



Paired meaning

Writers and painters come together to create pieces that reflect on what we have learned about ourselves and our place during the pandemic

WORDS LINDA SMITH

Heather Rose had been an enthusiastic ocean swimmer long before the COVID-19 outbreak. But spurred on by the upheaval of the pandemic, along with some personal health battles, the best-selling Tasmanian author decided to take things up a notch, ditching her wetsuit in an attempt to become more at one with nature.

"I've been sea swimming all my life," explains Rose, who lives by the beach, just outside Hobart.

"But in September last year I stopped wearing a wetsuit ...

and started swimming in just bathers. Now I go swimming every day unless the sea is too wild. "It's been a delicious and mysterious process of becoming more a part of the elements.

"It's been such an enervating experience and such a vibrant experience. "Sometimes the sea is warmer than the air."

Rose was inspired to abandon her wetsuit after watching others brave the water without one.

"I'd usually just stop swimming in winter because it was too cold," she admits. "But I've been inspired very much by some women, at least in their 70s. I've watched them for years doing

this and they'd look so vibrant when they came out of the sea - I thought I want that for my 75-year-old self."

And Rose is grateful she took the plunge as it has given her a fresh appreciation of the ocean and taught her more about herself than she realised it would. And she encourages others to do the same, although admits it's not for the faint-hearted.

"It was a very powerful experience to overcome our limitations about the cold and to get brave and see what that did to the body," she says. "We live very comfortable lives generally and we don't often put ourselves out of our comfort zones. I had

experienced some serious health challenges and I needed a circuit breaker for those.

"It's made me so appreciative of the ocean but also it's made me appreciative of life in a different way. I would highly recommend it."

Rose chose to write about her ocean swimming experiences as part of a new exhibition - Disappearing - at Bett Gallery, which brings together writers and artists to explore what it means to be Tasmanian and examine how the pandemic has changed the way we view our island state, for better or worse.

Artists and writers were paired up by the exhibition's curators, Carol Bett, Pete Hay and Gerard Castles.

The pairings include Simon Bevilacqua and Tim Burns, Rachel Leary and Helen Wright, Greg Lehman and Brigita Ozolins, James Dryburgh and Richard Wastell, Ben Walter and Tom O'Hern, Danielle Wood and David Keeling, Katherine Johnson and Amanda Davies, Leigh Woolley and Neil Haddon, Carol Patterson and Amber Koroluk-Stephenson and Jenny Weber and Matt Coyle.

Since writing is such a solo profession, Rose was delighted to be chosen to be part of the exhibition. And she was even delighted to be paired with long-time friend and artist Michaye Boulter.

"It was one of my great life ambitions to work with Michaye Boulter," she says. "We've known each other a long time, and I'm a huge fan of her art. The pairings were a surprise. And it was the most delightful surprise.

"She's such an exceptional artist and she captures Tasmanian skylscapes and seascapes with such integrity and such wholeheartedness."

Boulter speaks equally as glowingly of Rose.

"It was immediate joy to know that we would have this added sense of connection," Boulter explains. "To share friendship is one thing but to be able to share a working relationship is really meaningful. And we both have this connection with nature and Bruny Island and the sea."

All writers and artists were given a piece of writing by curator Pete Hay as a starting point.

"The whole exhibition is really about taking time out to examine where we are at," Boulter explains. "To reflect, and look at the effects of what's happening and deciding where do we want to go from here. What is it that we are in danger of losing as we bring more people to explore the beauty of our island? And is it a loss or is it a shedding ... Is it a new skin that we're developing, a new way of seeing our island?"

Like Rose, Boulter has her own strong connection to the sea.

Her childhood was spent on the ocean, as her parents built a boat in Brisbane and sailed it from Australia to Canada and back again, over a seven-year period.

Boulter was only a toddler when the journey began and spent her primary years being home schooled while developing a strong love of the ocean.

Her dad, a fisherman, moved the family to Tasmania when Boulter was 13.

Boulter is married to tourism entrepreneur Rob Pennicott, and even though they spend more time living in South Hobart now than on Bruny Island, they still enjoy getting out on the water with children Mia, 22, and Noah, 19.

Boulter credits the sea - and her atypical upbringing - for opening her eyes to a career as a landscape painter.

"I think that gave me the ability to see outside of normal conventions of what a career might like look," she says. "My parents were very free in that you do what you're passionate about. I didn't really fall into art until about Year 12, I had some great teachers then and found a place I could sink into and say what I wanted to say about the world.

"I did have that amazing childhood that I knew was a gift and I wanted to share that somehow."

Curator Carol Bett says it has been wonderful to see the work that has emerged through each of the writer/artist pairings.

She says Disappearing is the latest in a long line of exhibitions the gallery has showcased over the past 30 years featuring dynamic duos.

"We've been running poets and painters exhibitions every couple of years over last three decades," she explains. "And this time, because of the topic, we thought it would be more suitable to invite writers rather than just poets. Artists and poets and writers have a very solitary practice - they're in a studio, they work alone."

But she says connecting writers and painters together for a six-month period to produce a joint work resulted in some fascinating and innovative outcomes.

The idea for Disappearing came out of the COVID-19 pandemic. "People were reflecting on where they live, on what they valued about our community and our island," Bett says. "When we were in lockdown people would say how lucky we are to live here. We were saying that to each other, it was almost like a



Clockwise from left: A collaborative piece by Brigita Ozolins and Greg Lehman titled *This World*, in the Disappearing exhibition; writer Heather Rose and painter Michaye Boulter, above, who also paired up for Disappearing; Tim Burns's Solastalgia piece and Boulter's piece *Everything is Less Certain*.



greeting. And we are lucky to live here, so what is it we value, what is it we want to retain and what is that we want to move on from?

"I think it goes to the heart of what people are thinking and talking about at the moment. And the writers and artists have come back with some beautiful - and strong - work."

Some have used the exhibition to explore Tasmania's natural landscape - including majestic kunanyi - and the way we treat it or protect it. Others have focused on exploring the importance of our urban landscapes.

As well as using the experience to give thanks to the sea and what it has done for her personally, Rose hopes the work she and Boulter have created as part of the exhibition will also give viewers a new appreciation for the sea and a renewed desire to protect and nurture it.

"It's been an immense gift to connect with the ocean and be in the ocean at sunrise, in that beautiful luminous sea we get at first light in Tasmania through winter and into summer," she

says. "I've lived here at this beach for eight or nine years now and it has been closed (at various times) because of sewerage problems upstream.

"It's so horrifying to me that we were reckless with our sewerage and there's no excuse for the damage we've done to the River Derwent and all the fish and organisms that live in it."

She says heavy metals and the impacts of fish farms were also of concern.

"I worry about our pristine environment disappearing," Rose says. "We all expect that we can get in the sea and it's good for us, but it's not a given in the future."

See the Disappearing exhibition at Bett Gallery (Level 1, 65 Murray St, Hobart) until March 31. Open Monday to Saturday from 10am. Entry is free. There will also be a Writers and Artists in Conversation event at the gallery on Wednesday March 24 from 6pm-7.30pm. Tickets are \$5 at the door, with proceeds donated to Hobart City Mission. bettgallery.com.au