



City +

Sea

City+Sea

Wollongong is one of many global cities on the sea facing rapid environmental and social change. The sea is ever-present in the lives of the people who live on this long coastal strip, bounded by the escarpment and the Pacific Ocean. The geographic footprint of the City+Sea artwork extends from Otford in the north to Bass Point in the south.

City+Sea invites people to reflect on their relationships with this place. We offer you an unfamiliar perspective of the city from

the sea: a continuous video of the coastline filmed from a fishing boat over three hours and forty minutes, and a corresponding 26 metre long watercolour drawing.

This is a space for people to come together, to slow down, to yarn, to write, to draw, to create, and to share stories of this place.

If you would like to share your response to the artwork, or use the space for reflection, dialogue and learning, please contact Leah Gibbs on leah@uow.edu.au.

Exhibition

University of Wollongong Gallery
20th June – 11th September 2024
Mon–Wed 10am–4pm or by appointment

Interdisciplinary Exhibition Team

Dr Kim Williams (artist)
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Dr Lucas Ihlein (artist)
A/Prof. Sarah Hamylton (coastal geographer)

Artwork Contributors

Hayden Griffith (cinematographer)
Aunty Barbara Nicholson (Wadi Wadi Elder, poet)

Exhibition Tech Team

Phillippa Webb (gallery curator)
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Photography

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ISBN: 978-0-6480276-4-5

Funding

This project was funded by a University of Wollongong ReVITALise (RITA) Research Grant 2021. The exhibition received additional support from ACCESS (Australian Centre for Culture, Environment, Society and Space), and the ARC Linkage project (LP200300895).

Thanks to

Helen F. Wilson, Michelle Voyer, Anna Jones, Aaron Hull, Bobby from Aquilla Fishing Charters, Anthony McKnight, Aunty Carol Speechley, Valerie Harwood, Pauline McGuirk, Cath McKinnon, Sue Bennett, Jo Law, Pete Kelly, Glenn Alexander, Paul Jones, Holden Davies, John Causley (Graphic Design), C3P Research Centre, UOW Printery, Facilities Management Division.

Acknowledgement of Country

We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the land and water on which we live and work, and where this artwork was made. We acknowledge the people who hold connection to this Country, and we acknowledge Country itself.

Revelations

And the past gives up its secrets

While ever there is memory

Of long-held shadows

The good and the bad emerge

In equal measure to suitable

Emotions – stirring – wavering

Back and forth catching the eyes

And ears, tasting the saltiness

The earthiness of bittersweet mixes

And the people rejoice and resent

Simultaneously, for the realisation

Of truth laying in both

Light and shadow

- Aunty Barbara Nicholson, 2024





The city and the sea

A view of Wollongong

The view rolls out, down a steep, green slope, over red roofs, the dark bitumen-grey of streets. The white and reflective glass of apartment blocks. A distinct lighthouse on a headland, surrounded by sloping green grass, and if you look closely, another smaller lighthouse below. The bowl of the harbour, with its masts and gulls. A loved, long golden strip of sand. White water and rips, and the wide expanse of dark blue ocean, stretching out to the horizon, topped by the pale crisp blue of the big sky. It's a view I've seen many times. A view of Wollongong. A photograph snapped from the escarpment; Sublime Point most likely. Or perhaps a glimpse through the trees as I drive home from Sydney.

There's another view, that has become much more common since I made this place my home: the city from the air. A 'drone's eye view' from high up above the waves, looking down at the sea, back across the beach and harbour, through the city streets, the suburbs, the houses creeping assuredly (absurdly) up the escarpment, further each year. Then the blue-grey-greens of the escarpment itself, and Geera—Mount Keira, Grandmother mountain—watching over it all.

These vantage points present particular views of Wollongong. Postcard views. Not the views most of us see in our everyday lives. Not the way we know this place. What happens when we shift our view; take a different perspective? What new truths, ideas, thoughts does that invite?

A city on the sea

Wollongong is a city on the sea. The sea is always present, whether we think of it or not. Some of us get in the water regularly. Some get on it. Some walk along the shore, or gaze at it, for exercise or solace. But even for those who don't do these things, or at times when our days become too full or too busy to get our bodies down to the wet edge, the ocean is present.

Clean, salty air. Cool ocean breeze in the scorching months. Sweltering high humidity of February days, caught by the bowl of the escarpment. Thundering southerlies. Warm, wild north easterlies. Winter east coast lows, bringing their wind and rain. The ocean forms the weather we live in.

And the weather is getting wilder.



Change is underway

Wild weather is dramatic, and highly visible. In contrast, climate change moves slowly; almost imperceptibly. But change it does. The world's oceans are absorbing decades of heat and carbon dioxide, pumped into the atmosphere by industrial societies. The warming oceans swell, causing sea levels to rise. Ocean currents are disrupted. Biodiversity is in free-fall.

Cities on the sea feel the force of this change. And so many cities around the world are on the sea. Sea level rise, storm surge, coastal flooding, coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion into freshwater rivers, lakes and estuaries.

But climate change is not only biophysical. It is social, cultural and political.

Cities on the sea are facing increasing pressures of development, housing, up-market marinas, rising real estate prices, port infrastructure, ocean-bound

traffic, and most recently—in an effort to overcome our reliance on the fossil fuels that drive climate change—energy generation in the form of wind turbines, and the emotion, public debate, and politics that follow. Climate change demands we make changes in industry, in our everyday lives, and in our thinking.

All this change threatens things we love. And it offers opportunity to think afresh; to take a new perspective on this place.

Shifting perspective

When we physically shift our perspective, we see things in new ways. Things we know well become unfamiliar. A new perspective reveals new truths. We come to understand that our view is partial: both incomplete and uniquely ours. We learn that our perspective is one of many; that there are infinite other experiences, realities, and relationships with place held by other people and living beings. We might start to see what, and who, is missing from our view. Through all this we see that other possibilities exist.



And another shift in perspective is possible. At this time of rapid-fire information and diminishing attention spans, what happens if we slow down? This simple act—of slowing down—allows us to take time to notice; to see things differently.

So we take a different view. We sit on a boat. Backs to the morning sun. Paper clipped down in front of us, pencils in hand. We commit to drawing what we see on this journey south. We take turns over three hours and forty minutes to make a sketch of the coast—and the city—from the sea. Later, Kim adds water and colour to complete the view, tying together our separate parts.

On the boat I watch the birds. Consider this place from their perspective. I choose a shearwater's eye view: gliding just metres above the sea's surface, looking out across the water to the thin sliver of beach and city and the escarpment beyond, moving with the ocean's rise and fall.

Leah Gibbs



Perspectives of a coastal landscape

The crew of the Endeavour first sighted Red Point, now known as Hill 60, on the morning of Thursday 26th April 1770 as a south-westerly wind propelled them along at a steady 3 knots. This was a comfortable speed at which to map the beaches and rocky headlands from a distance of two to three leagues to sea, or ten to fifteen kilometres offshore.

Using a technique known today as ‘dead reckoning’, features were sketched, angles to those features were measured and boat speeds were logged. The entire East Coast of Australia was mapped in this manner by keeping up a constant record of the positions of features sighted relative to one another. Every now and then they would stop to observe the skies for several days and nights, taking in the necessary astronomical measurements to precisely establish their absolute position.

The Endeavour’s surveyors mapped from afar and got things wrong. In places they recorded rock platforms 80 km out of position. With erosion rates of 1 mm per thousand years, those rocks have barely moved in the last few hundred years. Their principal astronomer, Charles Green, was suffering from scurvy and had made several anomalous observations of transiting stars. Perhaps, with all those relative judgements of position,

an erroneous position propagated along the coastline with them. Like the wind pushing their sails along.

A historian Wadi Wadi Elder once told me about the perspective of this contact from the land. Fires were lit and runners were dispatched to spread the news of a tall ship making its way along the coast, from Yuin to Wadi Wadi to Eora land. By the time the ship dropped anchor in Gamay and christened it Botany Bay, the locals were aware of its presence.

Our interdisciplinary team chartered a fishing boat to film 50 km of coastline to the south of Sydney from Otford to Bass Point. Early one morning we sipped coffee in Wollongong Harbour among the smell of rotting fish bait while a rig was fitted to the starboard rail so that the camera could hold a steady gaze as the boat cut through waves and swell. Then we steamed north out of the harbour entrance to the sound of excited chatter. An hour later, we did a u-turn at Otford. Papers were flattened on upturned video equipment cases and pencils were sharpened to sketch the shoreline. Several hundred years on, in what ways were our filming and sketching pursuits any different to those of the crew of the Endeavour? Would our lived experiences on these beaches yield more accurate records of this coast?



An initial flourish of enthusiasm saw us working side by side, racing to keep up with the features passing in front of us. Later we tag-teamed sectors. Some sketched while others chatted about the places we were passing. We passed Woonona, where a shore party from the Endeavour attempted to land, but the swell was too high.

“Sydney Parkinson, the artist aboard the Endeavour, looked south from this spot and sketched the coastline from Hill 60 to the outer reaches of Martin Island” I tell Lucas, pointing in a southerly direction “he sketched it as one continuous profile”.

It really did look like an unbroken peninsula from our current position. But three islands actually stretch out to sea from the base of Hill 60 and as we moved further along our journey they unfolded before us, intersected by channels wide enough to navigate through.

A colony of fur seals basked on rocks as we rounded Martin Island. I once did monthly drone surveys to track their waxing and waning population. Having carefully positioned our small research

boat out of the swell, I would crane my neck to distinguish the grey seals from the grey rock platform. I’d usually spot around 6 or 7. Afterwards as I stitched the aerial photos together it would surprise me to find that there were many more seals - numbers swelled to several hundred in cooler months.

Sometimes your understanding of a landscape and its occupants depends on your perspective.

Perspective is also about time. It changes with the passing of seasons, climate cycles and ice ages. A geological map labels the Five Islands as the Bombo-Latite formation because they share minerals with mainland strata 20 km to the South. Bombo is a lava flow at the foot of Saddleback Mountain, an extinct volcanic crater that was last active 250 million years ago. Perhaps these basaltic islands were born in an ancient eruption. The Wadi Wadi Elders tell a similar story of these islands originating from the mainland. It is the sort of story that the author Patrick

Nunn calls a ‘drowning story’ in his book *The Edge of Memory*. These are some of the world’s oldest stories, passed on through oral traditions that span hundreds of generations. Over the last 11,000 years the Australian coastline was dramatically transformed when sea levels rose 120m to inundate a third of the continent. Drowning stories convey memories of the extraordinary changes that took place all around the country during this geological era known as the Holocene.

Scientists also tell stories of changes along the Illawarra coastline. Ground penetrating radar and sediment dating reveal thousands of years of layered beaches that have washed in from the sea and down the rivers to fill repeating concave coastal compartments of rock with sandy beaches. Beach sands disappear seasonally with the East coast low storms that winter brings, then creep back incrementally from beneath nearshore waves. Superimposed onto this seasonal rhythm, beaches wax and wane every five years with phases of the ENSO climate cycle. At these times, more dramatic changes are readily apparent as sands become more mobile and start bypassing rocky headlands.

A sort of landscape-scale sand calendar is set to the tempo of climate cycles that drive periods of flood and drought.

In beachside suburbs, warnings of up to 1.88 m sea-level rise by 2150 play havoc with real estate prices, insurance premiums and the lives of homeowners seeking a decent quality of life in a world of fear and anxiety. Perhaps those settling on this restless coastline would benefit from consulting the patterns that emerge from the longer-term perspective of such calendars. As the drowning story begins again, they might remember that this ancient story goes beyond recording how the landscape arrived at its current configuration to instruct generations on how to live a decent life, how to treat others and the land.

Sarah Hamylton

Time and Place

This exhibition shows long views of the Illawarra coastline, the land seen from the sea, rendered in video and watercolour. “But it’s such a colonial view”, worries one of our team. Perhaps so. The works could be interpreted as views of the coloniser. Echoes of Bass and Flinders sailing down the coast in search of places to land and settle, or indeed any ship that passed this way in order to plant a flag.

We invite our First Nations friends to look at the works. They take an interested view of places along the coastline and they tell stories about those places. Young stories and old stories. Aunty Barb decides then and there that she will write a poem. We are excited by this. Instead of colonisers, we become allies.

This is not my country. I am from the lands of the Bunurong people, on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. I came to Wollongong by chance, not knowing anything of this place, not even knowing where Wollongong was located. It is something about the geography, the topography, the unique land and sea forms of the Illawarra that made me early on want to sail along the coastline. The majesty of the escarpment, the rich greens of the forest and the faceted sandstone cliffs,

rearing up above the coastal, settled plain – wouldn’t that be wonderful to view from the sea?

Not having the connections to make a sea journey in my early days here, I would instead go to the top of the escarpment and paint the coastline from above. I was entranced by the long necklace of beaches and headlands. Houses, roads and industry were dwarfed by this viewpoint. Land ends and ocean begins, at first the yellow sandy beaches are whitened by foam, then the aquamarine of shallow water gains depth to a deep ultramarine that is punctuated here and there with container ships.

More recently, my dream of travelling along the Illawarra coast by boat became a reality. We hired a fishing boat, and working with a cinematographer, rigged a film camera on to the boat. The real time, single-take video traces our journey from Bald Hill to the gravel loader at Bass Point. The watercolour is a product of in-situ drawing on the boat, where we took turns to map the coastline in a rudimentary fashion in pencil. Later on I brought those pencil marks into greater detail with watercolour in a kind of impressionistic view of the coastline.

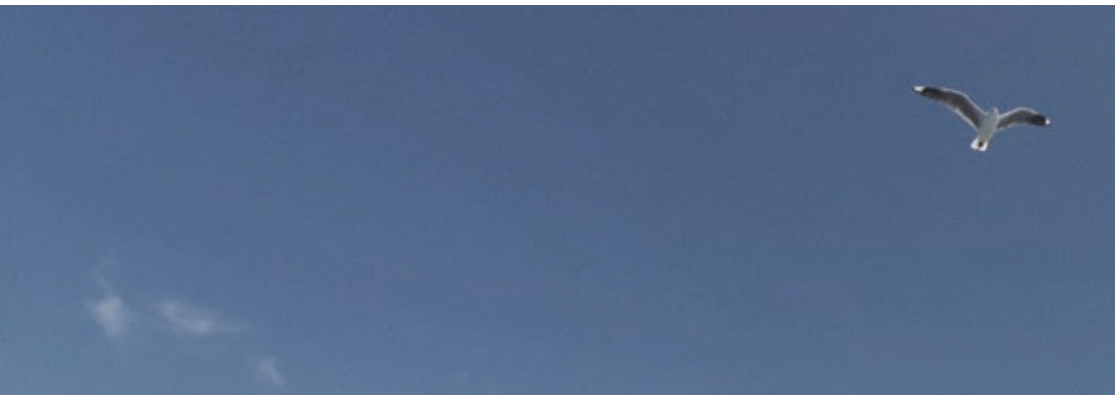


*Time becomes apparent:
the deep time of Aboriginal
habitation, the shallow time
of colonial settlement.*

The temporality of our video demands a long viewing, if the viewer can sit with it. Making marks on paper, gradually building up layers of watercolour over the entire twenty-six metres of the drawing, takes time and patience. Later on, one of our group asks me to slow down and let our collaborative process unfold gradually. Yet somehow I feel that time is running out.

Time continues to unfold. Often, exhibitions are static arrangements that, once installed, remain so over the duration of an exhibition. I see this exhibition in a different way, more as a backdrop, or a stage set on which others may respond to the work and contribute to the exhibition. These artworks are the product of our connection to this place. Aunty Barb is unequivocal - this is the place of the Wadi Wadi people.

Kim Williams



One drawing, one video

One drawing, one video. The video = a continuous digital scan of HERE, where we live, along the Illawarra coast. The drawing = a human scan, produced at the same time, from the same vantage point (a fishing boat).

The length of our movie = the real time it took to travel through this City+Seascape. [Time on boat = 3.5 hours] + [Watching the video = 3.5 hours]. The map is the territory. It's not reduced, nor reducible. You have to sit through it, there's no snapshot, no executive summary, no *précis*. If you enter the gallery after the video's already passed by your house, we won't rewind it for you. Nor will we fast-forward through the boring bits - *because there are no boring bits!* That's just the sound of your own impatience bouncing around inside your skull. So plump yourself down on a bean bag. When you move FAST in everyday life, then tuning in to Slow TV might be just the thing.

Temporally, this is "1:1 scale art". *But not spatially*. 26 metres is admittedly very long for a drawing, but it's an enormous reduction in scale from the real thing. How far is it from Bald Hill to Bass Point? Look it up. Work out the distance, divide

by 3.5 hours, and calculate the km/h of our watery junket. (Don't forget to factor in that the boat clung close to the coast, scooping in and out, not just barrelling south in a straight line).

There's an exciting moment when a bird appears. Perhaps she knows this fishing boat for an easy snack. A dog runs along the beach, seeming to race us. And the landmarks (*Sea Cliff Bridge! Bellambi Lagoon! That park near the beach where my kid plays soccer!*) are fun to spot, popping up like local celebs.

But apart from million-dollar sets and non-human protagonists, can our movie be said to have a plot?

How might this journey have felt for earlier boat-coasters and land-dwellers? In Cath McKinnon's *Storyland*, the windblown colonists (including George Bass of Bass Point) are pitching and yawing along the coast, hungry (and thirsty), scanning, scouring for a place to land, to make a foothold, to set up camp, to clear space

for territorial takeover ... while the locals look out from the 'scarp with curiosity and suspicion and kindness and fear.

In *City+Sea*, we (geographer + artists + scientist) perform our scan, but for what? We don't penetrate inland, we caress laterally, tickling the coast. Why? Well, perhaps ... *for no particular purpose*. To see what might happen. Running a stick along a metal railing. Or perhaps to offer this place our devotion: a kind of reverence, to let it be its own thing, and bear witness to *that*. In the *12 Creek Walks* book we wrote that "creeks belong to everyone, but most of all, they belong to themselves". Well, it's the same with the whole coast, isn't it? All this land, all this sea.

And now, semi-regularly, outflow from the mighty Waterways of the Illawarra is pushed back uphill, and the sea rises against our incursion, plotting its revenge from the murk where it absorbs all manner of "whitefella trash" and urban runoff. And the famous Kombi Van flushed down Towradgi Creek in the great floods of '98 will never again pootle along the Leisure Coast scanning the horizon for the best break.

Lucas Ihlein

Works referenced:

Cath McKinnon, 2017, *Storyland*, Fourth Estate.

Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, and Brogan Bunt, 2017, *12 Creek Walks*, Leech Press.

Aunty Barbara Nicholson, "Whitefella trash is not biodegradable", poem written as part of Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein's *Plastic-free Biennale*, NIRIN Biennale of Sydney, 2020.

