



Artist Nicola Dickson in her new exhibition, *Voyages' Tales: Baudin* at Beaver Galleries. Picture: Elesa Kurtz

Witnessing wonder at its most intense

Sally Pryor

WHEN Nicola Dickson looks at the drawings she did as a child, she can recognise her own hand instantly.

She's always been, as she describes it, a careful observer of the world around her, a habit that, in her life as an artist, has translated into some very slow, careful work.

"My skill is responding to different visual material and representing that. Although it doesn't feel important, it is all I can do, in some ways," she says.

The result is exhibitions like her current showing at Beaver Galleries, a series of works inspired by the expedition to Australia led by French naturalist Nicolas Baudin in 1800.

In a way, her entire career as an artist has been leading up to an exhibition like this one. She came relatively late to art as a professional skill.

Growing up in Sydney with little to no exposure to art, she trained as a veterinarian and brought up children, moving to Canberra in 1997 when her husband got a job here.

It wasn't until her youngest child started preschool that she decided to study art; she surprised even herself when she was accepted into the Australian National University School of Art in 2000, where she went on to complete a Bachelor degree and a PhD.

Until she arrived at art school, she had never been to a commercial gallery. But she had been drawing and painting since childhood.

Back then, she says, it was mainly bird

drawings in her portfolio, but her work has taken a similar direction ever since.

"I kept on doing it and explored other things along the way. It's been a really deep-seated interest, and in a way directs my practice now," she says.

"It's taken years for me to realise why I do it, what is it about it. I've realised when you're drawing and painting, looking and thinking about something, you're really trying to understand it.

They're just as vibrant and natural as if someone had done them now, and they appeared to collapse time.

Artist Nicola Dickson

"It's giving you a sense of your own humanity, your own identity as an Australian person, your own identity as an Australian settler woman.

"After the histories of colonisation, the natural world keeps on interesting me because it's a gateway to opening up all these things and all these stories and times of our engagement with the natural world and the different ways we think about it."

It led her, eventually, to look to history, and historical records, to understand how

nature was once considered.

"It occurred to me to look back at historical documents, old drawings and illustrations done, if you like, when wonder was most intense," she says.

She was particularly fascinated by the expedition to Australia led by French naturalist Nicolas Baudin in 1800 - the collections the explorers brought back, including plants, insects, birds and animals.

Napoleon's wife, the Empress Joséphine, acquired many of these for national posterity, nurturing Australian plants in vast greenhouses, and breeding black swans, kangaroos and emus on the grounds of Chateau Malmaison in Paris.

During a residency in Paris in 2017, Dickson spent hours poring over the Malmaison collection and historic archives.

She was particularly taken by the drawings and paintings of exotic birds in the collection - odd, unschooled, and immediate in the sense of wonder they conveyed.

"It's incredibly exciting, if you're a nerd, to look at these old drawings, because you can see the marks of someone else's hand as they've made them, and they look just like a drawing that someone who was living now would have made," she says.

"They're just as vibrant and natural as if someone had done them now, and they appeared to collapse time."

Expeditions like the Baudin were supported and financed by Napoleon, who hoped they would reflect the glory of France as a new Republic.

Joséphine's gardens at Malmaison attract

ed visitors from all over Europe.

"She was genuinely interested in botany and she did succeed in establishing plants there, she had all of the botanists there studying in the gardens, she had one of the best botanical artists at the time illustrating it all, she had a sense of doing it for prosperity," Dickson says.

Today, the house is a national museum, restored to its heyday.

In her research, Dickson was also taken by the objects owned and worn by Joséphine - an eccentric empress held up, herself, as a kind of showpiece for the people of France.

"Looking at Malmaison and the furniture that belonged to Napoleon and Joséphine, the portraits of them, they were really interesting - you could imagine the footsteps that had echoed through there," she says.

"But it was their personal effects that really touched me and, again, collapsed time. Seeing Joséphine's shoes, seeing images of her dresses, were just fantastic, because you can just imagine her as the woman living there, with all her foibles and all her eccentricities, because Malmaison was a really odd place, at times."

The shoes - elaborate silk creations - feature strongly in the exhibition.

It's as though Joséphine herself is standing over it all, agreeing with the sense of wonder that comes out of Dickson's paintings of birds in what must have seemed the strangest of landscapes.

■ *Voyages' Tales - Baudin*, by Nicola Dickson, is showing at Beaver Galleries until August 9.