

# Natural fascination with the world

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**Nicola Dickson: Walking the Murray - in the steps of Blandowski. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until June 11, 2022. [beavergalleries.com.au](http://beavergalleries.com.au).**

Canberra-based artist Nicola Dickson habitually combines her passion for drawing and painting of natural history subjects with an interest in post-colonial discourses primarily dealing with accounts of exploration of Australia in the 19th century.

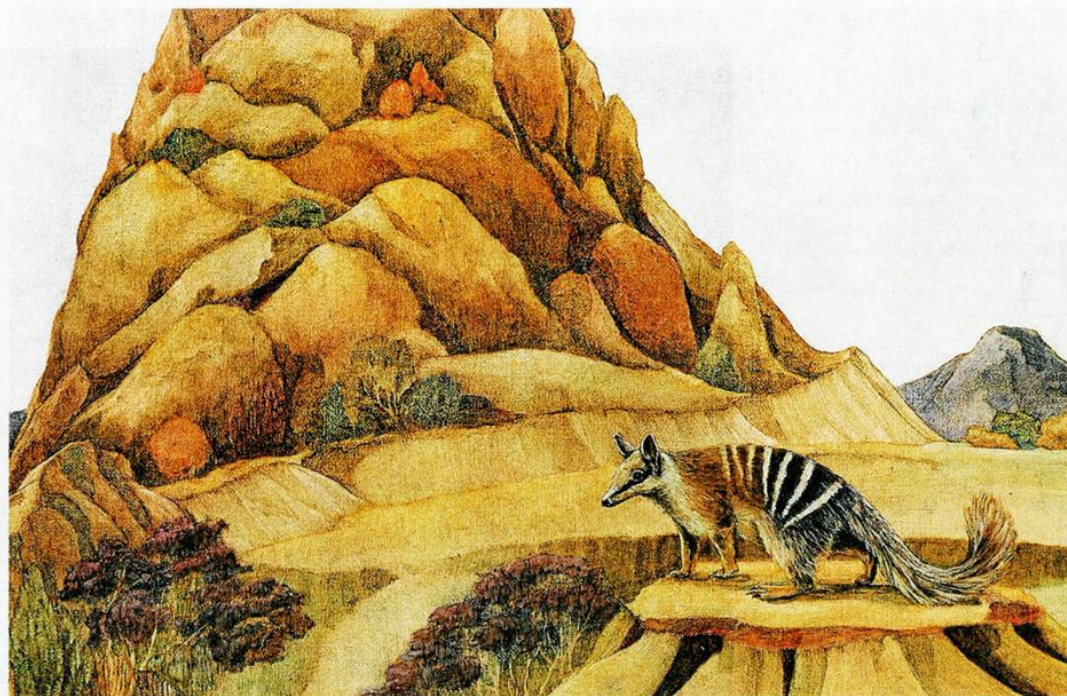
In 2021 Dickson undertook an artist's residency at the now defunct Art Vault in Mildura and from there explored the intriguing and abundant flora and fauna along the Murray River. Here there is a richness of bird life and small mammals in the area of transition between the Mallee desert scrub to the great river red gums along the banks of the river.

Dickson writes of her experience, "The way that walking directed my experience of the Murray is mirrored in my paintings."

"The main subjects of the paintings are those facets of the natural environment especially noteworthy to me - local birds, animals, distinctive plants and historical markers."

The added ingredient to Dickson's project was the exploits of German explorer, naturalist, zoologist and mining engineer William Blandowski (1822-1878). He led an expedition from December 1856 to August 1857 that travelled from Melbourne to Mildura and on to Mondellimin (Merbein) on the Murray River where he stayed for many months and with the assistance of the Nyeri Nyeri people gathered a large number of specimens. Blandowski, whose contribution to Australian natural history has been reassessed in a recent major publication edited by Harry Allen to mark the 150th anniversary of this expedition, was a brilliant but awkward and flawed individual who suffered from the prevailing anti-German sentiment in the colonies. He fled Australia in 1859 and later died in a mental asylum.

Dickson's paintings, including *Passing*



Nicola Dickson, *Passing time with Blandowski - Numbat*. Picture: Supplied

*time with Blandowski - Long-nosed Bandicoot, Passing time with Blandowski - Numbat, and Natural Histories - Wentworth boundary tree, Murray River* all have the quality of 19th-century natural history illustrations but executed from what could be termed a post-colonial perspective. The creatures that we encounter in Dickson's paintings, like the bandicoot, numbat, the bilby, eastern quoll and the various parrots, somehow appear like taxidermied specimens, precise in their zoological or ornithological rendering, but a little posed and quite lifeless.

The elements in the landscape - strange rock formations, boundary trees and scar

trees - are all treated with a similar degree of precision as the fauna and appear as a record of nature rather than an interpretation of nature or entering into the spirit of the place as is the case with many Aboriginal artists who produce timeless accounts of country.

There is nothing wrong in being anchored in the 19th century and employing the conventions of natural history painting - transcriptions that set out to record the known world, codify and name it, and, in the process, claim possession of it. A few years after he arrived in Australia, Blandowski approached Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe for an allowance to create an

"Illustrated Natural History of the Colony of Victoria." The natural history may not have eventuated, but the Lieutenant-Governor was inspired by Blandowski to create a Museum of Natural History that ultimately morphed into Museums Victoria.

Now having viewed a few of Dickson's exhibitions and followed her interactions with exploration artists including Nicolas Baudin, Jean Piron and Ferdinand Bauer, there is the making of a grand illustrated natural history of Australia in her oeuvre. She is fascinated by unexpected encounters with unusual objects, birds and animals in the natural world and seeks to translate them into her own peculiar artistic language.