

VERA MÖLLER: *A THOUSAND TIDES*

BUNJIL PLACE GALLERY

Underwater gardens, basalt reefs, the mangrove adorned coastline—these are the kinds 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, 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. Möller wanders easily across centuries and cultures, working between natural science and art histories, literature and philosophy, while drawing on her own locality for inspiration.

Möller's imaginatively conceived *A Thousand Tides* presented twenty-one works in varying mediums that extended the artist's curiosity about natural phenomena and the sensorial and visual sensations of aquatic environments. For this exhibition, Möller's attention settled on the intertidal coastline of Western Port.¹ Western Port's habitats are intricate and extraordinary. Its terrestrial and aquatic fauna and flora are a critical key to understanding why this region has captivated Möller since her arrival in Australia in the mid-1980s.

Möller's art practice is informed by her foundation in biology, microbiology, theology and fine art. Her 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.

¹ *A Thousand Tides* is a creative exploration of the fauna, flora and terrain of the local coast of Western Port Bay in Victoria. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognised the importance of the Western Port Biosphere Reserve, and the international Ramsar Convention lists the reserve as an ecologically important wetland site.

Möller is not simply representing or illustrating scientific research, she extracts and links 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 that things that are yet to be discovered or that have unknowingly disappeared can be seen as 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. Möller adopts techniques 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, creating biomorphic shapes in strange dreamlike environments.

Drawing upon these concepts, and created in 2019 specifically for this exhibition, *vestibulia*, *memoriama* and *cajalia* 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 interdependent.

The ideas that underpin the expansive sculptural tableau *vestibulia* emerged from 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. From a point of materiality; translucent, gelatinous forms, bioluminescence, opalescence ... These visual phenomena that are very hard to even describe are so wonderfully outlandish and unfamiliar. These strange forms that you see, are swaying in the moving water. It's a completely bizarre world.²

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 enthralling. 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 influence of natural history displays has been an ever-present narrative

2 Angela Brennan interview with Vera Möller, *Arts News Autumn*, City of Casey, January 2019.

within Möller's oeuvre and as the title suggests, *vestibulia* is positioned somewhere between an imaginary underwater 'cabinet of curiosity', an artificial reef and an aqueous garden.

Rather than delineating her practice, Möller views her sculptural objects and paintings as part of a greater whole, conceiving of her paintings as imaginary habitats or hallucinatory spaces from which her hybrid sculptural forms might emerge. Overall, her 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 6 metres, its 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 than her familiar portrait presentation, and it ever so subtly incorporates the suggestion of a horizon line, which opens interpretation of the work as being simultaneously an underwater and terrestrial environment. In the context of Möller's body of aquatic paintings, *memoriama* similarly establishes a visual tension 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, dreamlike and hallucinatory. She draws upon her observations of the secluded otherworldliness of underwater environments from the viewpoint of a snorkeller or diver suspended just below the water's surface.

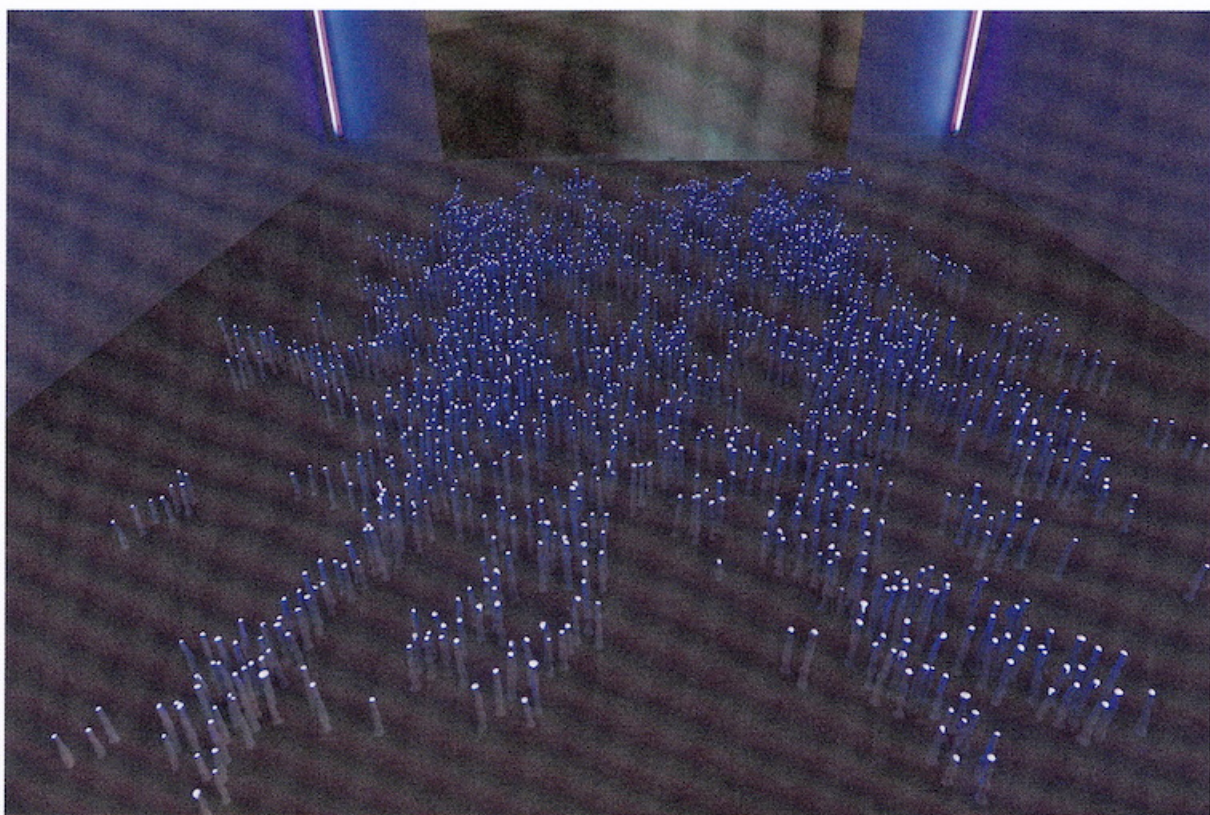
memoriama also has its origin in the many years Möller has spent observing the bay in various states of flux, through its perpetual cycles as tides ebb and flow, days pass and seasons change. For her, the poetry found within the interconnection of all living things—human and non-human—bridges ideas greater than just the immediate site, bringing into question humanity'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. Moller states, '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 that my own time spent, is my own lifetime.'³

Germinating from the direct experience of mangrove environments, the installation *cajalia* 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

3 Artist in conversation with the author, February 2019.

communication systems employed by some of Möller's favourite aquatic life forms that engage in the mysterious biological systems of phosphorescence and bioluminescence. While its basis draws upon actual visual phenomena that can be observed within Western Port Bay, *cajalia* is a space for contemplation. It blurs the boundary between the real and the imagined to seduce and call into question the importance of these special and unique life systems, and to encourage us to consider them as worthy of everyone's imagination and protection.

Penny Teale, Bunjil Place Gallery



Vera Möller, *cajalia* 2019, installation, modelling material and acrylic.
Photo: Mark Ashkanasy.



Vera Möller, *vestibulia*, 2019, mixed media installation, with *memoriama*, 2019 on wall. Photo: Mark Ashkanasy.

