

# OUT OF THE DARK

Encompassing cycles of decay and rejuvenation, **Erin Coates** distorts realities.

WORDS | BRIONY DOWNES

Growing up in the coastal locale of Albany in Western Australia, the surrounding landscape and marine environment played a significant role in **Erin Coates'** childhood. As she grew older, free diving and rock climbing became an important part of her life. Frequently drawing upon these influences in an artistic practice encompassing film, sculpture and drawing, Coates brings these personal experiences together to create work that touches on biology, body horror and oceanic gothic.

A term coined by Coates and frequent collaborator, Perth-based artist **Anna Nazzari**, ocean gothic "is a less explored subgenre to Australian gothic (a film genre made popular by films like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*)," Coates explains. "It focuses primarily on underwater spaces, maritime histories, and submerged ecosystems. My interest in underwater spaces began when I was growing up. My dad was a professional shell diver and there was seafaring on my mum's side. We spent a lot of time in and on the water. When it comes to my art practice, my work draws from direct

experiences of free diving, memories of things I saw growing up, and the important work marine biologists are doing now."

Recently included in *rivus*, the 23rd Biennale of Sydney and *Monster Theatres: 2020 Adelaide Biennial*, Coates has been working on a new series of graphite drawings in the chiaroscuro style. The passing of time and the physical limits of human and non-human bodies are key elements of this work, and Coates has represented these themes through intricately detailed depictions of sea life and human bones. "These graphite drawings are magically meticulous, in some ways amusing and instructive all at once," says **Margaret Moore**, director of Moore Contemporary, Perth. "They reflect her merging of environmental research with philosophical musings and are underpinned with her signature gothic edge."

Encompassing the cycle of decay and rejuvenation, the series *My Family's Bones* features bones with visible signs of medical interventions and injury like artificial joints and screwed together skull plates. Entwined

within the bone cavities are sea creatures – the Australian Gloomy Octopus, Crystal (Snow) Crab and the Mosaic Sea star. For Coates, this series, "speculates on an alternative future for my bones and those of my extended family. Slowly, bottom feeders inhabit these forms, transforming our bones into micro-architectures. There is a symbolic optimism proposed in this work, in the notion humans could enact a gainful offering to marine lifeforms in the future, as opposed to the one-sided extraction of natural resources. There is also dark humour and a measure of comfort, imagining our bones slowly dispersed throughout watery realms, providing habitat to flora and fauna."

Fluctuating between the mediums of drawing and film, Coates finds her drawing practice is often "part of the conceptual build up to making a film". Allowing for more subjective renderings of experience, her drawing practice runs parallel to the longer production time demanded by film. "I want to generate an atmosphere somewhere between nature documentary, horror and magic realism, and to make the drawings feel like they are pushing their way out of the dark."

OPPOSITE: Erin Coates, *Skull (craniotomy) Sea Stars*, 2022.  
Graphite on paper, 29.5 x 29.5cm.

FOLLOWING SPREAD LEFT: Erin Coates, *Knee (replacement) Anemone*, 2022.  
Graphite on paper, 29.5 x 29.5cm.

FOLLOWING SPREAD RIGHT: Erin Coates, *Pelvic (replacement) Octopus*, 2022.  
Graphite on paper, 29.5 x 29.5cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND MOORE CONTEMPORARY, PERTH.

Erin Coates shows with Moore Contemporary, Perth, at Sydney Contemporary 2022.



