



Messing About in Boats

Wednesday 19 August to Sunday 13 September 2026

Contributing Artists

Bennett Miller
Denise Pepper
Geoffrey Drake-Brockman
Marcia Espinosa
Mikaela Castledine
Nic Compton
Stuart Elliott
Sue Starcken
Susie Vickery
Todd Israel
Tom Freeman
Tony Jones

Curated by

Jude van der Merwe and Clare Stroud

Foreword

Skimming the Indian Ocean, Rockingham's coastline is strewn with boats and boating. Close to HMAS Stirling and the Garden Island Naval Base, boating is a big part of the lifestyle and experience of many Rockingham residents.

While a lot is written and made about the perils of the ocean, the desperation of people trying to make a livelihood or to find a new home, we do not often focus on the utter delight of "...messing about in boats..." – a phrase from Kenneth Grahame's 'Wind in the Willows' that has wormed its way into memory.

For this exhibition, we wanted to look at the sheer joy of taking time to putter about, to organise and re-organise and acquire all the fascinating flotsam and jetsam that go towards making that leap into the ocean. An ocean that lifts us away from the familiar and safe, into a place that quickens the pulse, offers limitless views, has endlessly fresh air and the promise – or threat – of something beyond our immediate control.

There is much that is playful within this exhibition, touching on memory, observation and joy.

There is also much that is serious, relevant to the histories and horrors we are currently creating.

It is not possible to have an exhibition referencing boats in WA without thinking of Tony Jones and his consistent capturing of what it means to be on the ocean, next to a river, and in a boat. Tony's daughter Gemma Jones, writing for his 2022 exhibition *Opening Regatta*, describes her dad's continuous urge to make art and recalls his refrain "...to get on the water no matter what". Many people are familiar with Tony's tall beacon-like works that reference markers, wind, and compass directions. For this exhibition he has produced a series of 'Trophies' – seven small lyrical sculptures that dance across the ocean and into the gallery.

Denise Pepper brings us sharply home with her gorgeous rendition of the idea of the Rockingham, the ship that brought 172 human souls to WA in 1830. It was driven ashore in Cockburn Sound during a massive gale, leaving passengers and crew marooned to fend for themselves on what they came to term 'Rockingham Town'. Denise weaves together the story of her ancestor Eleanor Edwards who survived the wrecked Rockingham and taught herself how to make and sell woven straw hats.

Both the story and Denise's tremendous craft skills speak to us about the fragility of survival and the power of human grit.

Stuart Elliott and Sue Starcken look at the critical absurdity of what we choose, at great expense, to move across oceans, and the lack of care we take to consider what goods we need to live happily and how we traverse our oceans. They play with the forms of what makes a desirable sea-worthy vessel – chipping away at what a flotation device can be.

Bennett Miller's works have a singular focus. He alerts us to the fixed points of observation necessary for navigation; the relationships between the sky, the sea and how humans use those points of power for their own ends, currently and most notably in the Strait of Hormuz.

Firmly rooted in memory Geoffrey Drake-Brockman, Nic Compton, Todd Israel and Susie Vickery throw themselves into recollections of days and decades gone by. There is a lightness and a sense of joy in all these works. A place for the pleasure of a stolen day – away from responsibilities beyond staying afloat, listening to the wind and the water; being with friends and family and valuing the thrill of the moment.

Tom Freeman adds to these memories with a beautiful series of squid ink drawings referencing what it feels like to go fishing with his son. Off the edge of a jetty, wavering skies, ink dark water and hazy notes of delight come together in this series of loose memory.

Mikaela Castledine and Marcia Espinosa consider the ocean and its inhabitants as forces removed from our daily concerns – the ocean has a lead role in determining what moves where and how. Humans are separate; removed to the role of observers entitled only to a sense of wonder.

Working with the artists for this exhibition has felt like a hello and farewell to Rockingham. We have had a wonderful four years working with the Rockingham Art Centre, staff and community and treasure all the memories of walking along the shoreline, smelling the air, watching the boats, the swimmers, the gulls and feeling grateful.

With thanks to the artists whose contributions to all our lives enriches and warms us.

Jude van der Merwe and Clare Stroud

Co-curators

Bennett Miller

When I was thinking about this show I was also often watching a YouTube channel called 'What's Going On With Shipping?' that is produced by an entertaining former mariner named Sal Mercogliano.

I first came across Sal because he covered the incident when the *Leeuwin* was struck by a wayward container ship in Fremantle Port, but more recently Sal has been almost exclusively explaining maritime incidents in the Strait of Hormuz.

Even though it is often about that sort of topic, I still really enjoy listening to Sal.



Bennett Miller, *Listening to Sal*, 2026,
mixed media installation, dimensions variable.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Denise Pepper

I have always felt a strong connection to my colonial Australian family. In this work, I reflect on the pioneering women who survived, endured and moved forward in their lives. Eleanor Edwards arrived on the Rockingham with her husband and four children. Even though the Peel Settlement expedition failed and the family faced many challenges, they eventually found their place and began to prosper in the early days of the Swan River Settlement. Eleanor was resourceful and determined. She taught herself weaving and soon started making and selling straw hats, which provided people with much-needed shade. I used a copper shim for the boat hull to highlight her weaving skills. By recognising and celebrating these traditional crafts, we draw attention to the lasting influence of women's work and its important role in shaping our cultural identity and heritage.



Denise Pepper, *Eleanor*, 2026,
copper shim, wood, ink,
35 x 110 x 25 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Geoffrey Drake-Brockman

I was prompted by the thematic of this show *Messing About in Boats* to review my own carefree time spent mucking around in boats. I recollected sessions spent with friends on a little tin dingy on the river – sinking a few tinnies while checking out the inlets and beaches of the estuary.

For many years my work has explored technological overlap with human emotional spaces – often focusing on existential limits that I extrapolated. For this work I decided to see if I could put together a little robotic automation to capture something of my simple and happy reminiscence.



Geoffrey Drake-Brockman,
Tinnie Time, 2026,
beer cans, tinplate automaton,
35 x 45 x 35 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Marcia Espinosa

My works are inspired by the coastal landscapes of Rockingham, where the textures of rock, weathered wood, and shipwreck fragments shape the shoreline. I am drawn to these remnants – materials shaped by time, salt, and movement – holding traces of both presence and loss.

Working with clay, I translate these surfaces and forms into sculptural objects that echo the rhythms of the coast. Like the ocean, the process involves erosion, accumulation, and transformation. The works become quiet reflections on place, memory, and the shifting boundary between land and sea.



Marcia Espinosa, *After the Tide III*, 2026, stoneware clay glazes, 44 x 37 x 12 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Mikaela Castledine

My recent practice explores the strange relationships humans have with animals.

Deep demonstrates the disconnect between our habits and rituals and the animals beneath the surfaces we play on. It references animals as entertainment – in the past through cruelty and coercion but now often through viral sharing of images on social media which can still rob them of their essential “animalness”.

Deep specifically references viral images of sleeping whales – enigmatic and indifferent to our desires – and reframes boats as being not of the sea but as little bits of land we take with us on to its surface.



Mikaela Castledine, *Deep*, 2026,
carved Basswood, vintage timber box,
paper collage, lights, 42 x 22 x 20 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Nic Compton

Strange Mirrors is a memory of times when Hans Arkeveld and I would putt up and down the Swan River in our Mirror dinghies. I see the Mirrors as a metaphor and reflection to the discussions we had while out on the water, just floating and chatting. Reflections as we both had Mirror dinghies and I would like to think I mirrored some of Hans' principals to do with art practices.

They were good times, and you will be missed by many my friend.



Nic Compton, *Strange Mirrors*, 2026,
carved wood, 42 x 72 x 72 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Stuart Elliott

I grew up far from the ocean's rim and most of what I learned about it was from books and films. Although I dived and body surfed, just being in the water I was never entirely comfortable. But its mysteries and legends as generators of uneasy fascination drew me back persistently. The idea of *Messing About in Boats* had a metaphysical kind of attraction, not unlike playing hidey in a cemetery or exploring caves – there was/is always just a hint of dread below the surface, a sense of almost spiritual vulnerability. How could one not try and make art about that?

I was also drawn by the modern phenomena of the 'luxury yacht'. They feature regularly in spy/crime/horror fiction so often. *Catier* is a fictional folly for those that may desire the best of several projected worlds – status, conspicuous wealth and avant-garde identity. But vanity is rarely cost free.



Stuart Elliott, '*Catier*' aka '*If This Craft's Rockin...*' 2, 2026, painted wood, 16 x 30 x 18 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Sue Starcken

Now and then, inspiring exhibition opportunities can arise to rustle complacency and challenge imagined parameters. Almost invariably, the invitation to join a group show is a call to creativity that extends beyond the individual artist's studios. In turn, a hitherto unknown grouping calls into being a novel creative entity. The 'group show' is oftentimes themed, working to a curatorial brief. *Messing About in Boats* invites a whole-hearted exploration of vessels on and in the water, where the *Ship of Fuels* appears well equipped to tackle the high seas...

Not too long ago, those things considered futuristic luxuries we now consider staples. But getting these items from place of manufacture to place of deployment engages the same process as did the Phoenicians of antiquity. We ship 'em. And that 'we' is still humans, though these days radar, radio, satellites, AI and the sheer scale of the vessels make marine disasters comparatively rare. Perhaps in the process as a species we have now less caution regarding that vast mysterious body of water. The sheer volume of shipped goods makes the law of averages a lot less lawful - and those 'must have' stuffed rogue containers are now a significant navigation hazard.



Sue Starcken and Stuart Elliott,
Ship of Fuels, 2026,
wood, cardboard, steel, glass,
acrylic and oil paint,
23 x 80 x 21 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Susie Vickery

As an embroiderer, I love bringing my stitched works to life with movement. For *Messing About in Boats*, I have created two automata.

The Good Ship Best Australian is a large ship made from a vintage Dingo Flour Mill bag and recycled denim, sailing away on an indigo sea. *Regatta* recalls my youth sailing VJs at the Koombana Bay Sailing Club in Bunbury. The other boats are made from the tops of my dad's sailing trophies, won racing his Sharpie in the same regatta, celebrating our family's shared memories of sailing.



Susie Vickery, *Regatta*, 2026,
textile, embroidery, appliqué, wood, automaton,
30 x 56 x 25 cm including handle.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Todd Israel

This sculpture reflects the joy and freedom I experienced playing in rivers and the sea as a young boy. Today, I find myself sharing those same experiences with my own children, creating a connection between past and present through play and adventure on the water.

The human body becomes a vessel, floating and moving across the water's surface, while the arms and legs act as rudders and oars, guiding its journey. At the helm sits the head, steering the vessel toward its next adventure. Through this work, I explore themes of childhood, imagination, family, and the enduring relationship between people and water.



Todd Israel, *Fun on the High Seas*, 2026,
meadow grass, sticks, cotton thread,
50 x 110 x 30 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Tom Freeman

I have recently become more and more involved in fishing. My son became interested in it over the last few years, particularly just the chat with people fishing and telling stories. What started as a way to entertain and engage him grew into my own strange fascination. Flathead in the river, herring at Wadjemup, chasing that salmon that got off, squid off the local rocks at night; it's fun, it's social, it's peaceful, it's a quest, it's art.



Tom Freeman, *6:17pm, 26 March 2026, South Beach Mole, Fremantle*, 2026, squid ink, saltwater on paper, 41 x 30 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Tony Jones

I have been messing about in boats most of my life. I clearly remember getting into trouble as a child for dropping a blue coloured wooden boat on the head from the steps leading down to the ocean where we lived in Cottesloe.

Our family's move to Chidley Point on the Swan River reinforced the love of being on and in the water, anything that would float was a challenge to get aboard and drift with the wind. Making small boats of mussel shells and racing them along the shore until the last one sank was regular entertainment.

Sea Scouts the learning experience and access to sailing in a crew of likeminded boys had me on my way. In a short time, I was sailing VJ's and Sharpies and other craft for the rest of my active life.

As an artist everything about sailing boats – the river, the ocean – has been inseparable subject matter – conscious or subconscious – since.



Tony Jones, *Trophy 2*, 2026,
powder-coated steel,
42 x 21 x 15 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Bennett Miller



Bennett Miller (WA) works across sculpture, installation, video and performance. He produces many works for a gallery setting but is better known for his large-scale performative installations for festivals and outdoor contexts. Since 2010 Miller's *Dachshund UN* has been presented in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth (AUS), Birmingham (UK), Toronto and Montreal (CAN). In 2012 Miller was included in *New 12* at ACCA, Melbourne and was a resident at Australia Council's Greene St Studio in New York. From 2013-2016 Miller presented four consecutive iterations of a fake Amish community at Splendour in the Grass Festival in NSW. In 2019 Miller presented *Behavioural Ecologies (Red)* as part of the Fremantle Biennale and in 2023 was a participant in the Groundwork Arts lab at the Fremantle Arts Centre. In 2025 Miller was the winner of the Melville Contemporary Award at Goolugatup Heathcote.

Denise Pepper



Denise Pepper, a professional artist, has recognised experience in submitting to public and panel art selection processes. Pepper is currently an educator in the School of Design at ECU. She won the WA Sculpture Scholarship at Sculpture by the Sea exhibition in 2018 titled *Leaden Hearts*, and Kids' Choice award for *Waiting in the Wings*. 2019. Pepper was awarded the prestigious Ranamok Art Glass Prize. Her artworks are installed in Perth, as well as regional New South Wales and Queensland.

Denise Pepper is represented by Stala Contemporary.

Image courtesy of Yvonne Doherty.

Geoffrey Drake-Brockman



Geoffrey has exhibited in Perth, Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Canberra, New York, Singapore, Denmark, and London. Solo shows include the Moores Building (2021), Linton and Kay (2016), Singapore Art Museum (2010), and PICA (2007). He has also had major exhibitions at the Morris Museum in Metropolitan New York (2018), and the National Gallery of Australia in 2001 and 2005. Geoffrey has undertaken numerous large-scale public art commissions including the 11m tall interactive robotic artwork *Totem* (2012) at the Perth Arena, and the interactive LED matrix *Surface* (2016) at Perth Children's Hospital.

Geoffrey has a BSc in Computer Science from UWA and an MA in Visual Arts from Curtin University. Through his interpretation of "cybernetics" he has found his voice combining themes and mechanisms of computation with parallels in the human realm and expressing the intersection between them via a combination of traditional and new media.

Marcia Espinosa



Marcia Espinosa is a Chilean-Australian artist whose practice explores memory, identity, and the relationship between material and place within a globalised context. Working primarily with stoneware clay, she creates hand-built sculptures that draw on landscapes from northern Chile and Western Australia, as well as references to folklore, architecture, and found objects. Her work reflects a deep connection to land, shaped by experiences of migration and cultural transition.

Espinosa studied Fine Arts at Arcis University in Chile before moving to Australia, where she completed an Advanced Diploma of Visual Art and Contemporary Craft at North Metropolitan TAFE (2014) and a Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art) with Distinction at Curtin University (2018). Her practice emphasises processes of transformation, erosion, and time, with forms that evoke fragments or relics, inviting reflection on what is remembered, altered, or lost. Espinosa has exhibited in group and solo exhibitions, and her work is held in public and private collections.

Marcia Espinosa is represented by Stala Contemporary.

Mikaela Castledine



Mikaela Castledine is an award-winning artist and published writer, with a degree in Applied Science and an MA in Writing and Literature. She has been a professional artist for over 30 years, working in collage and sculpture.

She was born in the Western Australian wheat-belt, grew up and now lives in the Perth Hills. She is best known for her crochet sculptures exploring our connections to animals, religious architecture across cultures, and family storytelling.

Nic Compton



Based in York, Western Australia, Nic Compton is known for his dynamic sculptures and installations that explore themes of connection, nature, and the human experience. He draws from the rich and diverse landscapes and cultures of Western Australia, integrating organic materials with innovative design to create powerful, evocative pieces that engage with their environment and audience. Compton's practice is rooted in a deep respect for the land and the stories it holds, often reflecting the interplay between histories, culture, and place.

Compton's early years growing up in Aotearoa (New Zealand) with Maori ancestry has influenced his art practices and his respect for Indigenous cultures. His work has been exhibited widely, and he has a strong track record of contributing to public art projects that bring communities together through shared artistic experiences. Compton's sculptures, ranging from large scale public art to more intimate studio-based work, are recognised for their intricate craftsmanship and thoughtful design, with an emphasis on cultural dialogue and sustainability.

Image courtesy of Raymond George Meckenstock.

Stuart Elliott



Studio based practice, thus far 28 major solo and several hundred group shows at both commercial and public spaces. Public and private commissions, local and international residencies. Lectured part time for 20 years at Adult Ed, TAFE, University and post grad. A number of state and national project grants, 2004 Scottish Council for Edinburgh residency, in 2005 awarded a Fellowship through ArtsWA to further develop experimental work.

Awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from Artsource in 2010, awarded an *Ignite* grant from BHP in 2015. Withdrew from part-time teaching in 2014. Worked as the Senior Art Collection Technician for Edith Cowan University to 2024. Commissioned in 2016 for *Syndicate III – The Council* (10 life sized figures and a suite of paintings). Worked on University projects in Shanghai, Indonesia, Cuba, and Canberra. Work in most major WA and various national and international collections.

Stuart Elliott is represented by Art Collective WA.

Sue Starcken



Sue Starcken is a Parkerville based printmaker whose practice is located in the Perth Hills community where she has lived and worked for many years. Starcken holds a Master's degree in Medieval and Early Modern Studies (UWA), and a Bachelor of Arts with Honours (ECU, WAAPA and SOCA). She recently retired from ECU where she had worked long term as the ECU Art Curator, Unit Coordinator, Lecturer and Tutor. She is a former board member and representative for Artsource and the Mundaring Arts Centre, with experience in gallery and event management, exhibition development, and community arts planning and delivery.

Amongst other memorable cultural exchanges, an artist in residence international exchange project with Cuba was instigated. She also helped develop the ECU–State Parliament artists-in-residence program and steered collaborations that led to the Young Originals program for WA public schools. In 2026 she was inducted into the WA Women's Hall of Fame, recognising her contributions to the arts and decades of community-focused creative work.

Susie Vickery



Susie is an embroidery and textile artist with a background in theatre and film, where she worked for over twenty years as a costumer. Her practice spans fine art embroidery and international development, including extensive work with women on handicraft projects in Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar, Turkey, and India.

Her work explores themes of identity, gender, and cultural heritage, shaped by concerns around inequality, environmental degradation, and climate change. Using embroidered textiles, animation, puppets, and automata, she addresses issues such as sweatshops, deforestation, and species extinction, creating work that engages audiences with complex subjects in accessible and thought-provoking ways.

Image courtesy of Raquel Aranda.

Todd Israel



Todd is a Western Australian artist and educator who has been creating finely crafted fibre works for more than 30 years. He holds a Diploma in Sculpture and Painting from Claremont School of Art, a Bachelor of Fine Art from Edith Cowan University, majoring in Textiles with a minor in Sculpture, and a Graduate Diploma of Teaching specialising in Visual Art. He is currently the specialist art teacher at Moorditj Noongar Community College in Middle Swan.

Working alongside his teaching career, Israel's art practice explores personal narrative through textile-based sculpture. His work has often focused on the human form, influenced by his experience as an elite athlete and a fascination with the body's structure, movement, and expression. Influenced by his aunt and mentor, Nalda Searles, Israel incorporates repurposed clothing and textile construction techniques into his work. He continues to explore new materials and ideas, creating artworks that connect memory, identity, and lived experience.

Tom Freeman



Tom Freeman was born in Margaret River, WA in 1985, and lives and works on Whadjuk Noongar land in Walyalup Fremantle, WA. Freeman graduated from Curtin University in 2007 with a BA (Fine Art), and his practice spans various forms of painting, drawing, ceramics and sculptural installation.

Daily life increasingly forces a creative approach to artmaking, and time is snatched and shaped in various forms of productivity or procrastination. All aspects of life are accepted within Freeman's art practice and over-thinking is ruled out. Freeman is represented by AVA gallery and regularly participates in group and solo exhibitions locally and nationally. His work has been acquired by numerous collections, including the Art Gallery of WA, Murdoch University, John Curtin University, City of Fremantle, Queensland University of Technology, and St John of God Health Care.

Tony Jones



Tony Jones is a Western Australian artist whose career spans more than five decades and includes 20 solo exhibitions, over 100 group exhibitions and more than 60 public art commissions.

He is most widely known for his public artworks that represent aspects of local history, including *Eliza* which stands in the Swan River, at the base of King's Park and of C. Y. O'Connor, in the water at Coogee Beach. Both sculptures have been embraced by locals, *Eliza* being frequently costumed by members of the public in response to matters of the day, and *C. Y. O'Connor Horse and Rider* being adorned with flowers by O'Connor's descendants on the anniversary of his death each year.

Jones' exhibition history and commissions can overshadow his curatorial activities which resulted in key exhibitions in the 1980s and 1990s that helped to position local sculpture in its contemporary context. His artistic output has occurred in parallel to his many roles, and his leadership in the arts was recognised in his award of a Medal of the Order of Australia in 2009 and WA Citizen of the Year (Arts) in 2008. In 2024 he was made a State Cultural Treasure.



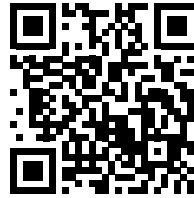
Rockingham Arts Centre
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Gallery opening times:

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Acknowledgement of Country

The City of Rockingham acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land, the Binjareb and Whadjuk Nyoongar peoples and their continuing connection to the land, waters and community. We pay our respects to all members of Aboriginal communities and their cultures, and to Elders past and present.



rockingham.wa.gov.au

Denise Pepper, *Eleanor*, 2026,
copper shim, wood, ink, 35 x 110 x 25 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.