

ALY DE GROOT - LUCKY AND SMILING AT CROCODILES...



Influenced by the diversity of cultures and the intensity of climate and landscape in Northern Australia, I am a contemporary fibre artist whose inter-disciplinary practice involves translating basket making processes along with man-made materials such as fishing line and ghost nets.

You may have experienced my multi-coloured jellyfish installation hanging in the trees at last year's Geelong Textile FORUM or at least read about them in Garry Benson's story in the February issue of Textile Fibre Forum magazine. And it's true - I am not just a crazy jellyfish lady; my obsession has now extended to an even deadlier creature that frequents Northern Australian waters.

When participating in the Territory Wildlife Parks residency program from July to December in 2012, I was fortunate enough to stumble upon an unlikely collaboration and love affair with their ridiculously handsome resident 4-metre long crocodile, affectionately known as Graham.



I was given frequent and behind the scenes access at the park, which is a vast nature playground situated 50 kilometres out of Darwin. As an Artist in Residence, I frequented the park on a regular basis to research ideas for new work as well as engage the broader community through contemporary fibre art workshops.

I took advantage of the unique and diverse surroundings, facilitating birds nest basket weaving workshops in the tree top aviary. However, my favourite hangout was the walk-through aquarium which houses some of the Top End's most amazing aquatic life, including Graham.

As the Lecturer in Visual Arts at the Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education, as well as being a PhD Candidate at Charles Darwin University, I value the inspiration and knowledge gained and exchanged through



formulating ideas and projects which can inspire and educate, using readily available materials that may otherwise pose an environmental threat.

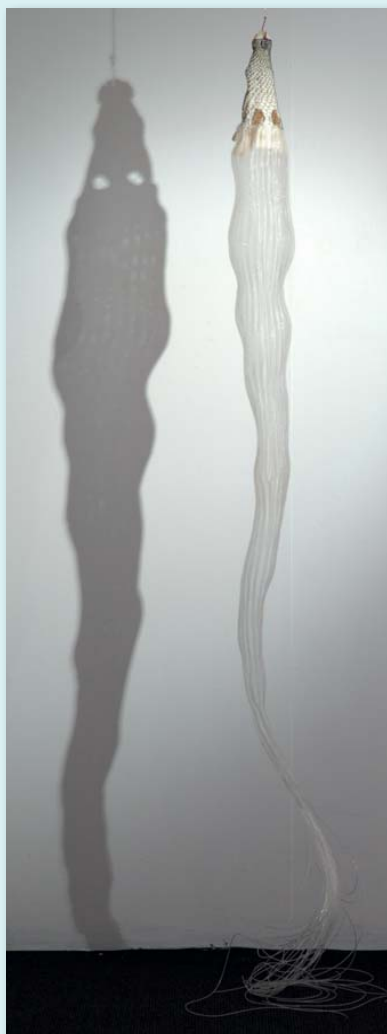
My recent work is titled 'Underwater Basket Weaving', as I was interested to discover that the American term is used to depict 'easy' degrees that have no valuable educational content.

Since 2005 I have been experimenting with discarded fishing nets to make *GhostNet Baskets*. These baskets are, in actuality, dysfunctional as utilitarian objects, and their primary purpose is to establish a creative avenue for educating people about these nets as well as finding a creative opportunity to utilize a dire environmental threat.

Once they are removed from our oceans and beaches, ghost nets continue to be an ecological burden by becoming landfill or omitting poisonous greenhouse gases when they are burnt.

In March 2011 I worked with GhostNets Australia and Indigenous Rangers on Groote Eylandt to find creative ways to use the nets to make baskets, bags, sculpture and wearable art.

Although weaving is often used as an ecological metaphor, the physical act of adopting contemporary basket making techniques, along with recycled detritus can promote an intimate understanding of responsibility and relationship to place. So I found it fitting to hold underwater basket weaving workshops with adults and children in the aquarium, where we wove baskets, sculpture and even Christmas decorations from discarded marine refuse which poses a threat to many of the water species found in the Wildlife Parks Underwater Sanctuary.



As well as holding workshops I also developed new work, which involved sitting near Graham for many hours, weaving and watching as the still beast only seemed to move or show any interest when small children stood on the ledge near his glass enclosure....

This quiet time with Graham has resulted in new work where I have extended processes used previously to make my jellyfish, to give form and life to some crocodile skulls.

The resulting ghostly figures titled *Lucky - The Guardian Angels For all Things Protected*, are aptly named because crocodiles are a protected species, unlike many of the water dwelling creatures in the Northern Territory who are suffering from marine debris and other ill-willed human activities.

I also made a collection of jewellery from copper, brass and crocodile skin titled *Animal Alchemy*. My inspiration came from a workshop with renowned American fibre artist and jeweller, Mary Hettmensberger, when she visited Darwin in September last year.

Dion Wedd, the Curator of Natural Sciences at the Wildlife Park, told me that Graham was gifted to the Wildlife Park in 1991 from the Northern Territory Crocodile Farm. He was going to be made into leather due to his cantankerous nature, but was offered



to TWP as an alternative to becoming a product for the high end fashionistas in Paris, London, New York and Sydney. He was paired with a female on two separate occasions and bashed them both; I don't recall whether or not he killed one, but I think he may have, so he has been a bachelor ever since (Wedd, 2013).

I felt lucky indeed to have had the opportunity to spend so much time in the presence of such a magnificent beast, but am very grateful for the thick perspex which separated my good self from the walking hand bag. I also felt blessed to utilise the Wildlife Park as a resource for inspiration as well as an avenue for communicating with the broader community about the impact debris has on marine life in the Top End and throughout Australia and the world.

Emersion in an unfamiliar landscape undoubtedly informed and influenced new design concepts and work, and I anticipate the opportunity to create an ongoing creative relationship with the Territory Wildlife Park and broader community by holding a solo exhibition in the walk-through aquarium in August 2014.

The artist has obtained all relevant permits from the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission to possess, use and sell crocodile products in her art practice. Aly's participation as an Artist in the Park at the Territory Wildlife Park (<http://www.territorywildlifepark.com.au>) was made possible by the support of staff at the Wildlife Park and Arts NT.

For more information on Aly's upcoming exhibitions and workshops check out her website- www.alydegroot.com

Opposite page, two versions of a crocodile... and examples of the jewellery created by Aly de Groot from copper, brass and crocodile skin for her series, 'Animal Alchemy'. This page the full length of the crocodile created from fishing line, with shadow, made by Aly de Groot who is shown at the Museum of South Australia with her award winning Box Jellyfish installation for the 2010 Waterhouse Art Prize.

