

## Present Pasts

NICOLA DICKSON

Artist Researcher, Ngunnawal Country, Canberra



**Fig. 1** Nicola Dickson, *Imagining Malmaison – Major Mitchell Cockatoo*, 2020. From the exhibition, *Voyagers' Tales – Baudin*, July 2020, Beaver Galleries, Canberra. Photo Brenton McGeachie Artwork © Nicola Dickson



**Fig. 2** Nicola Dickson, *French Collection*, 2019. Two detail images of the installation, *French Collection*, exhibited at the Canberra Museum and Gallery, 12 April to 10 August 2019. A suspended ring of ten pairs of birds' feet standing on perches (left), and a group of nine pairs of shackled swan's feet (right) placed on the floor. Porcelain, feathers, textiles. Photos (left) Rob Little, (right) Nicola Dickson Artwork © Nicola Dickson

## French Collection

*French Collection* was a recent body of objects created in response to the stories surrounding the vast collection of zoological 'specimens' made during the 1800–1804 Nicolas Baudin expedition to Australia. The expedition of two ships, *Le Naturaliste* and *Le Géographe*, officially sanctioned by Napoleon Bonaparte, has been described as one of the “most ambitious ordering enterprises in nineteenth-century science” (Pfennigwerth 2). A visual record of the various collections assembled by the Baudin expedition is held in the National Library of Australia, where I first encountered them: 40 engraved plates published as the *Atlas Historique* of the three-volume tome, *Voyage de découvertes aux Terres Australes*, largely written by voyage's zoologist, François Péron and initially published in Paris in 1807. The *Atlas*, derived from drawings made by the two artists accompanying the voyage, Nicolas





**Fig. 3** Nicola Dickson, *Imagining Malmaison – Eastern Spinebills*, 2020. From the exhibition, *Voyagers' Tales -Baudin* July 2020, Beaver Galleries, Canberra. Photo Brenton McGeachie Artwork © Nicola Dickson

Martin-Petit and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, notoriously includes images of sovereign First Nations people encountered by these Europeans, anonymised Indigenous cultural artefacts, particular locations visited, emus, seals and kangaroos. Shipped live to France, a captured pair of black swans became a favourite of the Empress

Joséphine Bonaparte who added them to her roaming menagerie of transported Australian animals—including a cassowary, emus and (short-lived) kangaroos—at her private Château de Malmaison, on the outskirts of Paris (Duyker; Gott).

Viewing and contemplating archival objects and images provokes me—a female Australian settler artist—to imaginatively engage with and re-present stories of the past; pasts that resonate in the contemporary present. My focus over the last ten years has been to imagine and think within the historical records of the French Enlightenment voyages of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as led by the naval military officer and colonial governor, Antoine Bruni d’Entrecasteaux and cartographer and naturalist, Baudin. These voyages to Australia and the Pacific are situated within a dismembering discourse of Empire, exploration, ‘discovery’ and exoticism (Chevalier). A major impetus for their undertaking was given by the emerging discipline of the natural sciences, and accompanying shifts in European conceptions of humankind’s relation to the natural world; a prime objective was the gathering/taking/making of knowledge by observation, measurement and material collection. Such knowledge was understood to be powerful in its potential economic and political value to a colonising European empire, in this particular case, French not British.

### **Voyagers’ Tales – Baudin**

In 2020, following the 2019–20 summer of ferocious bushfires, and during a Canberra COVID-19 lockdown amidst a truly global pandemic, my focus in practice turned to the endemic birds around me: local, heard, seen, treasured. What emerged was a renewed close-to-home response to the Baudin collecting raid of ‘exotic’ Australian species: this recent body of paintings and drawings titled *Voyagers’ Tales – Baudin*, was exhibited in July 2020 at Beaver Galleries in Canberra.

**Fig. 4 (Next page)** Nicola Dickson, *Imagining Malmaison – Zebra Finch*, 2020. From the exhibition, *Voyagers’ Tales - Baudin* July 2020, Beaver Galleries, Canberra. Photo Brenton McGeachie  
Artwork © Nicola Dickson









**Fig. 5** Nicola Dickson, *Imagining Malmaison – Gang-gang Cockatoo*, 2020. From the exhibition, *Voyagers' Tales - Baudin July 2020*, Beaver Galleries, Canberra. Photo Brenton McGeachie  
Artwork © Nicola Dickson

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