



OWEN THOMPSON'S SHELLBOX SERIES

The Shellbox series began with no grand scheme in mind. I had just finished a major exhibition of landscape works largely using sketches and photographic

references, and as a way to relax I returned to the fundamentals of painting: simple objects that I could observe and translate accurately into paint on paper.



Working directly from life challenges one's abilities to recreate the original three-dimensional reality of the objects by creating an illusion on a flat surface. I started to paint groups of objects from my box of collected curiosities and found it so enjoyable that I began another painting as soon as one was finished. Before long this evolved into a collection of paintings that were interesting when viewed as a series. The format and grouping of the works came after viewing them as a whole, and other influences played a part in this.

I grew up in a scientific and medical family and as a child was fascinated by visits to museums and science labs with their specimen trays and bell jars full of bizarre creatures preserved in formaldehyde.

Later when studying art I enjoyed and admired the skills of some of Australia's early painters, including the naturalists. A recently gifted book called "The Art of Science", Nicolas Baudin's voyages 1800-1804 (Jean Fornasiero, Lindl Lawton and John West-Sooby,



2016) made me aware of the remarkable work by the on-board artist of the French expedition, Charles Alexander Lesueur. The primary aim of Lesueur's work was to record the new discoveries they encountered on their journey for scientific purposes. There is also a clear element of aesthetic consideration to the compositions of these watercolours.

I was also influenced by the amazing contemporary work of John Wolsely, which combines the Old World skills of the

naturalist in accurate observational studies with a modern contextual, environmental, expressive sensibility.

I added a contemporary element to the nostalgic feel of 19th Century naturalist studies by presenting the Shellbox works in a triptych format. The presentation creates abstract spatial interactions between the objects, forming rhythms, repetitions and patterns. These interrelationships are as much the subject of the works as the objects themselves. One clear departure



from the work of earlier artists is the inclusion of the cast shadows as an integral part of the compositions.

As I developed this series, I began to search on the beach for objects to paint and realized that we have an almost instinctive tendency to seek to find perfect, complete, whole and undamaged specimens. And so I painted the work Fragments to show that there is often as much beauty to be found in the imperfect remnant parts as in the whole.

Perhaps there is a parallel here relevant to our experience of people too.

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