



## Nature's little warnings

*Lianne Edwards makes artworks concerned with the human impact on the natural world. In sculptural wall-work from the past few years, Edwards drew on unique materials to convey her message – as she explains to Robin Woodward.*

All artworks by and courtesy of Lianne Edwards.  
Photos: Louis Edwards

Opposite: Installation detail of *Life, Hotspots and Venting at Depth*, 2019, reused tuna bulk bags, plankton net, acrylic rods, LED lightbox

Right: *The Plankton Series III*, 2017, plankton net, brass, beach-cast plastic (sourced from Sea Cleaners), 665mm diameter

**Trained in both science and visual arts, with a background in conservation, Lianne Edwards is perhaps best known for her intricately cut postage-stamp assemblages often featuring New Zealand native fauna. Her work first came to attention in 2007, when she won the Development Award (Vermont Studio Residency) and the People's Choice Award at the Wallace Art Awards. I spoke to her in August about some of her recent works focused on the marine environment.**

**Robin Woodward: Your installation *Life, Hotspots and Venting at Depth* (2019) was one of the stand-out works at the 2019 Auckland Art Fair. It has a somewhat enigmatic title – can you tell me where that comes from?**

**Lianne Edwards:** I made this work to draw attention to the fact that, although the ocean depths are out of sight, they are not beyond the range of human influence. Last year I read about single-use plastic being found 11 kilometres underwater in the Mariana Trench in the western Pacific, thousands of kilometres from shore.

Few people get to visit the depths of the ocean; most of us rely on images provided by submersible research vessels. For years it was thought that no life could be supported under the intense pressure, cold and darkness of the ocean's depths. However, in the late 1970s deep-sea hydrothermal vents were discovered and this changed our understanding of how and where life can exist. These hot-water vents emit plumes of mineral-rich waters that support unique marine communities, including towering tubeworm colonies and a myriad of other strange, often transparent, marine life forms.

Constructed from plankton netting and reused tuna holding bags, *Life, Hotspots and Venting at Depth* reimagines the hot-vent marine communities with some of the human-derived contaminants that have rained down from above.

**You've also used plastic debris and plankton netting in other works, such as the *Plankton* series (2017).**

When I read of micro-plastics being found in the guts of zooplankton, some of the smallest ocean creatures, I was appalled – the pervasiveness of plastic and micro-plastic in our seas really struck home. Plastic is accumulating in seawater, sea creatures and marine sediments. In the *Plankton* works I wanted to draw attention to this.

Plankton are microscopic but mighty creatures that play an important role in marine ecosystems. Tiny plant and animal plankton (including the larval stages of fish or shellfish) form the basis of a food chain that leads all the way up to sharks and whales. Microscopic plastic pieces

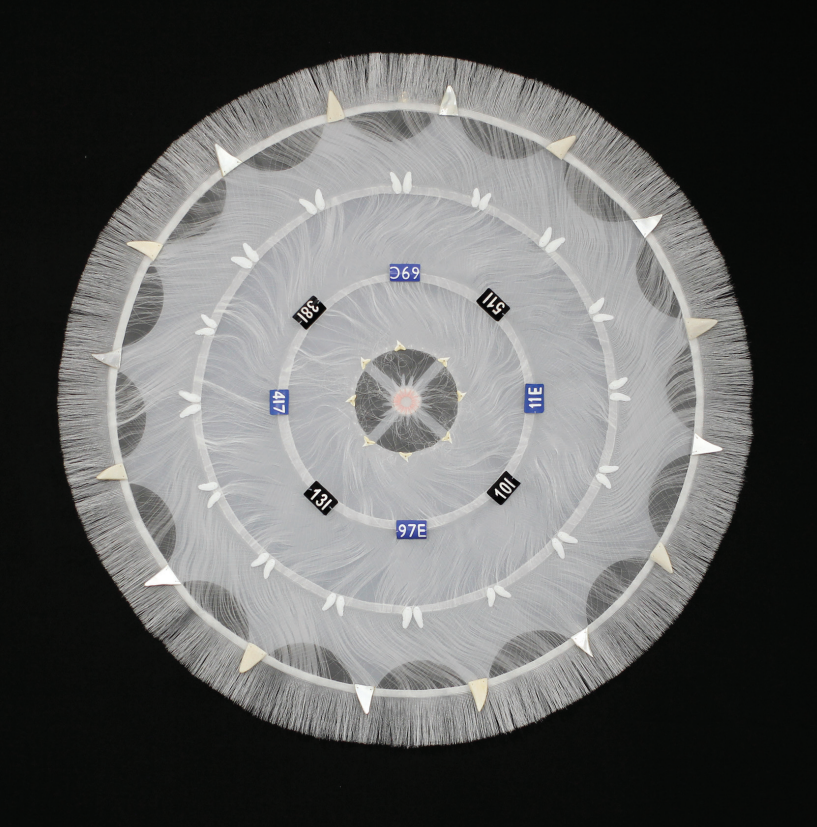


become mixed up in this 'plankton soup'. Plastic doesn't dissolve in water; it breaks down into smaller and smaller particles that are ingested by plankton, fish and shellfish, which may in turn be eaten by larger marine creatures including seabirds.

The diversity of these micro-organisms is not visible to the naked eye, so in the works I make the micro into the macro. I create my 'plankton' out of netting and plastic found by the Sea Cleaners initiative. The shapes of these artistic 'organisms' mimic those of microscopic marine species. The works are suggestive of what might be found trapped in the finely woven plankton net used by researchers to sample what's in seawater. The circular frame of the work is meant to suggest the view through a microscope – and I chose brass for the frame because it is a metal commonly used in maritime industries.

**You have a strong concern for conservation of the marine environment and pollution. What is the background to this? What brought you to this place?**

I guess it's a combination of many things: my initial studies in the biological sciences and resource management; working for the Department of Conservation coastal and marine section in its early years when it basically managed anything to do with the shoreline and seabed; taking part in estuarine and marine ecological surveys; and working next to scientists who focused on New Zealand's threatened and endangered native species. Once my youngest child (now studying sharks!) started school, I began studying art. It was a natural progression for my initial study and work experience to then inform my art practice.



Left: *Rise of the Jellies III*, 2019, plankton net, bird leg bands (wandering albatross), fish otolith, reused tuna bulk bag, swordfish bill, reused shark teeth, South Seas pearl shell, 790 x 790mm (framed)

Below: *IUU* (detail), 2019, plankton net, fish otolith, tuna fishing hooks, bird leg bands (wandering albatross), metal-encased thermometers, perspex, vinyl, 890 x 890mm

You can probably tell from my works that I am a bit of a collector, and the materials I use are important. I choose objects not just for their material properties but for their history and symbolism – their origin, use/misuse and travels. For example, a squid beak may have started life as the mouthpiece of a squid. After being consumed by an antipodean wandering albatross, the squid is partially digested, regurgitated and fed to a chick. The squid beak, unable to be digested, is again regurgitated (in a mass called a bolus) when the chick is about to fledge the nest at one year old. That bolus is collected and examined by a scientist before the contents are preserved or discarded – or used in an artwork.

In using transformed and revalued materials – whether collected or discarded objects, byproducts or waste products – I endeavour to add layers of meaning to my works. Ultimately, I aim for works to be compelling visually and also to have an inherent story.



**Thermometers seem to be another of your collected materials – I see they’re a feature of the *Target* works.**

Yes, I use them here along with bird leg bands, hoki otolith and coins stitched onto plankton net. Otolith are the ‘hearing bones’ found in all vertebrates – they help a fish orient itself in the water column – and I like them because for me they symbolise traces of existence. I dissected fish carcasses to obtain these ones.

The *Target* works are part of an ongoing commentary on the offshore Pacific tuna fishery, in particular how we value both the ‘target’ – tuna – and those species most commonly caught as bycatch or ‘non-target’ species. Bycatch is of major concern in the tuna fishery, especially when it includes sharks, seabirds, sea turtles, marine mammals and billfish, some of which are endangered.

The works *No. 201 Melilla* and *IUU* (both 2019) make comment on illegal fishing. The target shape references the name commonly given to vessels which are fishing illegally – ‘dark targets’. Often these vessels switch off their transponders and ‘go dark’.

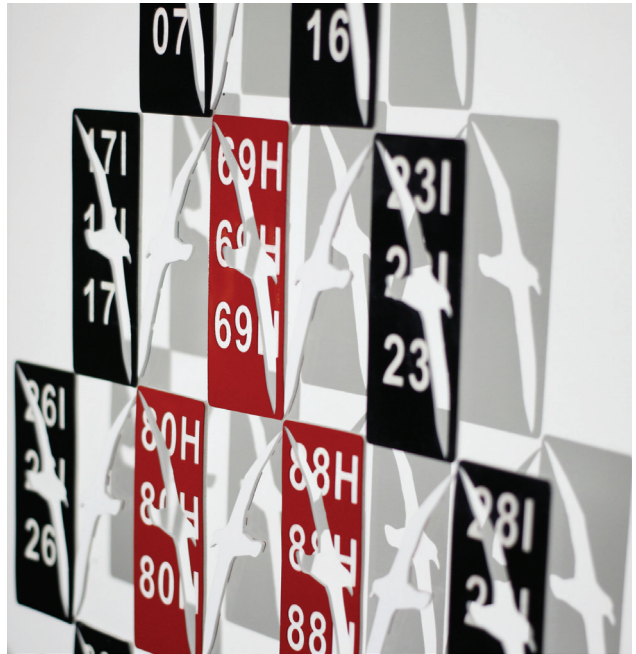
‘IUU’ stands for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing which is one of the greatest threats to marine ecosystems, biodiversity and fishery sustainability. The tuna hooks in this work reference the offshore Pacific tuna fishery. Coins represent the lucrative nature of these fish practices, with the most recent estimates putting the retail value of IUU catch at nearly a billion dollars annually.

*No. 201 Melilla* is the name of a Korean fishing trawler, one of the few international vessels ever seized for illegal fishing in New Zealand waters. Three officers were convicted of fish dumping (of 260 tonnes of hoki) and the boat was forfeited to the New Zealand government. The brass and metal thermometers came from the *Melilla* after it was sold at tender.

**You use coins again in the *Rise of the Jellies* series (2019). What is the story with those?**

Jellyfish are survivors; they have been around for hundreds of millions of years. When fish stocks are depleted, or marine ecosystems stressed, jellyfish will often proliferate. In *Rise of the Jellies* I use plankton netting to create jellyfish-like mandalas as a backdrop, with each layer referencing other groups of marine creatures that are less resilient than jellyfish. These include seabirds such as albatross (many species of which are endangered), fish, billfish, sharks and shellfish. Coins – Fijian pennies and halfpennies used from the 1930s to the 1960s – are also attached in order to reference the Pacific region as well as the market forces in play.

**In *Rise of the Jellies* you also use albatross leg bands, which become the main feature of *12 Chicks*, *4 Adults* and *49 Chicks* (both 2019). What were you doing here?**



I wanted to draw attention to the critically endangered Antipodean wandering albatross. These birds are banded by scientists in order to monitor population numbers. I was gifted a collection of bird leg bands: some had been retrieved from dead birds, some were duplicates or spares. Once information has been collected and recorded from a leg band, its scientific life is complete. To an artist these are incredible artefacts – treasures in fact.

Bird leg bands are colour coded for specific island populations, and adults and chicks also have different colours. Red bands identify adult wandering albatross located on Adams Island, one of New Zealand’s sub-Antarctic islands. The black bands identify the chicks of the red-banded birds. Hence the naming of the works – *12 chicks, 4 adults*. In cutting the albatross silhouette out of the flattened bands and having the shadows on the base board echo the birds, I am alluding to presence and absence, as I did in my earlier postage stamp works. Through fishing practices and environmental change, these majestic birds face the very real possibility of extinction.

**You made mention earlier of billfish as bycatch. I notice that swordfish bills are the principal material in *Sea Kraits* (2018–19). Can you tell me about that?**

Sea kraits are snake-like creatures found across much of the Pacific Ocean. Highly poisonous but docile creatures, they strike only if provoked. Visually their eye-catching black and white stripes send a warning of their lethal nature. Similarly, I view my *Sea Kraits* as nature’s little warnings. I wanted to make comment on some of the major issues facing the marine environment across the Pacific Ocean. The swordfish bills – a waste product of the New Zealand swordfish fishery – provided the vehicle to make that comment, with the insertion of plastic (sourced from beach-cast mussel buoys), various bindings and etchings. Each of these works symbolises an issue

Clockwise from top left: Lianne Edwards with *Sea Kraits*, 2018–19, swordfish bill, mussel buoy, coir, fishing nylon, ink, various sizes 1000–1500mm; detail of a *Sea Krait*; and *12 chicks, 4 adults*, 2019, bird leg bands (wandering albatross), acrylic, 700 x 345mm

such as sea-level rise, ocean acidification, over-fishing, fishery bycatch and marine pollution – especially plastic.

**And where to from here, Lianne? What you are working on at the moment and what ideas do you have for future work?**

Well, there’s always interesting and innovative scientific research being generated and there are many pressing environmental concerns – a lifetime’s work! My voice is in the art world. However, I like collaborating with scientists and environmental groups, so that issues reach a wider audience. I hope that more of this will happen. Meanwhile I’m experimenting with working on a larger scale and with lighting, so I’ll see where that takes me.

*Lianne Edwards has work in the group exhibition Impact at Whitespace Contemporary Art, Auckland, 16 February to 13 March 2020. She will be one of five featured artists in South/East Interference: Volume IV, at Bega Valley Regional Gallery, New South Wales, Australia, 18 September to 7 November 2020.*