

**MARINE MARVELS:**

Barbie Kjar at her Hobart studio with works in progress, at left, and *Sailor* and *Fish Man* drawings, at right, for her exhibition *The Sea, The Sea*.





# Wave of ideas surges ashore

A long-held affinity for the sea has become an ocean of inspiration for Hobart artist **Barbie Kjar**'s new exhibition

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A swim off Kingston Beach last summer set artist Barbie Kjar on the journey to her latest exhibition. The water felt thick and soupy on her skin but she could not see why.

The culprits, tiny plant organisms called phytoplankton, are too small to inspect with the naked eye but Kjar has brought them to life on paper, along with shrimps, jellyfish and other forms of marine life vast in number but mainly invisible to us.

"I wanted to explore what is underneath, an unknown layer in something so familiar to us," she explains.

And when a tide of jellyfish washed up on the beach, along with the news they were a new species, last summer, Kjar found herself dwelling on climate change and the ocean ecosystem.

The artist, who lives at Kingston Beach, is a keen ocean swimmer. Trips in her grandfather's dinghy, fishing for flathead, were an important part of her childhood. Sea themes and fish have also featured in her previous works.

Kjar (whose name is pronounced "care") is of Danish heritage on her father's side and Cornish and with Spanish links on her mother's side - all cultures heavily influenced by seafaring.

"I have always been fascinated with the sea," she says.

"There are all these amazing creatures, and there is always an element of danger. While swimming in Spain I've been stung by the tiniest of jellyfish, which just reached my toe with one long tentacle and the toe was purple for a month."

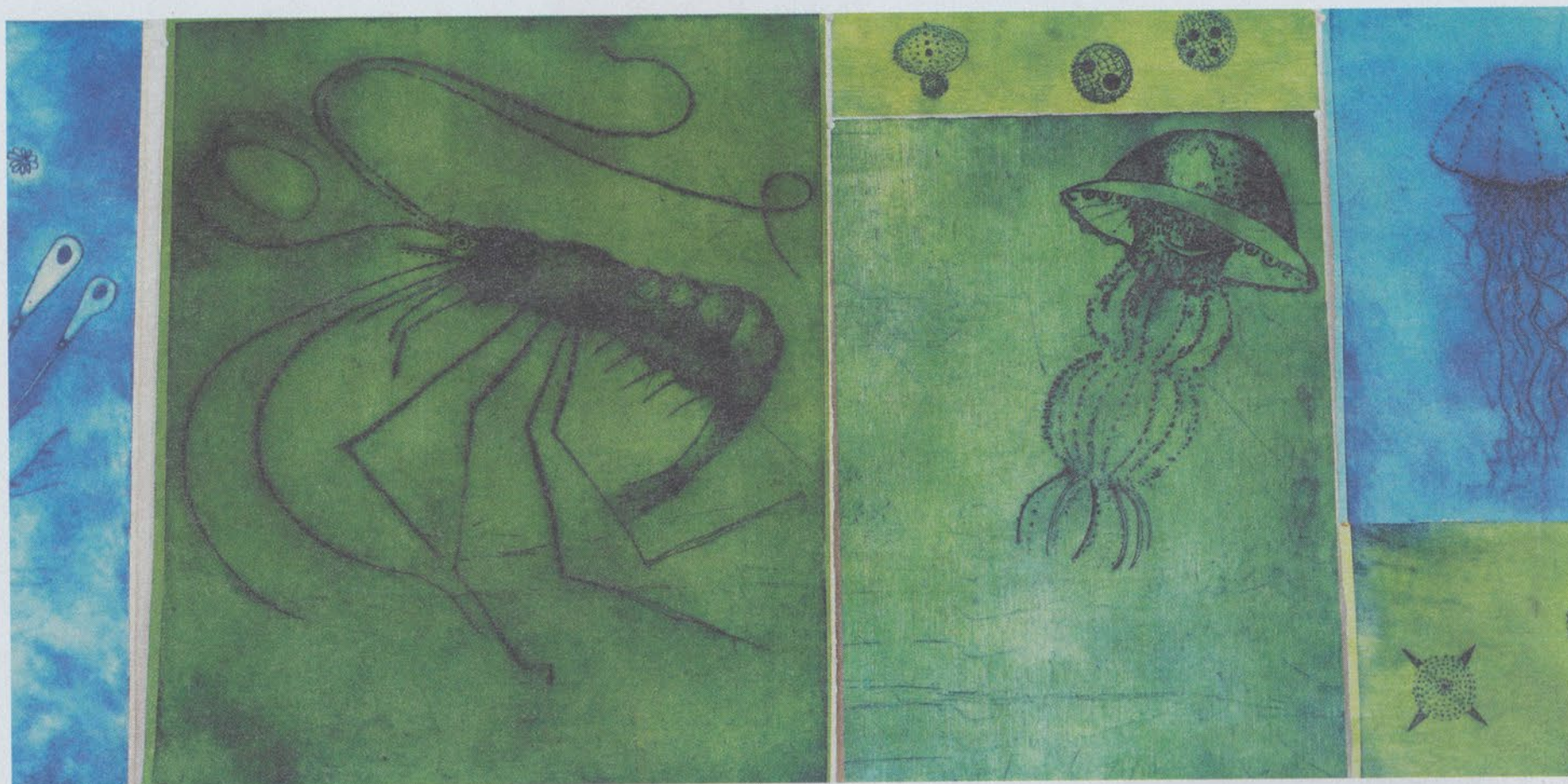
Such painful incidents could have put off many from spending time in the water, but Kjar says it just made her more determined to learn more about the ocean.

That determination is palpable around Kjar, in her quick way of talking, in her physical presence, which is so much bigger than her slight frame, and especially in her three decades of work, which is consistently true to her unique style and technique.

Kjar's exhibition goes beyond the biology in its exploration of what the sea means to people, focusing on journeys real and fictional. Her work has been inspired by writers from Homer to Herman Melville, Jorge Luis Borges and Emily Dickinson. ➤







One of Tasmania's best-known printmakers, Kjar has made her name with her intimate, distinctive portraits.

This exhibition, *The Sea, The Sea*, at Bett Gallery in North Hobart, is no exception, with themes and stories of the sea connecting the strongly coloured portraits to the marine life humans know only through a microscope.

"I am truly a people person," Kjar says. "I have always been trying to show the person and show the story of that person. That's what motivates me and my art. When you draw another person you always put yourself on the line. There has to be communication, the work has to tell us something about that person."

"When I start it is always something of a journey into darkness. I don't know what the end result will be. It is a process of learning about that particular person, watching them, holding their gaze. The artist has to reach into the dark. Just like the ocean has layers beneath the surface, so do people."

Kjar says novelist Alex Miller's description of portraiture as an act of faith, requiring the artist to watch and wait for a shy beast to come out, was spot on.

"The portrait is the result of a discourse, a process with the person," she says. "It is a conversation where both the model and the artist reveal something of themselves."

All of Kjar's portraits are from life and all are based on drawing. She says that in the first stage of the process a sitting with someone would often yield several drawings before she could hone in on what she wanted to show.

In addition to her print work, she has also painted portraits, including one of musician Brian Ritchie which stands in her studio. The portrait took several sittings, watching Brian play his Japanese flute, and resulted in about 10 drawings. Based on those, Kjar made a small painting before she was ready for the final portrait.

"It can be a long process, especially with a painted portrait that has so many layers," she says.

Many of Kjar's works are of people she has drawn time and time again, including her now adult children Luci and Jasper and fellow Tasmanian artist Tom O'Hern.

"I am always looking for people to draw," she says. "There is nothing more fascinating than the human face. The process involves an almost animal sense for understanding that person at that particular time."



**STRIKING:** Right, as with all her work, Kjar took her time to create her portrait of musician Brian Ritchie, which stands in her studio.



# I LOVE THE SEA AS A METAPHOR FOR WHAT IS GOING ON IN HUMAN LIVES. IN HOMER, THE JOURNEY ISN'T JUST ACROSS THE OCEAN BUT LIFE EXPERIENCE

**DISTINCTIVE:** Clockwise from left, *Aquarium Frieze*; *Sailor Girl*; *Constellation*; and *Snorkle Boy* are all drypoint and relief prints. For her exhibition, *The Sea, The Sea*, Kjar was inspired by literary works as well as folk tales.



"A portrait is so much more than a likeness, it has so many layers of the person, what fires them, what drives them, who they really are.

"Having said that, being able to produce a likeness is a real skill. I hope I am better at it now than when I was young."

She said she had been drawing people as long as she could remember.

Born in Burnie in 1957, Kjar says her childhood was one centred around making things.

"I would have cardboard, paper, colours. The important thing was I was allowed to make as much of a mess as I wanted," she says.

She said she was encouraged to draw in school in Burnie and later in college in Launceston, and she also learned from night classes she went to with her mother.

She did a fine-arts degree at the University of Tasmania in Hobart, but only after she studied English and completed a degree in education.

She had her first solo exhibition in 1986 and has been a regular at the Bett gallery ever since.

"My work as an artist has been shaped by my passion for literature," she says. "Reading gets the imagination going and there are so many stories we can explore through visual art."

For this exhibition, Kjar was inspired by literary works as well as folk tales. A major influence has been the Argentine poet Jorge Luis Borges.

"I love the sea as a metaphor for what is going on in human lives. In Homer, the journey isn't just across the ocean but life experience, with all the monsters, sirens and adventures."

Luci features in a work on this theme, drawing a parallel between navigating a vessel and making decisions in life.

One of the sea voyages Kjar explores in the exhibition is real – so real her anger flares up in her eyes when she talks about it.

Mohammad was a teenager from Afghanistan she was teaching through the TAFE in Hobart when young asylum seekers were housed at Pontville.

In Kjar's work, Mohammad's long journey from his homeland and his family to Australia, via Indonesia and a frightening boat voyage, are illustrated on the boy's body. His story of escaping the threat of the Taliban is also told in words on a picture of his shoes.

"This is a story we need to listen to. The treatment of asylum seekers drives me to desperation. The boys here were human beings, just children really, who had lost everything they had known before."

Another sea voyage featuring in the exhibition is the Spanish legend of a man who disappears while swimming in the sea and reappears five years later, with a strip of scales down his body.

Spain has been a big influence in Kjar's life and art, so much so that just mentioning the name brings a smile to her eyes.

She first went to Barcelona on an international printmakers' residency in the early 1990s with her young family.

"I fell in love with the country straight away," she says. "The vibrancy, the noise and the colours just blew me away. The Spanish people embrace life so fully, even in simple things like eating and drinking and conversation. They are so vocal, so bold in their opinions, so ready to touch you when they talk to you."

"I made great friends in Barcelona and I have got to see things in the city I would never have found by myself, all these crazy clubs and bars. One club had a room full of costumes so anyone could go in and decide who they wanted to be that night."

Kjar has had artistic residencies in several countries and she said the different influences had honed her own style even further.

A recent time in France proved to be a real eye-opener, when she had the opportunity to draw a model alongside fellow artist Colin Castell.

"His way of working was totally different from mine," she says. "He was much faster, much more structured. It was easy to see what Colin's work would be while I was still figuring out exactly what I wanted to do."

"I start off slowly and often have a few false starts or change my mind. But once I know what I want to do, it's all go. With a portrait, the main thing is the eyes. Once I get the eyes right and the gaze right, I've got it." ●

Barbie Kjar's exhibition, *The Sea, The Sea*, is on at Bett Gallery, Elizabeth St, North Hobart, until September 26