

Artist

# BIOGRAPHY

Erin Coates is a Perth-based artist working across drawing, sculpture and film and her work appears in both galleries and film festivals. She has shown in a number of significant exhibitions, including the *Adelaide Biennial: Monster Theatres* at the Art Gallery of South Australia, 2020, *Videobrasil - 21st Contemporary Art Biennial*, in São Paulo, 2019, and *The National: New Australian Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2017. Her films have screened in *Oaxaca Film Festival, Mexico*, *St Kilda Film Festival, Melbourne*, *Cleveland International Film Festival, USA*, and her recent film *Dark Water* won awards in *Genre Celebration Festival, Tokyo, Japan*, *Women in Horror Film Festival, Atlanta, USA*, and *Calcutta International Cult Film Festival, India*. Coates' artwork is held in the collections of the the Art Gallery of South Australia, City of Perth, Wesfarmers and Cruthers Collection of Women's Art.

[www.erincoates.net](http://www.erincoates.net)



Photograph by Saul Stead, courtesy of AGSA

## AFTERWORD

The Tilt program is part of the Goolugatup Heathcote annual exhibition schedule and has been developed to support local art practice, artistic enquiry and arts practitioners.

Each year, an artist is invited to respond to Goolugatup and its multi-layered history by creating a new body of work. Tilt provides local artists with an opportunity to bring new work to broad audiences, while contributing to the long and important story of the site. Tilt is an invitational exhibition, and in its 12 years has featured some of Western Australia's leading visual artists.

This year's Tilt artist is Erin Coates, who considers one of the most significant aspects of the site – the Derbarl Yerrigan/Swan River which wraps its watery way around the Goolugatup peninsula. She has worked in collaboration with percussionist Louise Devenish and composer Stuart James to explore the instrumental potential of her ceramic and metallic sculptures. The resulting exhibition and associated performances are a cacophony of sound, texture and shadow.

The exhibition deconstructs the environmental and spiritual impact of white settlement upon this area of the river, in particular in the era between the 1920s and 1950s. The removal of the natural oyster reefs during this time within the depths of the Derbarl Yerrigan is explored through suspended sculpture, video, sound and drawings.

The materiality of this show is at the core of its message. Natural oyster reefs were mined to produce the mortar of the very buildings in which the work is displayed. Coates brings this devastation of the underwater ecology to the fore.

Walk through the corridors and rooms of these old buildings and the ghost of the river might be within its very walls. This exhibition gives the viewer a rare glimpse of a submerged ecology and the opportunity to connect with the forgotten history of the river beside Goolugatup.

Jana Wallace Braddock — Curator

[www.heathcotewa.com](http://www.heathcotewa.com)



GOOLUGATUP  
HEATHCOTE



ISBN: 978-0-6487757-2-0

# ALLUVIAL GOLD

A solo exhibition by  
**ERIN COATES**  
for the Tilt program  
GOOLUGATUP HEATHCOTE



14 / 14  
NOV 2020 / FEB 2021



# BODIES OF WATER

Immense bodies of water are metaphorically rich as repositories for psychological and emotional projections. They are powerful and fragile, the stuff of floaty dreams and darkly enveloping nightmares. Immense bodies of water are also viscerally compelling, their reflective magnificence overwhelming at times and they are mysterious, containing hidden depths, unknown entities, frightening and fascinating lifeforms. In reality they are a force to contend with and an imperilled ecology in need of care. Much happens below the surface of the water that remains unseen, much that Erin Coates pays close attention to in *Alluvial Gold*.

Essay by

**Laetitia Wilson**

The Derbarl Yerrigan/Swan River is the body of concern here and especially the stretch of water surrounding Point Heathcote/Goolugatup. Like other such bodies, the Swan River is interconnected with and impacted by the land that surrounds it; the Indian Ocean that comes in and washes it out and; the lifeforms that live within, around and upon it. For many centuries the Swan Coastal plain, its flora and fauna were harmoniously managed by the Noongar people. Since the settlement of the Swan River Colony in 1829, the river has been witness and subject to a breakneck pace of development. In the very short span of nearly 200 years, suburbs have clustered about it, farms have belched fertiliser run off into it and all manner of trash, such as sewerage and discarded fishing line, have polluted it. The riverbed has been dredged for land reclamation and the shellfish reefs have been pilfered for lime and to use as road rubble. Natural habitats for local fauna, like its namesake, the black swan, have been destroyed, no more are the giant Banksias and thirty-foot Zamia palms and rare now are the reed beds on the fringes essential for filtration. Even the much-loved dolphin populations show the impact of this period on their skin, with mysterious and debilitating viral lesions.

The river is a complex topic for artistic exploration and Coates literally throws her body into it, becoming intimate with its lifeforms and changing ecologies through numerous free-diving expeditions. Coates is very familiar with the human impact on the intricate ecologies of the river. The resulting artworks are a far throw from the more familiar artistic scenes of picturesque painterly river views, where painters boast the mastery of their craft in *plein air*. This is *plein eau*. It is fluidly expressed across the mediums of graphite, cast silicon, shells, porcelain, bronze, gold, film and sound performance, to become a complex commentary on human/river/creature entanglements.

With an interest in the monstrous and body horror, Coates reveals the monsters of human creation and makes manifest the foreign objects invading the river and impacting it and its native inhabitants. Colonial fears about the unknown are realised in uncanny and viscerally confronting ways. Clumps of heavy metal crystals cluster on dolphin bones, unidentifiable, strange and surreal creatures swim in the depths and river plant life hybridises with human and animal life. The bodies created fall outside of conventional boundaries, they are transformed, mutated and re-materialised entities. They are creatures of the Anthropocene. Coates reminds us that it is us, humans, that have created this new breed of monsters and suggests that it is indeed us who are the real monsters.

Collaboration is often a key part of Coates' practice, and in this project a non-discipline-dominant approach was taken to collaboration with percussionist Louise Devenish and composer Stuart James. The sculptural pieces of ceramic, oystershell and bronze, were developed with both visually and instrumentally in mind. In addition to featuring in the exhibition, these instrumental sculptures are sounded in combination with vibraphone and electronics to create a musical score for *Alluvial Gold*. This was developed both for the video work and the 45-minute performance work for solo percussion by Devenish and James. The oyster shell chainmaille and the sound work are a memorial to the estuarine oyster shell reefs that for centuries prior to being dredged were crucial in filtering the water, creating a substrate and a habitat for native animals and plants.

Through the monstrous, surreal and grotesque, it becomes palpable that in *Alluvial Gold* the Swan River is so deeply interconnected with whatever is within, above and upon it. As Coates' hybridisation of different species makes evident, we cannot separate ourselves from the rest of the world, we are not independent but utterly reliant and have an impact on our environment, the plants, gasses and creatures within it. There's an undeniable transference of matter between the things of the Earth and Coates makes this manifest in a curious, confronting and utterly engaging series of works.

Erin Coates, *The Alluvium*, 2020, production still, video with sound, 10 minutes.  
Composer: Stuart James, Musician: Louise Devenish





# ARTIST STATEMENT

When I was invited to participate in Tilt at Goolugatup Heathcote, I was quickly drawn to the river that wraps around this site. It was believed that the river would have a calming influence on the mental state of patients, and this was one of the reasons that Heathcote Mental Health Reception Centre was built here in 1929.

I began researching the Derbarl Yerrigan/Swan River, at first through the City of Melville's Local History Service, then by connecting with local marine biologists, and finally by freediving to the depths of the river. I discovered that between 1927 and 1956, over 3 million tons of oyster shells were dredged from the river. They were transformed from an organic horizontal habitat, into ordered, vertical built forms; ground up and used as mortar in buildings – very likely including at Heathcote.

The transference of matter into and out of the river and the impact this has on estuarine ecology are the central concerns of the works I have made for this exhibition. It has been a hugely rewarding experience to undertake the Tilt residency, and to learn so much more about the Derbarl Yerrigan. There have been a number of important contributors and collaborators, and I want to especially acknowledge: Gina Capes and Michelle Campbell for historical research assistance, Noongar consultant Karen Jacobs, Jerry Fraser for all the oyster shells, Chandra Salgado, Delphine Chabanne and Joseph Christensen for marine biology research, Gareth Wood and Tanya Lee for freediving the river with me, Jasper Silver for helping with underwater cinematography, Holly O'Meehan for teaching me new ceramics skills, Robert Hitchcock and Max Butcher for expert help with the bronze casting and finishing, Jessica Wyld, Jen Jamieson, Kate Abon, John Coates and Neil Aldum for studio assistance, and my collaborators Louise Devenish and Stuart James for the incredible sound work that is a part of *Alluvial Gold*.

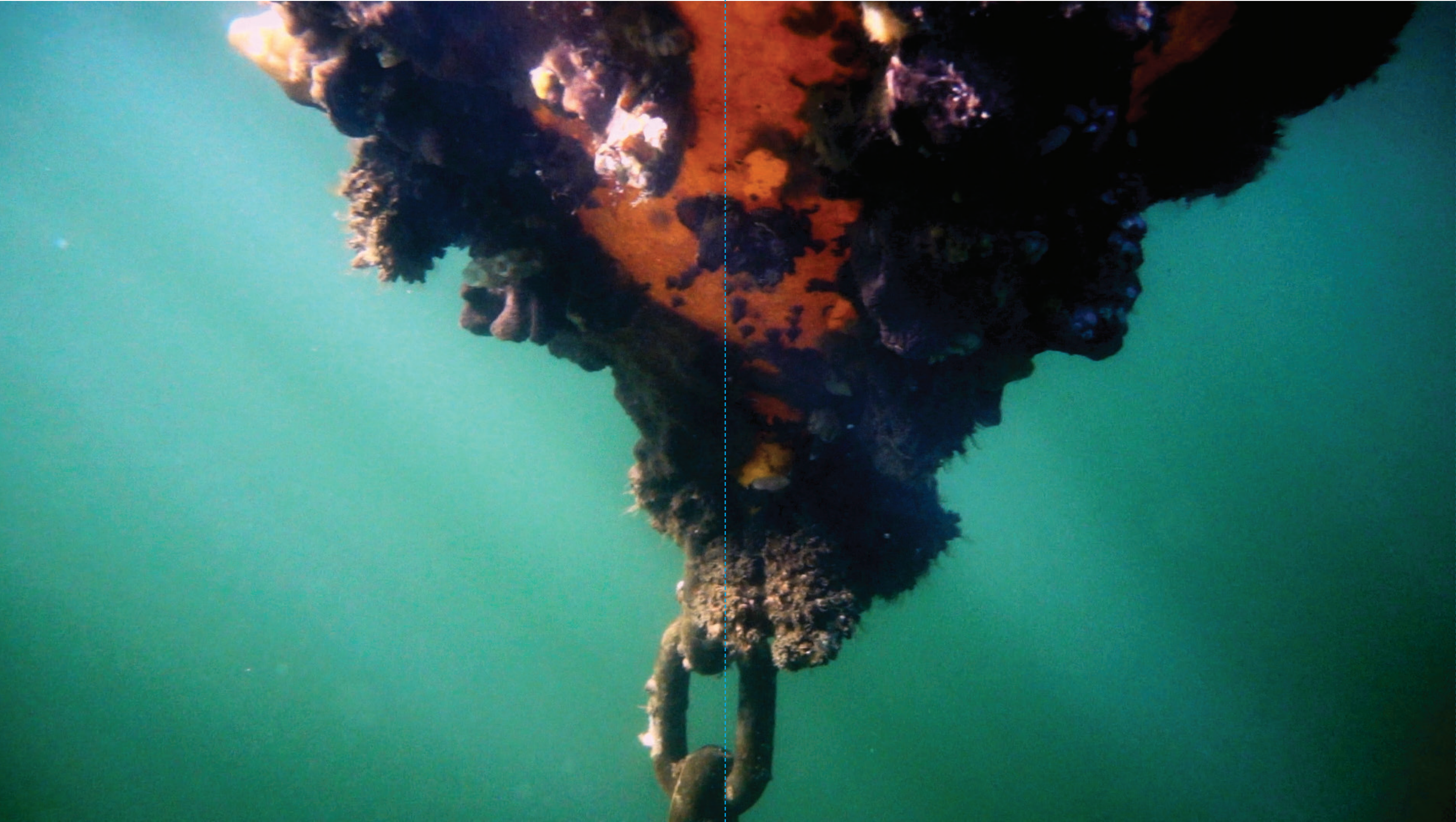
– Erin Coates.

The artist wishes to acknowledge the traditional owners of Goolugatup Heathcote, the Beeliar people of the Noongar Nation.

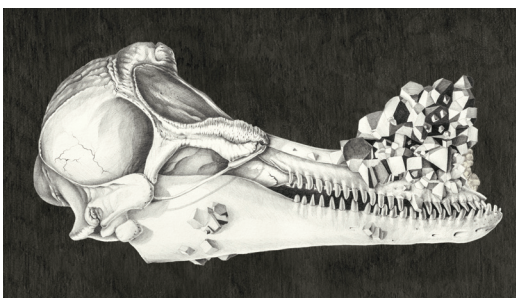
This project is supported by funding from the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.



Erin Coates, *The Alluvium*, production still, video with sound, 10 minutes, 2020  
Composer: Stuart James, Musician: Louise Devenish



Erin Coates, *The Alluvium*, 2020, production still, video with sound, 10 minutes  
Composer: Stuart James, Musician: Louise Devenish



Clock wise:  
Erin Coates, *Oystershell Chainmaille* in progress, 2020, oystershells, lead solder, brass wire, 2.3 x 3.3 m  
Erin Coates, *Zoonosis*, 2020, silicon, pigment and glass animal eyes  
Erin Coates, *Heavy Metal Skull*, from the series *Swan River Dolphin Bones*, 2020, graphite on paper, 42 x 60 cm



Erin Coates, *Heavy Metal Scapula*, from the series *Swan River Dolphin Bones*, 2020, graphite on paper, 42 x 30 cm

Erin Coates, *Oystershell Chainmaille* in progress, 2020, 2.3 x 3.3 m, oystershells, lead solder, brass wire