

Vera Möller

*A
THOUSAND
TIDES*

Vera Möller

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A Thousand Tides

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A THOUSAND TIDES

BUNJIL
— PLACE —



Program Partner



Presenting Partner



Berwick Mazda



Vera Möller
Flinders, Victoria 2019
Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy

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Vera Möller

Foreword

Through this project, we share with Dr Möller the hope that it encourages the discovery of the significance of this amazing biosphere, to recognise it as a space for creative exploration and as a realm worthy of everyone's imagination and protection.

Located in the heart of the south east growth corridor, the City of Casey covers an area of 409km² and encompasses a richly diverse and complex landscape including urban, agricultural, forested, wetland and coastal environments from the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges to the Western Port coastline.

Water is a significant element in the Casey landscape and provides important aquatic habitats for a range of species. We are lucky to fringe Western Port, an area recognised internally for its diverse ecosystems including seagrass, mangroves and saltmarsh that support a range of migratory bird species, endangered terrestrial species and complex underwater systems.

Casey is committed to the protection of its waterways and coastal environments and works with other agencies such as Melbourne Water and Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority to deliver works that improve water quality, reconnect the landscape and manage pest plants and animals.

Each year, Council with the support of the community, plant more than 20,000 trees to reconnect the landscape and improve biodiversity. Council's community engagement activities raise awareness of Australia's native flora and fauna and introduce residents to our diverse landscape. Council has committed to undertake maintenance on water sensitive urban design features that support our growing communities and provide amenity, cooling and character to our suburbs whilst also providing important urban biodiversity. Water management is a core priority for Casey and the aquatic habitats play an important role in ecosystem function, water treatment, stream health and protection of our wonderful bays.

To bring attention to the significance of Western Port, Bunjil Place Gallery has had the pleasure of commissioning artist, Dr Vera Möller to present an exhibition of new work on her ongoing research and engagement with the Western Port region. This body of work is now unveiled in this major exhibition, *A Thousand Tides* which is the first of what will be an ongoing series in our gallery program that invite artists to engage with contemporary and historical connections to the region.

Dr Vera Möller is one of Australia's most significant artists, having exhibited extensively here and overseas since the early 1990s. The basis of her creative practice is drawn through a deep engagement with the natural world, stemming from studies in biology, microbiology and theology in Würzburg and Munich, Germany prior to the artist migrating to Australia in 1986. Möller has amassed a body of knowledge across her career that is vast and ever expanding through dedicated engagement with the latest scientific research in an array of fields.

Corresponding with the practice of science, the artist studio is also a laboratory for experimentation. The synergies between these disciplines are apparent when reading the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)'s definition for research and experimental development, commonly referred to as R&D as... *creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge - including knowledge of humankind, culture and society - and to devise new applications of available knowledge.*

The development of this exhibition has created a platform for cross-disciplinary collaboration, with the Bunjil Place Gallery team

working in close dialogue with the Environment & Heritage and Waste Education teams within Council, and an array of community groups and organisations in the region. We are indebted to everyone for understanding the value of art in its ability to connect ideas with audiences and in understanding place.

Furthermore, within this publication is featured a series of essays by experts in their fields which together provide wonderful varied and layered histories and meaning of this region from a diverse range of perspectives.

We are so grateful that this exhibition features as part of the ART+CLIMATE=CHANGE 2019 festival and we have relished the opportunity to curate a special week of programming across the precinct including talks, performance, film, workshops and spoken word that celebrates our region and empowers us to find solutions for climate change.

Our thanks to the galleries that represent Dr Möller, Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane, and to our major exhibition partner, Berwick Mazda for supporting this important project.

Through this project, we share with Dr Möller the hope that it encourages the discovery of the significance of this amazing biosphere, to recognise it as a space for creative exploration and as a realm worthy of everyone's imagination and protection. Hopefully then an encounter with this exhibition might promote a sense of empathy with this extraordinary and vital local environment.

Simon King

Environment & Heritage Team Leader

Georgia Cribb

Bunjil Place Gallery Director

opposite:
Vera Möller
Flinders, Victoria 2019
Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy

Vera Möller

Evolution teaches us that for every species that exists today, millions once existed that are now extinct, and countless more might have existed or are yet to come into being.

The science of possibility has always fascinated German-born artist Vera Möller; the inspiration for her paintings, sculptures, collages and photographs are rooted in observations of natural objects and phenomena, even though the results are works of imaginary hybridisation. Much of her current exploration centres on the sea and its shoreline along the Mornington Peninsula and especially Western Port Bay.

“All my works are fictional,” she explains, “but they exist in the *realm* of the nudibranchs and other marine invertebrates.”

To that list could be added corals, grasses, fungi, mangrove roots, or sea kelp. Her gaze favours the micro and the multiple, but in some of her paintings plants and other life forms assume colossal size.

Her hypothetical forms are inspired by what we don't know as much as what we do; approximately 75 percent of species in the water are yet to be discovered, she points out, and some are totally inaccessible.

The realms of the utterly non-human contribute to the hallucinatory quality in much of Vera's work, the fascination and alienation that comes when land-dwelling bipeds peer into the watery depths.

The excitement of creating, she says, comes from the meeting of outer and inner worlds, making a connection between her knowledge and observations of nature and mining her private and very personal lexicon of images and memories. These juxtapositions provide the spark; “It won't be apparent to anyone else, but that's when I engage, when the excitement starts,” she says.

Vera, who was born in Bremen in 1955, came to art through science; her extensive knowledge of marine and limnic (freshwater) biology began with a field research and science degree, first commenced at the University of Würzburg in

Central Germany, and completed at Munich's Technical University down south, investigating the fresh-water ecology of Bavarian lakes.

Her original plans to study art were scuppered by her father who saw art schools as hot-beds of radical politics – a fair enough assessment in Germany in the mid 1970s – but there was creativity under the microscope too; she originally had ambitions to become a biological illustrator, a highly specialised and exacting field and her meticulous drawings of the microscopic algae were a vital part of learning and recording what existed in the chill waters of her homeland.

However, when Vera came to Australia in 1986 she was finally able to explore art in a broader context and as a discipline in itself.

This she did, first at the Victorian College of the Arts, with a BA and MA between 1990-1998 and then at Monash University, where she completed a PhD in 2007.

Titled “Dizzyland, a Studio Exploration of Biological Hybridity and Hypothetical Life Forms”, her thesis signalled that, like the Swiss-German artist Paul Klee, who described art as “taking a line for a walk”, Vera could use her knowledge of biology to take science for an artistic gambol.

A walk with Vera along the seashore is a mini seminar; it includes discussions of the vividly-hued molluscs known as nudibranchs, the habits of the Blue-ringed Octopus and the romantically-named algae, Neptune's Necklace, whose gelatinous greeny-gold strings festoon the rocks of the bay. She delights in the connections between disparate things; her recent discovery that, under infrared light, the Painted Lady or Pheasant Shell (*Phasionella Australis*) glows with a strong bioluminescence, inspired Vera's creation of faintly glowing mangrove air roots, one of this exhibition's largest installations.

The title of the show, *A Thousand Tides* similarly riffs on these juxtapositions; although partly a play on the influential work of critical theory, by Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, published in 1980 it suggests

“All my works are fictional, but they exist in the *realm* of the nudibranchs and other marine invertebrates.”

– Vera Möller

a view of the world that isn't anthropocentric and poses the question; how many tides does a lobster live? A mollusc? A strand of sea grass?

She doesn't claim to be an environmental artist, or, despite her training, a scientist, but from the mid-2000s her work has explored endangered and fragile environments; these include working with the Great Barrier Reef Foundation on Heron Island in Queensland and a cycle of projects in various locations including the forests of Kent, in England and Skullbone Plains, in central Tasmania.

Vera has been visiting the Mornington Peninsula for more than a decade, exploring the rock pools of Cape Schanck, the basalt platforms of Mushroom Reef off Flinders and especially Western Port Bay.

The latter is protected under the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty protecting wetlands. It contains many species of fauna and flora and terrains of mud, sand and basalt. The Weedy Seadragon, Victoria's emblem, also thrives here, as do several rare grasses and sea slugs. The mangroves to the north, though extensive, are under constant threat and are all that remain of the once-extensive Koo-wee-rup swamp.

She and her husband, artist Philip Hunter, moved to Flinders, on the bay's southernmost tip, in 2016.

Philip passed away of a fast-acting cancer in April 2017 and from being a creative playground they could share, it has become, in her bereavement, a place of intense solace and meditation.

Vera found that she was using a lot of white in her paintings. White is the colour, in many cultures, of mourning. White is also the colour of absence, of transformation, mist, smoke, turbulence, disappearance.

Vera's large paintings and installations start life in the studio and the first thing you notice in her cluttered but ordered work space is the exuberance and richness of colour; jewel-like gouaches and collages of intriguing shapes stand out from their plain backgrounds like

specimen drawings from a museum in a parallel universe; Perspex vitrines are filled with hundreds of striped and spotted forms, coral-like, fungi shaped, floral. They are simultaneously attractive and slightly dangerous; we can't categorise them, we don't know if they sting, or if they contain poison.

These vitrines, she has said, are partly inspired by the German artist and environmentalist Joseph Beuys, whose framing of objects was also a form of caging. As a way of framing, the glass case signals separation and categorisation, as well as evoking the dusty halls of 19th century Natural History museums and the controlled environment of the science laboratory.

But Vera's studio, though ordered, is too cluttered to be a lab; there's also a strong whiff of the academic's study in the shelves of books and learned journals and the collections of specimens in boxes, jars and display cases.

She mentions her teacher in Würzburg, Professor Wohlfahrt, who was a well known biological illustrator and whose life work included a four-volume study of Middle-Europe's butterflies.

Another inspiration (and fellow alumnus of Würzburg) is the 19th century physician, botanist and traveller, Philipp Franz von Siebold; he was one of the few Westerners allowed in to Japan during its 200-year-long Sakoku period of international isolation.

In 1997 Vera travelled to Japan as part of the Keith and Elisabeth Murdoch Travelling Fellowship and her collages of an imaginary zoological and botanical collection, *Flora and Fauna Japonica* with their meticulous groupings and spacing spring from Siebold's pioneering work.

Her husband, Phil, was also a great teacher, she says, who awoke in her a fascination for the Australian bush, on numerous camping and painting trips to the Goulburn River. They'd fish as well; the stillness and patience needed in fly-fishing, says Vera, is also very useful for observing the business of a stream-bed and the movement of insects and birds.

“I react aesthetically. But if I happen to have knowledge in that area, I can apply it. My work is a mixed bag of all of these interests. Sometimes it’s a bit confused, sometimes clear.”

– Vera Möller

“I react aesthetically. But if I happen to have knowledge in that area, I can apply it. My work is a mixed bag of all of these interests. Sometimes it’s a bit confused, sometimes clear.”

Her colours and patterns mimic nature, she continues, but are just as likely to erupt from a sudden memory of a favourite teenaged dress or a family holiday from childhood. Alongside her interest in patterns as camouflage and display, spots and stripes, she confesses, remind her of happy times in her childhood.

Vera’s sharply defined and meticulously made sculptures and collages contrast with the dreamy large oil paintings hanging on the walls, in various stages of completion.

Her paintings used to be sharply defined too, reminiscent of Dutch still-lives, but she changed direction towards a looser style a few years ago, a sea-change towards exploring the spaces around objects, rather than the objects themselves.

Here, on canvas, the aquatic shapes are dreamlike; the eye plunges into a forest of swaying kelp, tangles in a shimmer of hazy scrims and then lights on a vivid shape in orange or dense black.

She’ll work on several paintings at once, laying them flat and creating layers of ground colour allowing the flow of paint to suggest its own form. She shepherds these very liquid washes and concentrations of colour until she’s happy with the result. Only then does she stand them upright and starts what she describes as “large-scale doodling” until shapes emerge.

The technique mimics the movement of plants in agitated water and the tension between chance and control are what she finds most exciting about making art. But she’s playfully

guarded about the details of how she achieves the shimmery haze of her work. That would be revealing too much of the mystery, she says.

Vera’s conversation is infused with urgency about the loss of diversity and destruction of habitat and she’s engaged with a range of study and pressure groups. But her work is never didactic. The aim of her work, she says, is to draw the viewer in to a series of fantastic realms that feed the imagination as well as awakening a fascination for the world in all its immense diversity and strangeness.

Her aim, she says is to “beguile and seduce”, not to alarm or lecture; but in her brave new world of hybrids, hypotheses and serendipity, we are bound to sense the destruction of the strange and wonderful realms she references.

Fiona Gruber

Fiona Gruber is an arts journalist, critic, radio documentary maker and broadcaster who works in Australia and Europe. She is a features writer and critic for several publications including the Guardian, the Australian and The Times Literary Supplement and makes programs on the arts for ABC Radio National.



Vera Möller
celsenium 2017
oil on canvas
183.0 x 151.0 cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph: Vera Möller

pp. 12–13
Vera Möller
morphofolia (plate no. 4 and 12) 2018
collage on paper
each: 52.0 x 35.0 cm (sheet); 72.0 x 52.0 cm (frame)
Collection of the artist
Photography: Mark Ashkanasy



Somewhere in Between

Underwater gardens, basalt reefs, the mangrove adorned coastline – these are the kind of spaces that fascinate Vera Möller.

She has long been a traveller of the underwater realm, drawn to places that we do not necessarily understand, improvising off the unfamiliar, the bizarre and the strange.

Vivid with colour Vera Möller's art is otherworldly and alive with ideas. The tenor of her paintings, collages and sculptural installations often echo relationships that exist between mind and matter, linking different worlds and times, and different positions of seeing. Using a visual language that stems from exchanges between nature and culture, Möller wanders easily among natural science and art histories alongside literature and philosophy across centuries and cultures, and within her own locality for inspiration.

This imaginatively conceived exhibition *A Thousand Tides* presents twenty-two works in varying mediums that extend upon Möller's curiosity of natural phenomena and the sensorial and visual sensations of aquatic environments. For this exhibition Möller's attention settles on the intertidal coastline of Western Port. Though not conventionally beautiful, Western Port's habitats are intricate and extraordinary. It's fauna and flora both terrestrial and aquatic are plentiful, perplexing and at times weird and exhilarating - a key to understanding why this region has captivated Möller since her arrival in Australia in the mid-1980s.

Möller's art practice spanning thirty-years is informed by her foundation in biology,

microbiology, theology and fine art. Furthermore, lived experience has included important and seminal artist residencies exploring, observing and documenting precious and vulnerable environments. Her studio practice, like a scientific laboratory, involves open ended inquiry and experimentation which continually challenges the process of making through chance encounters with the chemistry of pigment, gravity and material. "All of those influences are brought back into the studio...utilising the memories I have, observations during field trips and the things that I make, artists I talk to and those from other fields, the working process I employ in the studio bring all these elements together, with a focus on the environment." Möller explains.

From this rich archive Möller is not simply representing or illustrating scientific research - she extracts and co-mingles past and present ideas and imagery, resulting in new forms being conjured into existence. These imaginary hybrids revel in the idea of the mysterious, the notion of things that are yet to be discovered or have unknowingly disappeared - a navigation of the scientific unknown.

The interactions found between the oppositions of nature and culture, technology and biology, and the singular in relation to the greater whole have been an ongoing narrative within her practice.

Notably, her aesthetic also has a basis in Surrealist principles, adopting techniques

“...These visual phenomena that are very hard to even describe and they are so wonderfully outlandish and unfamiliar. These strange forms that you see, are swaying in the moving water. It's a completely bizarre world.”

– Vera Möller

of chance and the processes of collage and assemblage as a way of transforming both the meaning and the context of the original, into new fantastical forms, biomorphic shapes in strange dream-like contexts. She engages this organic realm, populating her paintings and sculptural tableaux with the notions of the unfamiliar, weird and uncanny.

Drawing upon these concepts, and created in 2019 specifically for this exhibition, *vestibulia*, *memoriama* and *cajalía* are three major works conceived in response to the unique characteristics and intertidal habitats found within Western Port. The bay's dramatic tidal shifts provide an everchanging landscape full of diverse and intricate micro environments that are closely located and as a consequence interdependent.

For *vestibulia*, the ideas that underpin this expansive sculptural tableau emerged through periods spent closely observing the shallow rocky basalt reefs and underwater gardens located within the bay's deep channels. These living spaces offer endless encounters with the strange and flamboyant marine life that they house. Commenting on these experiences, Möller explains:

“When I moved to Flinders, I was really enthusiastic to discover all of the strange creatures living on Mushroom Reef. Elephant snails that looked like stealth-bombers. It is thoroughly weird looking sea life. From a point of materiality; translucent, gelatinous forms, bioluminescence, opalescence... These visual phenomena that are very hard to even describe and they are so wonderfully outlandish and unfamiliar. These strange forms that you see, are swaying in the moving water. It's a completely bizarre world.”

Taking its colour cue from the grey basalt rocks and the vivid and complex optics of the marine fauna and flora that inhabit them, *vestibulia*'s complexity of colour, patterning and intricacy of forms is staggering. These extraordinary underwater micro habitats, that are alive and in constant motion, are full of communication systems where tactics of camouflage, or high contrast colour and pattern are employed as a method to either attract prey or transmit signals of warning.

The concept of natural history displays has also been an ever-present narrative within Möller's oeuvre and as the title suggests *vestibulia* too is positioned somewhere in between an imaginary underwater 'cabinet of curiosity' artificial reef and an aqueous garden.

Rather than delineating her practice, Möller views her sculptural objects and paintings as part of a greater whole. The paintings as imaginary habitats or hallucinatory spaces where her hybrid sculptural forms might emerge. Overall, Möller's works are imaginings that capture an essence of the natural world. They evoke imaginative experiences of specific environments, of being part of it mentally, emotionally and physically.

Within this vernacular *memoriama* is a work on paper that spans an incredible six-meters, the sheer scale inviting our direct physical engagement. This work marks several new directions for Möller - it is the largest work on paper that she has created to date, it is presented in a landscape format rather the familiar portrait presentation and incorporates ever so subtly a suggestion of a horizon line, that opens the work's interpretation to being simultaneously an underwater and terrestrial environment.

“The ebb and flow of the tides of Western Port are quite extreme, and no tide is ever the same.”

– Vera Möller

Similarly, *memoriama* in the context of Möller’s body of aquatic paintings, employs the visual tensions between what could be a microscopic detail of the natural world under the lens or a macro vista of an environment observed from afar, evoking spaces that are atmospheric, dream-like and hallucinatory. She draws upon her observations of the secluded and otherworldliness of underwater environments observed from the viewpoint of a snorkeler or diver suspended just below the water’s surface.

memoriama also has its origins in the many years Möller has spent observing the bay in various transitions of flux, through its perpetual cycles as tides ebb and flow, days pass, and seasons change. For her, the poetry found within the interconnection of all living things, human and nonhuman, bridge ideas greater than just the immediate site. Bringing into question one’s place in the natural order of things - the part of the experience that is you - a natural system in response to another natural system. “The ebb and flow of the tides of Western Port are quite extreme, and no tide is ever the same. I am always conscious, everything around me moves forward or backwards and how that my own time spent there relates to my own lifetime.” She elucidates.

Germinating from the direct experience of mangrove environments, the installation, *cajalía* is comprised of thousands of individual biomorphic forms inspired by the incredible and unique aerial root system (pneumatophores) of mangroves. In Western Port, these upward root extensions are found at low tide, amassed in mudflats under and extending beyond the canopy of the mangrove trees.

Contemplating the possibilities of what science could create, Möller’s imaginative air-root field is transformed by the phosphorescent tips that glow when subjected to ultraviolet light. This hybrid creation emulates the fascinating communication systems employed by some of Möller’s favourite aquatic lifeforms, that engage in the mysterious biological systems of phosphorescence and bioluminescence.

cajalía is a creative space for contemplation, its basis draws upon actual visual phenomena that can be observed within Western Port. Still, it is a piece that blurs the boundary between the real and imagined, to seduce and draw into question the importance of these special and unique life systems, to encourage us to consider these as worthy of everyone’s imagination and protection.

Penny Teale
Bunjil Place Gallery Curator

Vera Möller
cajalía 2019 (detail)
modelling material and acrylic
20.0 x 250.0 x 350.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne
Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy



Vera Möller
studio 2019 (painting *slow indigo* 2015-19)
Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy



Vera Möller
carliana 2018
oil on linen
180.0 x 150.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne
Photograph: Vera Möller



opposite:
Vera Möller
studio 2019 (painting *slow indigo* 2015-19)
Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy



Vera Möller
memoriam 2019
ink, gouache, watercolour, charcoal and pigments on paper
142.0 x 625.0 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne
Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy



Vera Möller
palette 2011
 modelling material, plastic, silicone, enamel and acrylic paint,
 MDF and Perspex cover
 56.0 x 55.0 x 55.0 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne
 Photograph: Vera Möller

pp. 24–25, 26, 28, 29 & 30
 Vera Möller & studio 2019
 Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy





Vera Möller
vestibulia 2019 (detail)
mixed media
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne
Photography: Mark Ashkanasy









Vera Möller, Flinders, Victoria 2019
Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy

The Significance of Western Port to the Bunurong People

I am writing this brief statement on behalf of the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation. As an archaeologist and historian, I recognise my privilege in being an educated European male, and that my profession has often perpetuated the colonial paradigm. As a result, I feel that in order to decolonise our work, and the resultant social spaces it produces, we need to do more than ask for the token input from Indigenous people into research agendas and the construction of these spaces but offer the mastery of our craft to work instead within an Indigenous-led agenda. A small measure, to attempt to counterbalance the massive structural inequality that has resulted from the attempted genocide of Indigenous people and the colonisation of what is now Australia.

During the pre-colonial era, Western Port and Port Phillip Bay are only recent additions to the cultural landscape of the region. Formally rivers and floodplains, they were formed by the rising sea waters during the Holocene period, six to seven thousand years ago. Compared to the deep time Indigenous occupation of south-eastern Australia, which is currently understood to be approximately 35,000 years old, Western Port and Port Phillip Bay are new features of the coastline.

The Bunurong people's traditional lands extend from Werribee River in the north-west, down to Wilson's Promontory in the south-east including the catchments of Carrum Swamp, Western Port and the Tarwin River, including the Mornington Peninsula, Phillip Island and French Island. All of this cultural landscape is significant to the Bunurong. Three Bunurong clan estates areas surround Western Port: Burinyong Balluk to the West, Mayone Bulluk to the north

and Yallock Bulluk to the east. This landscape included the resource-rich great swamp to the north (Koowerup), through which, if you did not know the way, you couldn't get through.

During the pre-colonial era the Bunurong people had a seasonal pattern of resource use. This included harvesting different foods as they became more abundant. At times this involved moving camps to utilise these resources. As winter ended, symbolised by the first buds of the Ti-tree, the Bunurong people would move closer to the coast in order to take advantage of the plentiful eggs produced by the many bird species. During the summer months, bark canoes would be made to visit French Island and catch seal and mutton birds. Fishing and foraging amongst the tidal flats of Western Port would also have taken place during the warm summers, resulting in an abundance of shellfish, orchid bulbs or wild currants. As the weather cooled, winter cloaks were made from possum and kangaroo skins, and the Bunurong would move away from the coast to other hunting and ceremonial grounds in the Dandenong Ranges.

The Yallock Bulluk Bunurong were amongst the first Indigenous people in Victoria that were involved in cross-cultural entanglements with Europeans. These early relations included interactions with sealers and explorers. An early French account of Western Port (Durmont D'Urville 1826) recorded seeing sealers, their Indigenous wives and children.

As overland European settlers and squatters arrived in the Bunurong territories, many of these cross-cultural interactions with Indigenous leaders were peaceful. These relatively peaceful interactions with specific settlers were not due to the Bunurong being easily influenced, but instead

As winter ended, symbolised by the first buds of the Ti-tree, the Bunurong people would move closer to the coast in order to take advantage of the plentiful eggs produced by the many bird species. During the summer months, bark canoes would be made to visit French Island and catch seal and mutton birds.

Indigenous leaders such as Old Mr Mann, Koolloorlook, Kurborough, Old Doctor, Bobbinary and Budgery Tom often controlled these interfaces in order to promote their own political and social agendas. The day-to-day records of early settlers in the region such as Edward Hobson and George Smith indicate that the Bunurong people keenly observed Europeans, judged, defied and criticised them, while also manipulating them for their own purposes. However, as European settlement progressed, the colonial endeavour increased its power in the region and the Bunurong people who had survived were moved from their traditional lands to stations and missions, often on other Indigenous people's territories.

The Bunurong people and their lifeways have persisted into the present day. However, the negative influence of colonialism has left a significant legacy upon the Bunurong and other Indigenous people in Australia that have resulted in the need for them to assert ownership of their country in order to move forward within their decolonising agenda.

Dr David Tutchener

Archaeologist and Heritage Advisor
Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal
Corporation (BLCAC)

In regard to putting this together I want to thank the BLCAC, Dan Turnbull, Robert Ogden and the previous work of scholars of the Bunurong people, particularly Marie Fels.

Biology and Art in Western Port



Louis-Auguste De Sainson
France 1801 – 1887
*Vue prise au Port Western dans la Crique
des Mangliers* 1826
lithograph, hand-coloured in watercolour
21.5 x 32.9 cm (image)
Collection of State Library Victoria

The first European pictorial illustrations of Victoria were printed as coloured lithographs in an expedition report, the *Voyage de la Corvette l'Astrolabe* in 1833 in France. One shows five white men, three carrying a dead seal, an aboriginal man, three dogs and a thatched hut among a few eucalyptus trees on a largely cleared slope by the bay. The other is of a larger group hauling a seine net on to a beach. The mangroves that surround Western Port can be clearly seen. The illustrations were made by Louis-Auguste de Sainson, the official artist of a French expedition into the southwestern Pacific commanded by Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville. The expedition visited Western Port in 1826.

Dumont d'Urville and his scientific team landed on the eastern shore of Western Port and noted the tidal mudflats, mangroves and diverse coastal forest of gums, she-oaks and paperbarks. The two naturalists on board, Jean René Constant Quoy and Joseph Paul Gaimard, collected numerous biological specimens. When they returned to France, they described new species of marine invertebrates based on their collections in Western Port: a new sea squirt, the southern calamari, a new species of octopus and another of air-breathing limpet. They were most excited by discovering a live specimen of a bivalve mollusc called *Neotrignonia pectinata*. This shell had hitherto been known only from dead shells collected earlier in Tasmania and before that only as a fossil. The species is common enough in Western Port still today.

As this account tells, art and science as interacting disciplines, and exploitation of natural resources, have a long history in Western Port.

The marine biological novelty of Western

Port was evident to the early French explorers but became especially noticed much later, in the 1960s. What was then the Fisheries and Wildlife Department began to look at the environmental impact of port development at Crib Point and Hastings. It was quickly realised by the marine biologists involved in this study that, apart from the larger fish and molluscs, the fauna living on the floor of the channels and in the seagrass had never really been examined. Their discoveries led to the description of hundreds of new species of small crustaceans, molluscs and marine worms by Australian and invited overseas biologists. The studies in Western Port were the genesis of three important observations by marine biologists like myself studying the fauna of southern Australia. First, the number of species is exceptionally high, in the thousands, compared with similar environments elsewhere, even when compared with the more famous Australian coral reef environments. Second, a high percentage, 90% or more, of these species had never been seen before and lacked zoological names. Third, the fauna is highly endemic, that is, it occurs only along the southern coast of Victoria extending more or less to southern New South Wales and Western Australia but not into northern tropical Australia. These concepts have developed recently into an initiative now called the "Great Southern Reef" – the southern equivalent to the Great Barrier Reef – a system of kelp forests with unique and diverse marine life. Due to its scale and close proximity to almost 70% of the Australian population, the Great Southern Reef forms an integral part of Australian culture and society. It plays a multi billion-dollar role in our national economy, supporting a broad range of tourism, recreational and commercial activities.

The entrances to Western Port and Phillip Island are part of this giant marine system and it is here that this understanding of southern Australian marine biodiversity germinated.

The characteristics of largely unnoticed critters in Western Port are of immense interest to marine biologists researching the origin, evolution and biodiversity of marine fauna. But the critters, burrowing in the sand and moving about the seagrass, play an important unseen role in the ecology and health of the bay. For a start, they are the food of all fish, including those targeted by local fishers. They themselves feed on sediment or filter sea-water thereby maintaining water quality and oxygen levels, critical for the survival of larger animals like fish and birds. All species, including the smallest ones, play a finely tuned balancing act, each having its own role in ecological interactions and food webs. Having many species gives the system some resilience. Being largely endemic means that loss of one species from southern Australia is a loss forever.

Vera Möller's exhibition *A Thousand Tides* includes "paintings and sculpture of imaginary underwater species inspired by the coast of Western Port". My own experience as one who has discovered, described and illustrated numerous species from here and elsewhere tells me that nature and art converge. Many species of the small crabs and related crustaceans that I know well are elaborately and convolutedly decorated or coloured. Some are covered with spines or frills, others are brightly coloured, while some have unimaginable adaptive structures. Their complex forms approach anything that an artist might imagine. This explains in part why biological subjects so often attract artists. The division between straight illustration of the real thing as an aid in description or identification, and artistic interpretation or imagination is not clear. An artist's rendition of a biological subject can be both an accurate representation and evoke an emotional response. Dr Möller's work is unreservedly imaginary but as Oscar Wilde wrote "*Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life*".

The fact that Western Port was the place where these discoveries were made is not an accident. Dumont d'Urville and the *Astrolabe* were drawn to its shelter in 1826, as was industry drawn to its safe harbour in the 1960s, and still.

Western Port is the only deep marine harbour in Victoria and one of few along the southern Australian coast. But harbours like Western Port are by their very nature at risk of over-exploitation. Western Port is special because of its combination of marine environments, unique in Victoria. They grade from coastal forest, maritime saltmarsh, mangroves, seagrass beds, to deep channels. All are precious in their own way for the species they house but also in the way they interact to maintain the bay ecosystem. Together, a large portion of Western Port was designated in 1982 as a wetland of international importance under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (under the Ramsar Convention) and in 2002 the United Nations proclaimed the Western Port region a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Notable is the powerful ability of coastal vegetated ecosystems such as Western Port to sequester carbon, so-called "blue carbon", and thereby help mitigate climate change. Coastal blue carbon ecosystems (seagrasses, mangroves and saltmarshes) are among the earth's most efficient carbon sinks, burying carbon faster than tropical rainforests and locking away carbon in the ground for millennia. It has long been recognised that these blue carbon ecosystems provide other important ecosystem services: enhancing biodiversity, supporting fisheries, and protecting shorelines against extreme weather events.

The reason that vegetated ecosystems are able to accumulate carbon from the atmosphere is their ability, in fact existential necessity, to photosynthesise, convert sunlight to energy and carbon dioxide to plant biomass. Seagrasses are the dominant player in this process in Western Port. Their leaves fuel the food chain when grazed or decay to become a food source for microbes eaten by larger animals. Seagrass beds shelter numerous invertebrates and juvenile fishes such as whiting, and their rhizome systems stabilise sediments. The mangrove fringe performs similar ecological services. Its rotted leaves are a food source, the trees prevent erosion and their branches shelter water birds. Further inland saltmarshes, intermittently covered with sea-water, are a habitat for wading birds and burrowing crabs.



Mangroves, Warneet, Victoria
Photograph: Vera Möller

Western Port is close to a huge metropolis, subject to industrial and recreational pressures, and over the last century to the effects of climate change. Not surprisingly, the areal extent and health of its environments have changed since the most extensive scientific surveys were done in the 1970s. Dredging has impacted deep channels, sediment runoff from agriculture has challenged seagrass meadows such that they have at times retreated significantly and then partially recovered, and saltmarshes have retreated for reasons uncertain. On the positive side, parts of the bay are set aside as marine national parks, at Yaringa, French Island and Churchill Island, that can alleviate some of the environmental pressures.

Several community groups and parts of government are sufficiently concerned about the health of Western Port to be proactive in finding measures that might counter known threats. The City of Casey contributes to these endeavours but importantly their success relies on engaging the local community. One way to do this is

through Vera Möller's exhibition *A Thousand Tides* which I commend. Biologists like me who have worked in Western Port can overwhelm the public with data and dire predictions about the consequences of rising sea-level or drought or sedimentation or erosion. But an exhibition such as this can engage an audience emotionally and stimulate sympathy for what is truly a very special place.

Gary C. B. Poore PhD

Principal Curator Emeritus (Marine Biology)
Museums Victoria

Western Port

Location:



Cannons Creek
Blind Bight
Tooradin

Warneet

French Island
National Park

Flinders

Rhyll

Phillip Island

Legend:

— Ramsar Boundry

● Wetlands



Nudibranch, Western Port, Victoria
Photography: Glenys Greenwood



Painted Lady shell, Western Port, Victoria
Photograph: Vera Möller



Nudibranch, Western Port, Victoria
Photography: Glenys Greenwood

Catalogue of Exhibition Works

Vera Möller A Thousand Tides

All works courtesy of the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne unless otherwise stated. Dimensions of works are given in centimetres (cm), height preceding width, followed by depth.

Paintings

- liquilumber* 2013
oil on linen
199.8 x 167.8 cm
- swashette* 2015
oil on linen
182.5 x 151.3 cm
- sandrana* 2015
oil on linen
149.3 x 149.3 cm
- celsenium* 2017
oil on canvas
183.0 x 151.0 cm
Collection of the artist
- sandrelle* 2017
oil on canvas
167.0 x 137.0 cm
- deatina* 2017
oil on linen
157.0 x 137.0 cm
- lobelior* 2017
oil on linen
157.0 x 137.0 cm
Collection of the artist
- rondaluz* 2017
oil on linen
157.0 x 137.0 cm
- carliana* 2018
oil on linen
180.0 x 150.0 cm
- slow indigo* 2015-19
oil on linen
triptych: 183.0 x 457.5 cm
(overall dimensions)
Collection of the artist

Works on paper

- morphofolia* (plate no. 1-14) 2018
collage on paper
14 works: 52.0 x 35.0 cm (sheet);
72.0 x 52.0 cm (frame)
Collection of the artist
- philolia* (no. 1-70) 2001-2019
ink, gouache, watercolour and enamel on paper
70 works: each 18.0 x 13.4 cm (sheet)
- speciata* (no. 1-33) 2017-2019
pen, ink, watercolour on paper
33 works: 20.0 x 110.0 x 110.0 cm (frame)
Collection of the artist
- memoriama* 2019
ink, gouache, watercolour, charcoal
and pigments on paper
142.0 x 625.0 cm

Objects

- babylonia* 2003
modelling material, plastic, silicone, enamel
and acrylic paint
25.0 x 118.0 x 45.0 cm
- prototopia* 2007
mixed media, MDF and Perspex cover
60.0 x 60.0 x 60.0 cm
Collection of the artist
- palette* 2011
modelling material, plastic, silicone, enamel
and acrylic paint, MDF and Perspex cover
56.0 x 55.0 x 55.0 cm
- zoolette* 2017
modelling material, acrylic and enamel paint,
MDF and Perspex cover
62.0 x 46.0 x 46.0 cm
- nono zone* 2003-19
mixed media
25.0 x 120.0 x 200.0 cm (dimensions variable)
Collection of the artist
- cajalía* 2019
modelling material and acrylic
installation: approximately 20.0 x 250.0 x 350.0 cm
(dimensions variable)
- vestibulia* 2019
mixed media
installation: approximately 50.0 x 240.0 x 480.0 cm
(dimensions variable)
- brearonium* 2019
modelling material, plastic, silicone, enamel
and acrylic paint
33.0 x 67.0 x 35.0 cm

Artist Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to director Georgia Cribb and curator Penny Teale for their invitation to develop this creative project for Bunjil Place Gallery. To be given the advantageous chance and challenge to focus creatively on an extraordinary natural environment, one that also happens to be home is a rare opportunity for an artist indeed. It is an honour to be part of Climarte and participate in the ART+CLIMATE=CHANGE 2019 festival.

After my husband artist Philip Hunter died in April 2017, it was this wonderful invitation that encouraged me to commence working again. Immediately before his death Philip did talk to me about this difficult task and, as always, offered me wise guidance. Nearly two years have passed since then and I have been working on my own in the studio that we once shared, entirely committed to continue in pursuit of those creative values and ambitions that had connected us so powerfully over a period of nearly thirty years. Working towards *A Thousand Tides* has afforded me room for deep introspection in the solitude of the studio. Nocturnal and sunny field trips into the region have allowed me to make some thrilling observations of natural phenomena. On these exciting excursions my steady companion has been our incomparable dog Lolly and sometimes I have had the pleasure to be joined by friends.

It is always a great blessing to be able to work with wonderful professionals.

I have very much enjoyed my collaborations with Georgia Cribb, Penny Teale, Sarah Lyons, Nicole Mason, Catherine Bennetts-Cash, Angela Barnett and Kirsten MacAlpine, and I would like to thank them for their ideas and enthusiasm. Their generous encouragement has been important for mounting this exhibition.

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I dedicate this project to Philip Hunter, my great love and inspiration.

Vera Möller

Thank you

Bunjil Place Gallery sincerely thanks Dr. Vera Möller for her enthusiasm, commitment and shared expertise during the development and realisation of this exhibition and publication. It has been a great pleasure and rewarding experience for us to work closely with the artist.

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In particular, Bunjil Place Gallery acknowledges and extends its gratitude to program partner Climarte as part of the ART+CLIMATE=CHANGE 2019 festival and presenting partner Berwick Mazda.

Penny Teale

Bunjil Place Gallery Curator

BUNJIL
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