

Wistful works of detailed delicacy

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Nicola Dickson: *Voyagers' Tales*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Tuesday to -Sunday 10am to 5pm. Until August 9, 2020.

Before Napoleon Bonaparte set out to conquer Europe, he approved the Nicolas Baudin expedition to explore 'the coasts of New Holland' with the explicit purpose of "observation and research relating to Geography and Natural History".

The expedition left Le Havre, in France, in October 1800 and limped back to France in March 1804, severely depleted and lacking the leader. He had died of tuberculosis in le de France (Mauritius) the previous year.

Scientifically, the expedition was a great success with more than 2500 new species discovered and many thousands of live and dead specimens brought back to Europe.

More than 100,000 specimens from the expedition were lodged in French museums, while live plants, animals and birds were sent to Empress Joséphine Bonaparte's gardens at Château de Malmaison.

When reading an account of the expedition, I am always amazed at how the artist Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, who produced painstaking drawings where you can feel the texture of the fur or the sting of the echidna's quills, would engage in wholesale butchery.

On one day he killed no fewer than 200 birds for the ornithological collection.

Nevertheless, the European appetite for specimens from exotic worlds that they could name and claim was insatiable and the Baudin horde has become a magnet for researchers.

A couple of years ago, the National Museum of Australia hosted the impressive *The Art of Science: Baudin's Voyagers 1800-1804* exhibition that displayed a cross-section of these treasures.

Nicola Dickson is a mid-career Canberra-based artist who for many years has been interested in exploring 18th and 19th-century natural science illustrations within what could be termed a post-colonial context.



Nicola Dickson, *Imagining Malmaison-Friarbirds*, 2020. Picture: Supplied

About five years ago at the Beaver Galleries she explored the heritage of the great Austrian naturalist Ferdinand Bauer, and in more recent years she has been interested in the work of the Baudin artists Charles-Alexandre Lesueur and Nicolas-Martin Petit and the collection of specimens fostered by the empress at the Château de Malmaison.

The artist writes of her intent in this exhibition: "My drawings and paintings try to convey a sense of the past 'presences' I felt of those birds and plants transported from Australia ... Their silhouettes frame drawings I made from my photographs of Malmaison's grounds. Other drawings are based on porcelain busts of Napoleon and Joséphine

or sketches done by Nicolas-Martin Petit of Tasmanian indigenous peoples. In each case the subject is decoratively combined with plant forms to reflect different contexts from which they were viewed."

There is a delicacy in Dickson's drawings, such as *Transported: Major Mitchell Cockatoo* and *Transported: Gang-gang Cockatoo*, where she attempts to juxtapose images and feelings, where it is not only the image of the bird that is reproduced, but also the artist's feeling on the encounter with this naturalistic artifice produced through European eyes for a European audience.

Possibly the strongest part of the exhibition is the acrylic and oil paintings,

including *Imagining Malmaison-Friarbirds*, where the artist embarks on a complex and fanciful conceptual adventure of imagining the empress's gardens populated by these displaced antipodean captives, transported into an alien country. Dickson effectively captures the sense of displacement - an ornamental flowering splendour that appears as real and tangible, while at the same time emerging like a completely artificial fairy tale.

There is a wistful, decorative quality that pervades the exhibition - an unreality within which dwell the Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and Yellow Wattlebirds that normally belong within our backyard setting.