

ALY DE GROOT NOT JUST A CRAZY JELLYFISH LADY.



Story and photos by Garry Benson

One of the highlights of TAFTA's 2012 Geelong FORUM was the appearance of a swarm of sparkling bright jellyfish infesting the trees at Geelong Grammar School. And the source of this infestation was an installation by Northern Australian fibre artist Aly de Groot.

One word to describe Aly is passionate. She's passionate about her art, the state of our natural world and our planet. She also mixes a great sense of humour with a need to weave a tragic tale of imbalance and invasion by an unlikely villain - the jellyfish.

I met Aly while filming a short series of documentaries at the Geelong FORUM and we sat down and talked about why her normal day is spent hanging jellyfish woven from fishing line in trees.

"I think jellyfish are environmental indicators. I've conducted research on them and it seems they love the change in the condition in the oceans - as the water gets warmer their population is increasing enormously - and they have fewer and fewer predators, such as sea turtles, because of overfishing and marine debris such as ghost nets that trap turtles among other things.

"All over the world various jellyfish breeds are going crazy - different countries have different jellyfish problems. In Japan they have this giant pink jellyfish issue going on. There are masses of them clogging the sea, endangering the environment & devastating the fishing industry. That's why I've been making the pink jellyfish - these so-called Nomura's jellyfish are breeding in massive numbers.

"They can be up to two metres across. This sort of waterborne colonizer used to occur every 40 years or so but now - because of changing breeding conditions in coastal China - as the oceans become warmer their numbers are out of control. Think about it - now they have fewer predators and the pollution in the ocean makes perfect conditions for them."

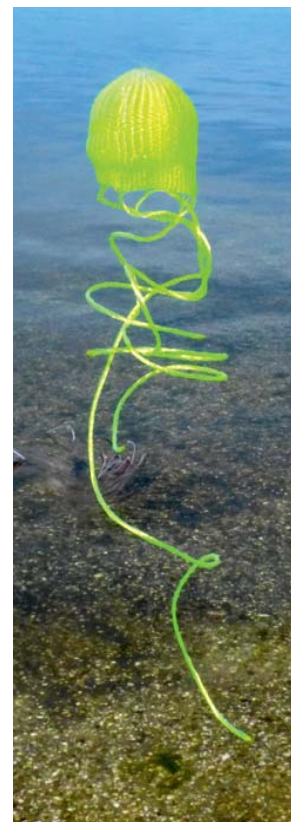
What's the situation in Australia - I know in the far north of tropical Australia swimming is often dangerous because of the dreaded Box Jelly fish?

"Box Jellyfish are usually only found where I come from, in the top end of Australia, but they are starting to be found in places they've never been found before. Last year they were sighted in northern NSW - Coffs Harbour. Within 10 years it's possible they could end up on iconic Bondi Beach in Sydney. I therefore find it apt to travel like the box jellyfish, and install my artwork in unexpected places so as to tell this story.

"I think the jellyfish symbolises our climate problems, and I don't think making these tree jelly fish is trivializing the problem. I make these beautiful objects so I can lure people in and tell them the story so they can think about what they can do personally to limit these problems. Once I've got over 100 jellyfish up in the trees here at Geelong, I'm also going to make a ghost net turtle, as turtles are the main predator for the jelly fish, but turtles are having a hard time because of ghost nets." ▶▶▶



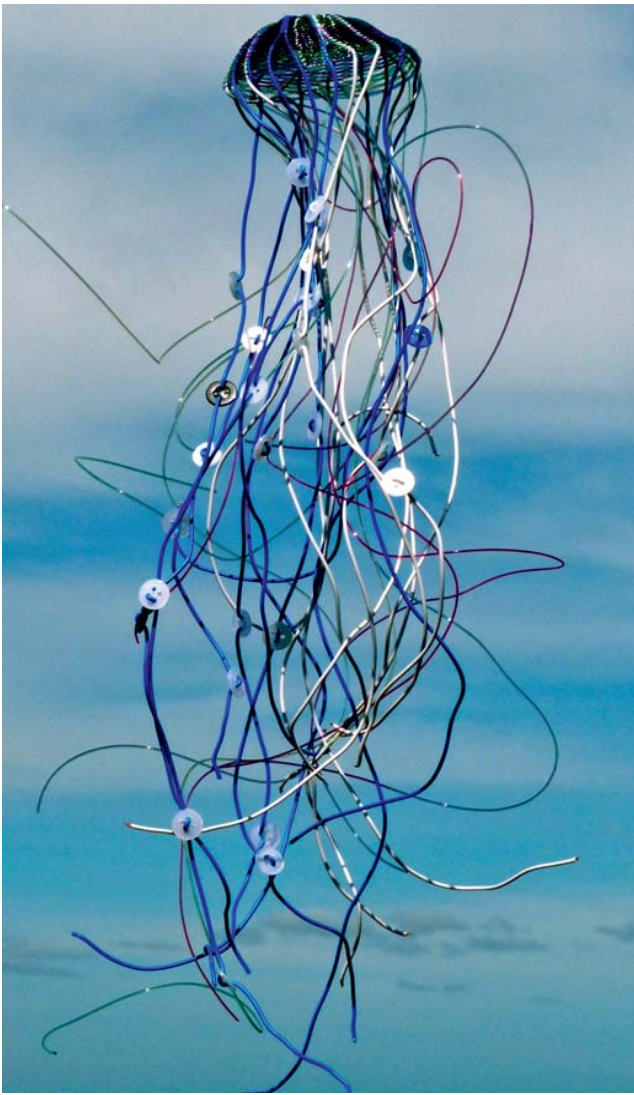
Opposite page: jellyfish suspended from the trees in the main quadrangle, Geelong Grammar School; bottom of page, a pink jellyfish is shown floating over Corio Bay. **This page top,** the ghost net turtle afloat in a fountain; below Aly de Groot is shown in her working spot amongst jellyfish - and inflatables by Evelyn Roth. Below right, an iridescent green jellyfish at Corio Bay. Bottom of page, suspended pink and white jellyfish.



Japan fears massive jellyfish invasion this year



Japanese researchers monitoring the activity of giant jellyfish in Chinese waters are warning of a potentially historic and catastrophic invasion this year. Marine surveys conducted in late June have revealed alarming numbers of Nomura's jellyfish – massive creatures that grow up to 2 meters (6 ft 7 in) in diameter and weigh as much as to 220 kilograms (about 450 lbs) -- lurking in the Yellow Sea and East China Sea. The researchers warn that ocean currents may bring swarms of the monster jellies to Japan, which has been plagued by similar invasions in recent years. In addition to damaging nets, the giant jellyfish are blamed for killing other fish with their venom, lowering the quality and quantity of catches, increasing the risk of capsizing trawlers, and stinging fishermen. In 2005, the fishing industry reported over 100,000 cases of jellyfish-related damage nationwide. At the peak of the invasion that year, an estimated 300 to 500 million-monster jellyfish passed through the Tsushima Strait into the Sea of Japan each day. <http://www.asahi.com/>



Why are there these huge problems with turtles etc and the Ghost Nets?

"Turtles get caught up in the ghost nets so I like to tell that story as well. Turtles are the main predators of jellyfish but they have their own problems. They eat plastic bags thinking they're jellyfish, and they get caught up in the ghost nets - so the turtle I'm making is made out of ghost nets. I like to make marine animals so I can tell the not so happy side of what's going on in our beautiful oceans.

"Last year I was working for GhostNets Australia on Groote island with indigenous rangers and weavers to find creative ways to dispose of the ghost nets that wash up on their beaches. I learnt that they find turtles caught up in the nets as often as four or five times a week."

When did your obsession with marine life begin?

"I love the ocean, I always have. My dad used to take me fishing all the time and he's been involved in volunteer turtle conservation work for most of my life, so I've had a fascination with turtles from a very young age.

"I've lived in northern Australia since 1994 but I only saw the jellyfish for the first time in 2005. I was on a bridge near where I



live - I looked down and there they were, sparkling like they're sparkling on the trees in the sunlight and I just thought they were so beautiful. I was intrigued by their mysteriousness, the way they hide beneath the surface. I think jellyfish are quite beautiful [*this was the reaction of the FORUM participants*] and their beauty symbolises our attraction to unsustainable living practices that are creating all these problems without us knowing it.

"I was using basketry practice in my art so I thought I could use fishing line to make them. I made friends with jellyfish expert, Bart Cummings and my interest grew and grew. I started researching them and eventually my research became the subject of a Masters degree and a passionate obsession with the humble jellyfish!"

When did you first become aware of the Ghost (or Drift) Nets?

"I first heard about ghost nets in 2006. GhostNets Australia had a competition encouraging people to use some of the nets for their artwork. So I grabbed some of the nets from them. I didn't end up entering the competition but I realised that they're a really good material to use.

"Usually they are disposed of by being burnt, so making them into artwork is a creative solution for a dire environmental threat. So I've been using them ever since and I love them as an art medium. They are durable, can handle outside conditions, the artwork doesn't need to hide in the gallery, it can be out in the elements, in peoples' faces, reaching a wide and diverse audience. I also like working outside so people can come up and have a yarn and I can tell them my story. So they can see I'm not just a crazy Jellyfish Lady!" □

Top of page left, a blue jellyfish (with buttons) and right, the jellyfish washed ashore with detritus.

Learn more about Aly de Groot from: www.alydegroot.com.au See also <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3173949.htm> For more information on ghost nets: www.ghostnetsaustralia.com.au or watch them in action at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8F-jKIEvUw&feature=em-share_video_user

