

# arcadia sound of the sea

## About the exhibition

*Arcadia: Sound of the Sea*, curated by Dr Sarah Engledow, is an exhibition of 40 photographs by John Witzig, co-founder of *Tracks* magazine and founder of *SeaNotes*; juxtaposed with seven large ink drawings by Nicholas Harding and film footage from Albert Falzon's *Morning of the Earth*. *Arcadia* is expressive of the free-spirited, passive-revolutionary character of a group of Australian surfers in the late 1960s and 1970s. Underpinned by a Romantic conception of the awesome and spiritually restorative force of the sea, it reflects Witzig's publications' prescient treatment of Australian politics; religion; architecture; environmental conservation; food; and alternatives to conformist, competitive ways of living in a burgeoning capitalist country. Witzig's photographs have been newly-printed for exhibition under his own supervision, many to unprecedented size. Five sections from Falzon's 1972 film express a dream of an untrammelled lifestyle in saturated colour with psychedelic soundtrack. Harding's intricate recent drawings are a natural fit with the texture of the photographs and share their vigorous, yet gentle, sensibility. Together, photographs, film and drawings evoke textures and odours: salt and fresh water, wet and dry sand, dune vegetation, undergrowth, tent canvas, floors of vans and shacks, weatherboards, hand-knitted jumpers, thin old t-shirts, corduroy, spongy neoprene, stiff hair, dog fur, noses and claws, banksia pods, firewood, seaweed and rocks.

## About the resource

Throughout white settlement, our art and literature have largely associated the Australian character or psyche with 'the bush'. Gradually, throughout the last century, the beach began to replace the bush as the repository of a spiritual sense of place for the European population. As Robert Drewe describes in the foreword to a book of surfing photographs by Witzig, "Perhaps more than any other people, Australians crave a regular glimpse of the ocean in their mind's eye ... These days the legend of the coast is certainly as valid as the myth of the outback, and arguably more relevant to contemporary Australian culture." Surfing in the early 1970s developed into a cultural phenomenon from being simply a recreational sport. The counter cultural aspects of surfing represented a break from the conventions of urban Australia – broad notions of revolution, seeking freedom, seeking danger, dropping out, living with nature, and environmentalism. The shadow of conscription loomed over this generation of young men and may well have catalysed their natural urge for freedom, daring and a simpler, purer way of life. Alongside photographs and drawings from the exhibition, this resource contains brief extracts from the writing of Tim Winton and Robert Drewe, both featured in portraits at the National Portrait Gallery, and both sharing an enduring fascination with the sea, with surfing, and with portraying Australian masculinity. Along with quotations from surfers Nat Young, Nick Carroll and Tom Carroll, the literary extracts offer opportunities to prompt writing, discussion and reflection for students. Additionally, clips from

*Morning of the Earth* directed by Albie Falzon can be located at: [australianscreen.com.au/titles/morning-earth](http://australianscreen.com.au/titles/morning-earth) The resource aims to provide a variety of teaching and learning opportunities based on the exhibition, *Arcadia: Sound of the Sea*, which range in sophistication and complexity. Educators are encouraged to pick and choose tasks that suit the interests and abilities of their students. The activities target literacy: speaking and listening, reading and writing, art making and visual analysis: responding to an image, analysing the content and structure of an image. This resource has relevance to Australian History, Sport, Australian Studies, Cultural Studies, English and Visual Arts and is recommended for Years 9-12.

## NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY EXHIBITION

King Edward Terrace Canberra ACT 2600  
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*The Locals at Angourie* c.1972

This picture of five young men waiting for swell brings together the elements of corkscrew curls, shaggy bleached hair, corduroy, old windcheaters, bare feet and scrubby vegetation all in a muted palette. The downcast gaze and diffident expression of the boy on the right, and the beard and straggly hair of the boy next to him imbue the image with softness, prefiguring the digital artworks of David Rozetsky. Not only in the attitude of prayer on the part of the youth in the yellow t-shirt, but in all the boys' quietude and sense of anticipation, there's a faint suggestion of pictures of the disciples. Before they got their feet washed, of course.

**References**

Robert Drewe, *The Bodysurfers* Penguin Books 1983  
Tim Winton, *Breath* Penguin Books 2009  
Albert Falzon (dir) *Morning of the Earth* 1972  
Paul Clarke and Greg Appel (dirs.) *Bombora – the Story of Australian Surfing* 2009  
Ed. John Witzig, *Tracks* tracksmag.com  
Kate Raynor, Study Guide, *Bombora – the Story of Australian Surfing* metromagazine.com.au  
David Marr, Nicholas Harding: essay [rexiwin.com/artists/gallery\\_artists/harding/2006\\_exhib/essay.html](http://rexiwin.com/artists/gallery_artists/harding/2006_exhib/essay.html)

Arcadia: An Ancient Greek province which was isolated with mountainous topography and a sparse population of shepherds. Later, the word 'Arcadia' developed into a poetic byword for an idyllic vision of unspoiled wilderness. The inhabitants of this region were imagined as living close to nature, uncorrupted by civilisation, and virtuous.

Bombora: Aboriginal word for the sound of a wave crashing beyond the line of the surf, or on an outer reef.

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**By simply surfing we are supporting the revolution.**

Nat Young, surfer, *Tracks* magazine, 1970

**Surfing came to us from a place that was totally out of sync with any of Australia's other cultural wellsprings; it came straight from the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This is a history of something we've got that's not European. It allowed Australians to become unique and not tied up with the apron strings of the Empire.**

Nick Carroll, surfer, *Bombora: the story of Australian surfing*, 2009

**Discuss, design, write, respond**

- Kombi van, tent, spade, wood, dog and water bag form the essential elements of sustainable and simple living in this photograph by John Witzig. What other elements can you identify in the image? How sustainable is such a lifestyle do you think?
- What links between surfers and environmentalists can you list?
- Consider Nick Carroll's statement above.

Is there anything uniquely Australian about this photograph?

- Surfing is variously described as an art, a sport, a culture, a lifestyle, a spiritual practice. How would you describe it and why? Do you have a past time that resembles surfing in what it offers you in terms of experience and identity?
- Define the idea of a 'subculture'. Was surfing in the seventies a kind of subculture? If so, is it still a subculture or is too commercialised and popular now to be considered this way.
- What does it mean to 'drop out'? A reporter once asked Nat Young, 'What is it that you are trying to get away from by being a surfer?' Write an imagined answer to these two questions from the point of view of a surfer in the photograph.
- Essential elements of the surfing lifestyle included; living simply and sustainably, getting back to nature, making your own boards, living in tree houses or dilapidated farm houses and vans. Draw your own design for a tree house by the beach. Create a design for your personalised board or van using digital technology.

*Prevelly Park (Geoff Sedovic and Nigel Coates) 1971*

Between the scruffy grass in the foreground, and the overarching peppermint branches that create a kind of proscenium, there might be a fire going, though there's no hint of smoke or flame. The vertical post in the back of the Kombi, and a rock, are at the midpoint of this picture; the diagonal trunks with their rough bark are the strongest element, with the strappy leaves on the plant on the right balancing the whole. The fin on the left edge is the key to what the boys are doing there; looking at the vegetation, you can hear the susurrant of the sea, just over a hill. Roving loosely, the eye returns to the dog, sitting side-saddle and the ashy soles of Sedovic's feet.



**...blokes dancing themselves across the bay with smiles on their faces and sun in their hair...How strange it was to see men do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared.**

Tim Winton, *Breath*

**That day I went back across to the bombora and rode two waves. Together those rides wouldn't add up to more than half a minute of experience, of which I can only recall a fraction: flickering moments, odd details. Like the staccato**

**chat of water against the board. A momentary illusion of being at the same level as the distant cliffs. The angelic relief of gliding out onto the shoulder of the wave in a mist of spray and adrenaline. Surviving is the strongest memory I have; the sense of having walked on water.**

Tim Winton, *Breath*

**Inside those waves our voices bounced back at us, deeper and larger for all the noise, like the voices of men.**

Tim Winton, *Breath*

### Discuss, design, write, respond

- In his novel *Breath*, Tim Winton explores surfing and its lasting impact in the life of a man. From the extracts above, what does Winton suggest about the importance of surfing in some men's lives?
- Write a story based on the image of the young men above.
- What attracts some young men to engage in surfing? Many women also surf these days. Has the culture changed a lot since the seventies? If so, how?
- 'Surviving', 'adrenaline', and 'grace' are all terms that Winton uses to refer to the attraction of surfing. Do any other sports or activities provide similar challenges and rewards?
- Man's smallness in the face of nature is a recurring theme in images and writing about surfing. How might you explore this theme artistically? Through art, music, performance, writing, a storyboard? Would surfing be your choice to explore this feeling?
- What makes you feel free? Make a short biographical film on a smartphone or tablet which explores the activities and places that mean 'freedom' to you.

### *Mrs Sutherland's 1976*

In 1976, when he was 32, Witzig was on the north shore of Hawaii to have a go at surfing Sunset before it was too late. Assigned to write the major article of the winter for *Surfer* magazine, he set up his typewriter at the window of a rented room at the front of an old house owned by a Mrs Sutherland, by the ocean between Haleiwa and Waimea. Most of the young men in this photograph, taken on the verandah outside Witzig's room, are Hawaiian/American surfers and surf journalists, including photographer Leonard Brady, surfer Bobby Owens, journalist Bernie Baker and shaper Bernie Crouch. Mark Richards, from Newcastle, the Smirnoff Pro winner at Waimea in 1975, sits on the split-cane stool. Mark Warren, from Narrabeen, who won the Smirnoff Pro in 1976, sits on the sofa beside Hawaiian Mark Foo, who was to drown in big waves in California at the age of 36.



**I know that when I've been surfing, I've got a certain level of calmness to me, and when I've hit the ocean, even in its presence at the shore, and especially by a powerful surf, I've been put in my place as a person. That's what I think people sense when they get hooked by surfing, hooked by their relationship with the ocean. All of a sudden they're part of something that's a lot bigger than them.**

Tom Carroll, surfer

**That eye...was like a f\*\*\*in hole in the universe.**

Tim Winton, *Breath*

**As a boy his happiness had been bound up in the ocean, the regular rising and curling of waves over sandbanks and reefs, the baking sun, the cronies lounging against the promenade, the bunches of girls gossiping and flirting on the sand, the violent contrasting physical pleasures of bodysurfing....It was a combination of the exhilarating charge of the surf, the plunge on a wave, the currents pummeling and**

**streaming along the body, the skin stretched salty and taut across the shoulders, the pungent sweetness of suntan oil, the sensual anticipation of future summer days and nights....he could hardly be blamed for trying for that feeling again – the harmony and boundless optimism.**

Robert Drewe, *The Bodysurfers*.

**Discuss, design, write, respond**

- It is often said that, at a certain point in the last century, the beach replaced the bush as our spirit of place. Do you agree? What is your special, meaningful place? Do you find it in nature or elsewhere?
- What do the quotations above from Tom Carroll, Tim Winton and Robert Drewe have in common? Can you find a relationship between the statements and the image above?
- Write your own response to the experience of the young men in Witzig's picture.
- Do you agree that surfing is somehow part of an Australian national psyche?
- Do contemporary surfing magazines and websites reflect the spirit of place compared

to magazines like *Tracks*? What are the notable differences between the range of articles in *Tracks* compared to contemporary surfing literature? [tracksmag.com](http://tracksmag.com)

- What does Arcadia mean to you? (see definition on front of this resource) Write, draw, paint or perform your response.

*Nigel Coates and Murray Smith at Smiths Beach WA 1972*

It's almost impossible to believe that this photograph, featured on the cover of *Tracks* in March 1972, isn't a trick; but Witzig did indeed take it from the water, struggling to maintain his own position very, very close to the action. Murray Smith's sleek neoprene form is lofted on a veritable mountain of water. His profile itself resembles a granite headland; the lobe of his ear is in the exact centre of the photograph. Coates focuses on his own path but there's a profound sense of connection between the two surfers. Smith feels, in himself, the sweet ride his friend has caught, and his chest swells with exultation as he waits for his own. They say you never surf twice on the same wave.



### Diggers Scrub

Diggers Scrub depicts heathland between Woolli and Minnie Water on the Yuraygir coast, where the seashore is unruly. It's the only work Harding made specifically for exhibition in Arcadia; the skeletal melaleuca branches that twist across the foreground echo throughout the exhibition in the bleached driftwood and tangled salty hair of the surfers. The Yuraygir National Park was created after sandmining stopped in the area in the late 1970s. Now, the vegetal dominates. Profusely-seeding tuckeroo and banksia, and weeds such as bitou and lantana blindly manufacture themselves, over and over, out of sun and water. The scrub is impregnable, scrambly, prickly, with a pungent smell; forbidding intervention, it has to be skirted, got past. Harding sketches incessantly, wherever he is, but he can't make enormous drawings like Diggers Scrub outdoors, because of the paper involved; they have to begin where they end, in the studio. Characteristically, the drawing starts around the middle of the tree, with photographs pinned up alongside and three

pots of ink to hand. After a while, the artist's dependence on the mechanical evidence gives way to the memory of the experience of being in the place he's evoking, and he begins to relate branches and stems through instinct and artistic imperative. Around the composition he's laid down the tree begins to grow organically, the artist its inherent and irresistible life force.

### Discuss, design, write, respond

- How does this ink drawing by Nicholas Harding complement the photographs of John Witzig or the footage by Albert Falzon? Together, what sights, smells, sounds and textures do the works evoke for you?
- Create your own small scale exhibition choosing to combine video footage and photographs with drawings or paintings. What aspects of each work connect them to each other? What themes are you exploring through the choice of different media?
- 'This is the world before melanoma. It's late afternoon. The sun's been beating down all day. The wind's getting up. But people are still out. Those scrappy pandanus that

seemed barely alive before Nicholas noticed them, are huge in the landscape now. Forget Norfolk Pines. He's made pandanus the signature trees of the coast' David Marr, from a short essay about Nicholas Harding's work 2006. Marr wrote this little piece in response to a drawing of the coast by Harding. Write your own response to the Harding drawing, *Diggers Scrub*.