

Journey into the natural world

Canberra artist Nicola Dickson has been fascinated by the natural world for as long as she can remember. After leaving school she trained as a veterinarian (now her old textbooks sit in her bookshelf as a drawing reference) but her true passion was drawing and painting.

She reached a point where she wanted to be able to create works like those that moved her when she went to galleries and exhibitions, so she tossed everything in and went to the Australian National University School of Art, completing an undergraduate degree and later a PhD.

"I just had to do it," she said.

Her work for *So Fine* has been inspired by that fascination for the natural world.

"I've always been interested in plants and animals, trying to convey that sense of wonder when you look at them, thinking this is another living creature, how is it different from me?"

"There were all these questions of national identity, individual identity, and all those things became complicated and I was searching for ways to try and develop paintings that engage with this."

It occurred to her then, to go back to a time when wonder was most intense, to the time of early exploration, expeditions to the southern lands.

"The early colonists were drawing a natural world they weren't familiar with and their art work regularly reflected this fresh eye.

"That opened me up to a lot of the archival

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material about these voyages and they were just so interesting I became captivated, particularly with the [Bruni] d'Entrecasteaux voyages [from 1791-94]."

She's contributed several paintings, painted coconut shells and words handcut from skin against a backdrop of sumptuous hand-blocked wallpaper.

"All histories have to be told from the point of view from the particular person in time and place," Dickson says.

"My particular take on history is always going to be a result of where I live in Australia, the fact that I'm a woman, the fact we live so close to the Pacific ... all those things impact upon the stories that interest me and how I tell them.

"It will be interesting to have an exhibition where we have a group of women together and see if there are similarities or differences in the way we approach stories and maybe the way we develop processes to engage with those stories."



Nicola Dickson's work will feature in the Portrait Gallery's blockbuster exhibition, *So Fine*.
Photo: Elesä Kurtz