision course with the mainstream, with his strong and

very public advocacy for political and environmental action. Both through his own work and as a teacher, in the view of my parents' generation, at least, he had become a "disturbing" social influence. I guess my desire or determination to become an artist was simply not strong enough at that time, and I decided to study biology instead. My hope was to become a biological illustrator.

I was very fortunate that during my biology studies in Würzburg, I was taught the subject of biological illustration by emeritus Professor Wohlfahrt. Part of his life's work had been the production of a four-volume encyclopaedia of Middle Europe's butterflies, for which he also provided all the accompanying watercolours and illustrations. Wohlfahrt was a terrific teacher and able to fuel enthusiasm among his students for the wonders and knowledge of the natural world, and he encouraged the precise representation of phenomena through drawing. Though I acknowledge my capacity to be annoyingly impatient, I did learn patience for the execution of artwork there and then.

Eventually, I studied microbiology at the TUM in Munich, a course that introduced me to the study of fungi (mycology) and to freshwater ecology (limnology). As a student researcher, I was employed to assist with various groundbreaking freshwater lake research projects throughout Bavaria. My role was to collect algae samples, identify and count the algae species under the microscope, and then draw them with precision.

**JMcK: Have you been influenced by Beuys: his environmental concerns, the application of his practice and philosophy to the wider society, to the alchemical processes he employed?**

**VM:** I have encountered many of his works, but I don't think Beuys or his modes of action and production have directly influenced my own practice. But his actions, and the public's reactions at the time, certainly provoked the need to ask questions, to become interested in what it meant to grow up in postwar Germany, and to deal with Germany's immediate past. Jochen Gerz's and also Anselm Kiefer's work interested me for the same reasons. Beuys's environmental philosophy has become of interest to me much more recently, in the context of engaging with questions of climate change and the age of the anthropocene.

I am acutely aware, however, that the shaping of sensibilities occurs during the earlier years in our lives, when one tries to make sense of encounters with unusual things, things that appear somehow weird, or out of place, that are not easy to explain. All those years ago in Aachen at the Neue Galerie, I had an encounter with an artwork that did make a big impression on me for the above reasons. I cannot tell any more if it was indeed one of Beuys's works, or a concept piece by another artist. Displayed in a glass vitrine was a single apple, all by itself, rotting/drying/ shrinking away over a period of months. I was struggling to comprehend what this was supposed to mean, or at least mean to me. It took me a while "to get with the programme". When I now think about the many Beuys works that I have seen in the past decades, I am still intrigued by Beuys and find it difficult to articulate what the intrigue is about.

One particular mode of framing frequently employed by Beuys that does interest me is the idea of the vitrine. I have created constellations of objects in Perspex display boxes for many years, as they are clearly associated with glass cabinets familiar from natural history museum displays. It is a way of isolating groups of objects. The inaccessibility of such objects behind glass immediately brings them acutely into focus and renders them as something special.

**JMcK: Your studio is a very inspiring place with a huge volume of work, both complete and in process. It also resembles a huge laboratory. How would you describe your research methods, and the forensic processes you employ?**

**VM:** I guess I go about collecting snippets of information and bits of stuff just like a child would. Any time I walk out on to Mushroom Reef at the end of our street, there are things to see and photograph. The idea is to move about slowly and stand still often, to bend down and to turn rocks over, to look very closely. To be prepared to reach into the water, feel under a rock ledge and see what might turn up.

Only a few weeks ago, after sunset, I discovered a rather large octopus in what was quite a small rock pool. He tried really hard to hide from me. When I insisted on touching, he whirled his arms around wildly to scare me off, revealing an underside that was flashing with bright orange, apparently the octopus's colour of anger. I left him alone and was then able to observe this fantastic

creature go through every camouflage trick it had up its sleeve. Not only did it effectively modify its skin colour to look like the appropriate “basalt rock pattern” of the surrounding reef’s basalt platforms, it then went a step further. To successfully mimic the surrounds of its hiding place, it came up with really crazy 3D skin surface articulation, making skin folds in order to look just like a bunch of dark seaweed ... just amazing!

Apart from such excursions, I continue to engage with our ever-growing collection of books. I regularly scan a lot of online material about a variety of subjects, ranging from reef research to fashion shoots, from horticultural blogs to websites dedicated to architectural innovation. Equally, I love to forage in opportunity shops and street markets for books, magazines and odd bits. Every now and then I come across something that I would regard as an unusual find. I am after curious subjects, mysterious reproductions and uncommon collage materials that I can add to my collection of “items of interest”. Out of this melange, I filter bits of visual and conceptual information that will eventually lead to ideas for new work.

**JMcK: The subversion of nature into haunting hybrid forms conjures the mad scientist who creates horrific, threatening creatures. How, in your view, can fantasy and fear operate to raise consciousness of the magnitude of environmental dangers?**

**VM:** How do we deal with the urgency of a potential future in an environment that is perhaps dramatically reduced in diversity and beauty, and possibly severely depleted in those natural resources that we need for survival? There is a plethora of artists nationally and internationally employing a diverse range of strategies to raise consciousness about the environmental issues we are facing today. The use of horror, or creation of fear, for the purpose of raising alarm is a perhaps useful tool, even more so when applied strategically and in well-calibrated doses. I recently listened to an important reef research scientist, Ove Hoegh-Guldberg (he coined the term coral bleaching), who commented that the scientific community must strive for a positive approach to communicating the future of the reef, to find pockets of optimism. If the account of the full “horror” of the GBR’s decline, for example, is the only story that is being told to the public about what happens there, people tend to disengage rather than engage. That is what I understood he was saying.

What does, or could, fantasy bring to this particular subject? It might mean to show something from a different angle by recasting it in an unusual context.

Artists clearly use fantasy to extrapolate and exaggerate in order to deliver material in ways that will startle the viewers and heighten the senses. The surrealists so effectively used tactics of rupture and recombination to shake their audience out of their boots. Today, to produce an image of horror might simply mean to create visuals of the available statistics of human interference and the consequences.

**JMcK: Underwater photography and fly-fishing both contribute to your invented creatures. Can you describe how you research the subject, how you continue to inform your practice?**

**VM:** As I indicated, I go out and seek exposure to familiar or unfamiliar terrain. I have been fly-fishing since the early-90s. For about 20 years, we used to set up camp in the same spot, right on the edge of the Goulburn river in Northern Victoria. With a growing familiarity with good fishing spots in the area and developing a nose for where to exactly look for trout, I noticed other creatures and features in the same environment. I literally learned how to look properly, how to watch for movement in and out of the water, how to distinguish subtle colour changes and make out detail. That required sitting as still as I could on the bank of the river. I was able to observe platypuses going about collecting their food in their habitat, and watched busy water rats and poisonous snakes swimming past me. I saw wombats with their babies and spotted magnificent yellow-tailed black cockatoos feeding their young. To watch trout feed at close range, on various aquatic and terrestrial insects in an eddy at the bottom of your feet is just fantastic. It really sharpens your eye. The observed detail contributes to a memory bank of forms, colours, textures and markings.

During my residency in Kings Wood forest in England, I used a macro lens to photograph miniature objects I had made and positioned among the mosses and lichen on the forest floor. The view through the lens reveals a microcosm of life forms and detail. Equally important as a means of arriving at new forms for objects is straightforward experimentation. I am not aiming to illustrate

or imitate existing lifeforms: my aim is to come up with some new shapes.

**JMcK: Stripes and spots abound in the natural world, but you also highlight the cultural significance in clothing: pirate costumes, prisoners, Marimekko fabrics and the decorative history and potential. How did you come to realise the power of these formal elements?**

**VM:** I began to develop an interest in particular sets of decorative schemes when I recognised just how often they appeared on items of clothing, flags and other items documented in my family's photograph albums. They were particularly dominant in holiday snapshots from beaches of Germany's North Sea islands. This proliferation was clearly a consequence of the international popularity of various patterns during the late 1950s and early 60s. Stripes and dots, especially when seen in complex layers or accumulations, I realised, signified particularly enjoyable parts of my childhood. From the late 90s onwards, I looked more closely at visual, formal and conceptual aspects of such schemes.

I investigated characteristics of spot and stripe patterns in nature and culture, in creative, historical and architectural contexts. My interest was specifically in mechanisms of concealment as part of camouflage regimes, and in optical aspects of seeking attention or of warning. Through the ages, stripe patterns have been frequently used in clothing to mark the "other" and the "untrustworthy", for example. The work of Yayoi Kusama and Daniel Buren has been on my horizon as well. In terms of the application of those patterns within my own work, I was particularly keen on their optical characteristics and their metaphorical potential.

**JMcK: Colonial illustrators in the 18th and 19th centuries in the antipodes were often startled by the oddness of local flora and fauna. How did you react to the environment when you came from Europe to Australia?**

**VM:** A strong desire to live in Australia was awakened during my initial visit here in 1981. I visited Wilsons Promontory in the south east of Victoria. Both geological and climatic events helped to make Australia's fauna and flora unique. It was just so fascinating and so different from what I knew from Europe that my appetite was whetted. I could cite numerous examples of animals and plants that are characterised by a distinct otherness that is not easily defined. Marsupials, wombats and kangaroos, for example, and the monotremes, such as the platypus and the echidna, with their "odd" body shapes and reproductive systems, seemed peculiar and often unattractive to people arriving from Europe a few centuries ago. Early illustrations frequently demonstrate how problematic it seems to have been to come to terms with new physiognomies and physiologies.

The aforementioned platypus, a monotreme, has a soft bill that resembles that of a duck, while the body looks similar to that of a mole or otter. It looks so weird that it reminded me of the Bavarian wolpertinger. This is an entirely fictional creature that people would construct by stitching together parts of taxidermied small animals. This practice was found throughout the larger region of the European Alps, probably to keep the mind busy during long winter evenings.

For me, the excitement about all this has never really worn off. I totally enjoy looking into our garden, feeding three kookaburras that land on the veranda, admiring our tall gum tree, looking up to the new arrival, a koala with joey. I love walking past our plants – kangaroo paws, grevilleas, banksias and leucospermums. Two months ago, we discovered that a big blue-tongue lizard was living here, too. Regarding the occasionally unfavourable remarks about Australian flora by visiting Europeans, a personal anecdote comes to mind. I vividly remember a comment my mother made during her one and only visit from Germany. Having observed the extensive shedding of bark by some eucalypt species during our cross-country drive, she remarked: "I don't really like these trees, they look so untidy."

**JMcK: The glasswork of the Vienna Secession movement shares your passion for vivid colour, stripes, spots and organic forms. Has it, or other aspects of art nouveau in Europe, been an influence on your aesthetic?**

**VM:** Not really, I don't think. My aesthetic was more significantly influenced by things I saw during a three-month residency on a Keith and Elisabeth Murdoch travelling fellowship in Japan, in 1997. Traditional and innovative contemporary modes of display, food and fashion culture, old artefacts in museums, walking around Kyoto through temple gardens and shrines – those experiences had a lasting influence on my practice.

**JMcK: Can you describe the body of work, Labland? Were the mice real?**

**VM:** In 2001, I found a shoebox in our store room in which a mouse had made a nest from finely shredded blue plastic bag material. In it, I discovered seven tiny baby mice, with grown hair but still blind. They were crawling about ever so slowly. I brought the box into the studio and put the mice on my big worktable. It was filled with a large array of handmade objects that I was experimenting with at the time. To my great excitement, the little mice moved about at a snail's pace and sidled up to some of the objects close by. The constellations created by the mice crawling into all sorts of weird positions in relation to the objects were stunning. One single mouse, for example, in order to be able to cuddle up to the rest had climbed on top of the others, but then got stuck in what looked like a miniature tree form. When the others eventually slowly moved on, it was left there, like a cow that had been stuck on a tree after a great flood. The scenarios looked so entirely surreal that I immediately decided to document them. I used up the one roll of film that I had left in my fridge. This was well before the time I had digital cameras or mobile phones. One photo shows the group of mice in parallel formation, with their heads pointing and pressed tightly to one of my smaller dotted objects, just as if they were trying to suckle – a marvellous tableau, a composition that had not been choreographed by me, a chance event. The images intrigued me as “pseudo dioramas”, a still-life setting with live mice among simulated organic forms.

After I had finished, I placed the tiny creatures back into the box and back where I had found them. The plan was to get plenty of film and repeat the shoot the next day. But the next morning they were gone. Mother mouse had moved them elsewhere and I was unable find them again. The resulting sequence of photographs, together with the actual table full of objects, I later showed at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne.

**JMcK: The Dutch still-life tradition has informed your painting. Can you describe the apparent energy that exists in the portrayal of deathly stillness?**

**VM:** I find the stillness of those images very attractive. There is a pent-up energy that is somehow frozen in the paintings. But I must say not all of them interest me in the same way. My additional curiosity about artists of this period was the new use of the microscope and lenses, and their role as naturalists.

For a time, I looked closely at the highly choreographed, hybrid bouquets of some of the Dutch still-life painters of the 17th century, artists such as Jan Goedaert and Ambrosius Bosschaert. I refer to these paintings of flora as hybrid bouquets, because we are looking at bunches of flowers that just don't blossom at the same time. They were meant to be showstopper pieces. Another artist is Marseus van Schrieck, who set up a meticulously composed scene against the backdrop of dark and impenetrable underwood. He created a brooding impression of the deathly relationships between the hunters and the hunted on the forest floor. These are all very tight but potent images. To produce paintings with such intensely observed and accurately rendered detail takes serious technical finesse. This painterly brilliance was something these artists apparently competed for and prided themselves on. However, the purpose for the creation of those images was not simply to shine with artistic flair. As a Calvinist, Goedaert's practice as a painter and as an entomologist was driven as much by an intellectual curiosity as it was by his Christian faith. The study of insect metamorphosis afforded him the view of a microcosm, and the secrets and processes discovered there cast a light for him on larger macrocosmic principles. His interest in the arcana of insect life followed on in the tradition of the Renaissance humanists, and Pliny before them.

**JMcK: The recent paintings, Liquilumber, employ a more fluid application of paint that reminds one of Morris Louis and abstract expressionism. Can you explain the shift?**

**VM:** The shift in the paintings needed to satisfy two strong ambitions I had for a new body of work. I wanted to make a clear break from the very tight mode of painting that I had developed over a longer period of time. Instead of painting painstaking details of close-ups of imaginary species, I wanted to be able to capture the experiences of gliding through the underwater spaces on the Great Barrier Reef.

The move to our new studio in the previous year had created a significant interruption to studio life and I felt the time was right to experiment with entirely different strategies of the physical application of paint. I convinced myself to adopt a sort of devil-may-



care attitude, to cut loose and simply experiment for a while. I very purposefully did not look at any artists, but simply let myself be propelled by the things that I had encountered underwater during my snorkelling expeditions among the fringing reefs on Heron Island. At the same time, I had also studied more closely the photographs I had taken with my macro lens in 2009, of a forest floor during the residency in the Kingswood in Kent. I really liked the fluidity of colours, the blurring of forms in those areas in the photographs that were out of focus.

After a brief period of experimentation, I developed confidence and started to work on large canvasses. Certain similarities with work by artists such as Morris eventually became apparent, but I have not consciously ever made it a point of reference. My concern with these paintings was to capture some of the visual information, the almost hallucinatory effect of those mysterious underwater spaces on the Great Barrier Reef. I wanted to create paintings about the stunning optical effects that I had seen there, of light filtering through moving water, about the layering of transparent seaweeds and the distinct absence of any observable horizon due to the relative opacity of water. I wanted to paint about looking up from the bottom of the reef and about phenomena such as opalescence, iridescence and bioluminescence.

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