
VANISHING
POINT

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an art/science collaboration on ocean plastics

INSTITUTE FOR MARINE AND ANTARCTIC STUDIES, HOBART
MAY 2015

THE VANISHING POINT COLLABORATION

The idea for *Vanishing Point* began many years ago while combing the King Island Coastline – discovering shells, various sea creatures, pieces of broken china and assorted debris from shipwrecks, and of course, plastic.

At first there was intrigue at the origins of these brightly coloured toothbrushes and cigarette lighters, assorted footwear, shampoo and water bottles with descriptions written in various languages, but the intrigue quickly turned to concern as more and more plastic appeared upon these pristine beaches.

In 2012 during a visit to the Shetland Isles I met BBC nature photographer Raymond Besant while showing his documentary 'The Flying Dustbin'. The documentary features the work of Dr Jan Andries van Franeker and his studies of the Northern Fulmar and the effect of plastic ingestion on their numbers.

It was also there, while watching the puffins battling the North Sea gales and juggling their landings between gusts, I learned that plastic debris was now so wide spread it had been discovered inside the stomachs of the puffin chicks. During a single gale, I watched the waves deposit discarded nets, plastic drums, fishing floats, assorted drink bottles, lighters, and many other items of plastic debris.

While attending Discover Wildlife – an art/science symposium held at CSIRO Canberra in 2014 – it was evident that our ocean's health is severely at risk as the issue of ocean plastic debris was repeatedly addressed.

This was the catalyst to form the art/science collaborative exhibition – *Vanishing Point*.

This is an exhibition where ocean science ventures beyond the customary context of laboratories and academic journals and enters into the realm of art.

The participating artists Sophie, Peter, Ron, Toby, myself, and scientists Heidi, Frederique and Patti, all have a long association with the sea and a shared passion for the creatures and plants that depend on it for their continued survival.

The goal for *Vanishing Point* is not specifically to shock the viewer but rather to encourage connections with the natural world. This connection with our environment is becoming more critical as society increasingly disengages from it.

The works emerge from an inquiry-based pursuit that is common to both art and science, presenting a commentary on the multifaceted nature of both scientific research and artistic expression. Art has the ability to reach in to science, pull out the intriguing and present it to the world in an accessible and thought provoking way.

Vanishing Point focusses on the perceived inherent beauty and value of colourful plastic and its intrinsic appeal to both humans and wildlife alike.

It is an enormous environmental issue for our oceans and for us and demands our attention and action.

Katherine Cooper

WHAT THE SCIENTISTS SAY

Plastic is useful. It is colourful, lightweight and versatile. It is also ubiquitous, persistent and sometimes deadly. The three of us have spent our professional lives travelling the planet, conducting research in isolated locales that most will never see. We've witnessed the devastating effects that plastic debris has on both the environment and its delicate creatures. We've written scientific papers, lectured, photographed, filmed and strived to let the world know that oceanic plastic is not fantastic.

Marine debris is not just an eyesore on the beach – it damages precious wildlife habitats and is eaten by animals mistaking it for food. It causes entanglement of animals, assists transport of pest species, and it is a navigation hazard causing vessel damage.

Ironically, the virtues that make plastic useful to consumers, mainly their durability and chemical stability, are the same qualities that damage the marine ecosystem. Plastic does not biodegrade; it just breaks down into smaller and smaller synthetic crumbs. These tiny particles are then eaten by species closer to the base of the food web.

The fragments of flotsam and jetsam also act as sponges of contaminants from the water which are transferred up the food web.

But it's not just the magnificent seabirds, whales and turtles that are at risk. Recent research shows that fish, marine worms, bivalves, zooplankton and even corals ingest plastic debris that has been fragmented by wind, waves and the sun.

As scientists, we are trying to understand and report this tragedy. We don't have the power to solve it alone. But as a worldwide community, each of us can make a difference with every choice that we make.

Drs Heidi Auman, Patti Virtue & Frederique Olivier

Tryworks Bay Collection by Sophie Carnell.

THANKS

The artists would like to thank everyone who encouraged and supported them on their Vanishing Point journey.

Thank you to IMAS for their assistance and contributions, in particular Executive Director Mike Coffin, Richard Coleman, Anita Gowers and Craig Macauley.

Special thanks to Rob Pennicott for so eloquently and passionately opening the exhibition.

Additionally Katherine would like to thank Michaye Boulter and Adrian Barber for their advice and guidance; Matt Doggett and Ed Dunens for their source photography.

Peter would like to thank Roger Imms & Rob Blakers.

Katherine and Toby acknowledge Gallery Salamanca and Handmark Gallery.

Particular thanks from the artists and scientists to Katherine Cooper for initiating and driving this collaboration with such passion and good humour.

WHAT THE ARTISTS SAY

SOPHIE CARNELL

The process of making work for *Vanishing Point* has been an absolute eye-opener for me – recognising the overwhelming all-pervasiveness of plastics throughout the planet and its systems.

It's easy to become despondent over the damage that we are inflicting upon the planet and ourselves but if we all recognise the problem, be aware and communicate how we use and misuse plastics, perhaps we can come back from the brink.

There are two strands to my work for *Vanishing Point*. By using ocean debris found on local beaches, transforming them into camouflaged natural elements, I echo the plight of the creatures that live and feed from the ocean and mistakenly eat the ubiquitous pieces of plastics as food.

Incorporating this 'waste' into precious objects also highlights what we view as precious and what we view as disposable. If we treasure materials we use every day and better consider what happens after we are finished with them, perhaps we would bestow them and our shared living environment with more value.

The work for this exhibition was made entirely from ocean debris, plastic rubbish already in the waste chain, recycled silver and Australian or repurposed gemstones.

Coral Brooch 1
/ 10.7 x 4.8 x 0.8 cm,
altered ocean debris (thick plastic), recycled sterling silver, repurposed garnet.

Coral Brooch 2
/ 5 x 5.8 x 2.7 cm, altered ocean debris (lollipop sticks), recycled sterling silver, Australian sapphire (Tommahawk, QLD).

KATHERINE COOPER

I have lived on various islands for many years.

Island lifestyle has allowed me to pursue my passion for the environment and to view the impact of our actions upon these once pristine places and their inhabitants – in particular, our seabirds.

My aim is to create an image that allows the viewer to appreciate these amazing creatures for their beauty, grace and skill – to take the time to stop and really observe them.

These seabirds are drawn to the colourful and the beautiful – the small objects floating about in our oceans...and then they eat them.

The Footprint (detail) / 120 x 100cm, watercolour and gouache on Claybord.

The Little Red Samurai has become a signature, linking my pieces for *Vanishing Point*.

He was found in the stomach of a Laysan Albatross during a study conducted on Midway Island by Dr Heidi Auman.

The Little Red Samurai is colourful, beautiful, resilient and he is made of plastic. It's this plastic that is impacting dramatically upon our oceans, its inhabitants, the birdlife and eventually, us.

All works are watercolour/ gouache on Ampersand Claybord.

I am most grateful to the following photographers for the use of their amazing reference images:

Matt Doggett
– www.mattdogget.co.uk
Ed Dunens
– Ballarat, Victoria

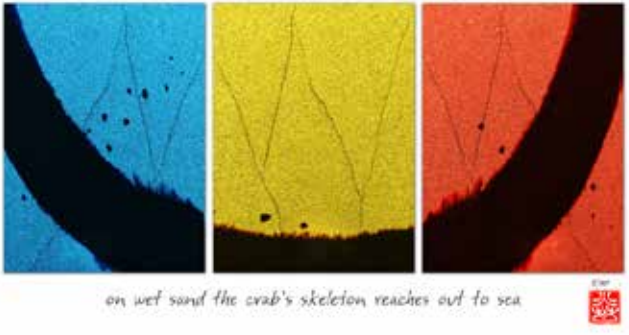
Little Red Samurai
/ 12 x 12 cm, watercolour and gouache on Claybord.

Out to Lunch – Gannet (detail, right)
/ 120 x 100 cm, watercolour and gouache on Claybord.

RON C. MOSS

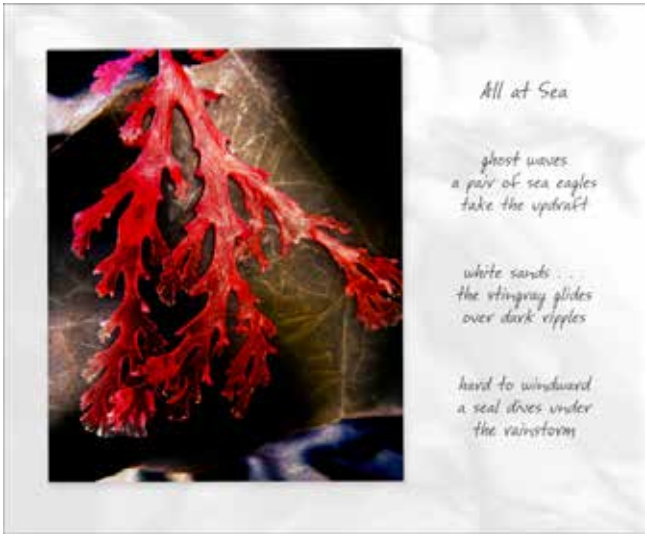
I consider myself a student of the Zen arts, which have fascinated me from an early age. I enjoy the distilled conciseness of haiku, the exploration of art and mixed media, and sometimes I like to combine the two, as in the ancient tradition of haiga. I try to bring a sense of contemplation into my work.

Moments of stillness are important in our very busy lives and my path is to practice the way of art and haiku poetry. It's a privilege to be involved in this very important project with such an amazing group of talented people.



on wet sand / 66 x 98 cm, photographic print framed under glass.

winter beach / 18 x 23 cm, photographic print framed under glass.



all at sea / 22 x 20 cm, photographic print framed under glass.

first dip (right) / 23 x 18 cm,photographic print framed under glass..

the first dip
of my paddle . . .
winter's end

TOBY MUIR WILSON

I set out to explore the communication of a problem, plastics in the ocean, using sculptural furniture. References are made to modes of communication, plastics from the ocean and nautical themes.

'Flag cabinet' layers the feeling of water, rusted iron and safety orange with a message delivered by flags. Messages have been delivered silently for centuries by flags but silence can be loud.

'Love seat' brings us face to face in conversation; framed by water we are facing each other over shards of plastic, a cactus plant questioning one of our futures. The Huon Pine seat from salvaged material possibly 2000 years old dwarves the time scale of a product of industrialisation though not its impact.

'Dark screen' offers some protection as well as a message. Rope salvaged from Tasmania's Tarkine coast is using brush making techniques transformed into a message in Braille (even the blind can see the problem). A verse from Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* paints a positive story of coloured detritus in the ocean.

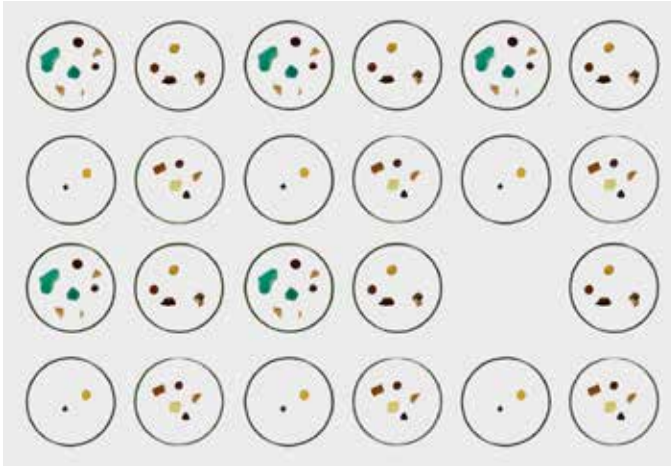
Dark Screen / 180 x 50 cm, salvaged timber and salvaged rope.

Love Seat / 140 x 45 x 50 cm, huon pine, blackwood, found plastic debris.

PETER WALSH

My involvement in the *Vanishing Point* collaboration has made me realise the issue of plastic pollution in our oceans is much more widespread than I'd originally imagined. Walking on various beaches around Hobart looking for materials and inspiration for the project, I was surprised to find the extent of plastic in our marine environment was much greater than I'd originally perceived. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the issue. Maybe the solution lies in taking small steps as a community to both diminish our reliance on plastic products and reduce its widespread presence in our natural environment.

'Food for Thought' is a piece derived from a study by IMAS scientists. Small pieces of colourful plastic were taken from the stomachs of fledgling short-tailed shearwater chicks (confiscated from poachers at Clifton Beach near Hobart). Of the 171 chicks sampled, 96% had plastic in their stomachs. Each circle in the artwork is a petri dish containing the plastic taken from a single chick. The extent of the problem is obvious, what we understand less is the impact it has on these birds. Of the 23 birds represented, is it reasonable to assume at least one might die from plastics ingestion? Will the rate of mortality be higher? Are we willing to accept this loss of life? Food for Thought.



Food for Thought

'A Day at the Beach' is a series of images providing a commentary on the dysfunction, disconnection and disrespect in our relationship to the marine environment using plastics both as metaphor and example. While our fascination with the natural world hasn't diminished, we continually find ways to make ourselves more comfortable and safe when we venture into it resulting in a disconnection and often unnecessary fear.

Much of the time, we're even content to watch it on TV rather than venture into the wilderness. But sometimes we just need to take our shoes off and dig toes into sand, get on hands and knees and see what we can find in the tideline, play in the shallow waters or go for a swim.

A Day at the Beach (detail)


CAUTION
WET
FLOOR

THE ARTISTS

SOPHIE CARNELL creates sculptural works in a variety of media, from precious metals to glass, ranging in scale from small wearable pieces to installations. Her work explores relationships to landscape, place and interconnections with our environment. Natural and found materials are transformed into objects and wearable tokens that carry an essence of this beautiful land in which we live. Sophie uses her art to communicate the importance of the preciousness of the environment that nurtures and supports us all. **sophiecarnell.com**

KATHERINE COOPER is a Hobart based artist whose work is dedicated to raising awareness of the beauty and fragility of our wildlife and the habitats in which they co-exist with humans. Her work is particularly drawn to the birdlife that inhabit our islands and oceans. Katherine has been exhibiting in solo and group exhibitions nationally and internationally since 1990 and her works are represented in corporate and private collections in Australia, UK, USA and the House of Krug, France. She was also a Finalist in the BBC Wildlife Artist of the year 2011 and 2012. **katherinecooperart.com.au**

RON C. MOSS is an artist and poet from Tasmania, a place of rugged wilderness that inspires his work. He is recognised as an outstanding illustrator and designer of many poetry books, and his achievements in haiku and related genres have been widely published and honoured with many awards. Ron is the artist in residence for the online journal *A Hundred Gourds* and the annual *Muttering Thunder*. His award winning first haiku collection, *The Bone Carver* is now available from Ron. **ronmoss.com**

TOBY MUIR WILSON is a furniture maker based near Stanley in North West Tasmania. Major themes explored in his work include landscape and peoples interaction with it. A range of cabinet making skills and decorative techniques are used to create narratives. He is represented in numerous public and private collections. **tobymuirwilson.com**

PETER WALSH has a diverse and busy background including photographer, researcher, musician, sound engineer and software developer. These days Peter spends his time working in marine research and following his passion for photography. With a particular interest in wilderness/landscape photography, he strives to include a message of conservation and care for the environment and collaborates regularly on conservation projects and with scientists working in environmental research.

THE SCIENTISTS

HEIDI AUMAN has worked as a biologist for most of the past 25 years, focusing mainly on seabird biology. Her research is global in nature with a preference for isolated islands. Her specialisations focus upon human impacts on seabirds, including plastic debris ingestion, toxicology, human disturbance, physiology, urbanisation and diet. She has demonstrated that our ecological footprint has reached the farthest corners of the Earth, often with disturbing consequences.

Garbage Guts was inspired by Dr Heidi Auman's research on the impacts of marine debris on Midway Atoll's Laysan albatross. She hopes to educate a future generation about the danger of trashing our seas. Signed copies are available from garbageguts@HeidiAuman.com.

FREDERIQUE OLIVIER is a marine scientist with 15 years of experience in Antarctica, the SubAntarctic and the Southern Ocean and Pacific seas. Fred has spent over 2 years bobbing around on the Southern Ocean and about 3 in tropical seas on her own yacht or research vessels on the Great Barrier Reef, witnessing the plastic issue in all its forms. Growing up in Europe, she was well aware of the marine pollution issues and in 2001, as she started a PhD on marine debris at UTAS, it revealed even birds nesting on the pristine shores of Antarctica are affected by the problem.

PATTI VIRTUE is a marine scientist and university lecturer who has been involved in many Antarctic expeditions undertaking research with her students. Her research incorporates aspects of biological oceanography, sea ice ecology, and studies on zooplankton (krill, which form the basis of the marine food chain). Working in such a precious environment such as Antarctica, Patti is only too aware that micro plastics (the size of krill food) pose an insidious threat to fragile marine ecosystems.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Simple steps to reduce your plastic footprint

1 Most importantly, **REDUCE YOUR CONSUMPTION**! The vast majority of plastic materials consumed by society are not recycled or recovered.

2 **RECYCLE** within your own home – how many new uses can you find for a plastic container? Go to the tip shop or second hand shop instead of buying new.

3 **SAY NO TO PLASTIC**-ware, plastic straws, disposable lighters and even plastic toothbrushes. Bring your own produce bags when you shop. Bring your own water bottle, coffee cup, eating utensils and containers when you order takeaways. Say no to that takeaway coffee plastic top if you haven't got your own cup with you.

4 **BUY IN BULK** if possible, and buy products in boxes, not plastic.

5 **DON'T LET PLASTIC WASTE REACH THE OCEAN** in the first place! If you see a bit of plastic rubbish on the ground, pick it up.

6 **PARTICIPATE IN OR INITIATE COMMUNITY CLEAN UPS** at your local beach, river banks and road sides.

7 **EDUCATE YOURSELF** and others. What happens to your plastic waste? Check out the curriculum, activities, posters and fact sheets here: **marinedebris.noaa.gov/educate.**

WITH HEARTFELT THANKS TO