

ABROLHOS ISLANDS : NIGEL HELYER

PROJECT TITLE: *CrayVox*
ARTIST: Nigel Helyer
COMMUNITY: Houtman Abrolhos Islands
PARTNER: City of Greater Geraldton
RESIDENCY DATES: March–May 2011 (Abrolhos Islands)
September 2011 (Taiwan and Hong Kong)



AQUAVESCENT AUDIO CECELIA CMIELEWSKI

*The Island, a cemetery exhaled by the sea.
The tree of life, calcinated to a bleached white clinker raft.
Whilst all around, submerged beneath the endless sheet of water
Fronds branch and entwine, filament and fan, knoll and star
Electric pink jostles acid green, fading to sombre blue where the sharks sleep.¹*

There are several kinds of communities in Australia where an invitation is necessary to enter their borders: many remote Indigenous communities, military and naval bases, and the Abrolhos Islands. All require some kind of personal reference from trusted associates before the invitation can be arranged.

Nigel Helyer is an artist who is able to be placed in any cultural and geographic situation (from islands off the coast of Tasmania to those in the Finnish Archipelago; from central Mexico to central China) and acclimatise within days. His is a peripatetic practice, which in the case of the people who live and work for part of the year on the Abrolhos, mirrors their nomadic search for crayfish. He is also a consummate sailor, a definite pre-requisite for engaging with crayfishermen

who operate amongst one of the most dangerous stretches of ocean around Australia, evident by the many early ship wrecks, the most famous being that of the *Batavia* in 1629.

Helyer's practice is frequently characterised by the combined elements of ocean life; bio-politics; shipping; marine habitats; micro- and macro-scaled marine organisms; and social and political histories of specific areas. If a boat can be involved, so much the better!

CrayVox is an audio map. The eight-channel sound composition brings a beautifully crafted full-scale skeletal crayboat to life. The audio actuators on the bright orange sounding boards are linked with the cray pots (re-fashioned into speakers) and siren horns. Helyer is mapping the invisible for us.





The audio tracks provide intriguing and illusive elements of the social, political and biological environments that make up the crayfishing industry, from the capture at the Abrolhos to the markets of Taipei.

The *CrayVox* soundscape includes the voices of the men and women who work and live from time to time in this harshest of environments. Their work is tough and repetitive, utterly dependent on their boats, the engines of which we hear as one of the choruses. We hear the sounds of the creatures—the clack clack of the crustaceans, the rasping of the crayfish and the high-pitched chatter of miniature shrimplike creatures—captured through underwater recordings. Occasionally we hear intonations of the thousands of Latin-named organisms known to inhabit the Abrolhos; there are several hundred algae alone. The most dynamic part of the audiomap is the auctioneering and crowd response at the fishmarkets in Taipei City: the sounds of which seem to replicate the frenzy of some of the underwater critter's sounds.

CrayVox is also a visual map. Replicating the old way of making boats, a scaled sketch no larger than 15cm is rendered as a 1:10 scale model and then lofted to 1:1 scale, which becomes the



sculpture. The precision of the realised piece is all the more impressive when we know the sculpture (like a ship in a bottle taking up the entire gallery room in the Fremantle Arts Centre) is drawn by hand and made by hand. The crayboat is all there in a pared-back style.

CrayVox is not a critique, it is an engagement with the political, social, economic and species levels about a nearly bygone way of life and economy, which is in danger of becoming (like so much of WA) a lifestyle choice, where access to peace and eccentricity may still be found.

Not content with crafting a big boat and composing an evocative audio work, there is *CrayVox* the book. Thirty commissioned cartographic illustrations and recipes named after each of the islands are bound in a book that opens both Chinese-way and European-way. The book came about as a way to show other elements that make up this story. How does a calligrapher in Taipei City imagine and represent some of the islands in the Abrolhos group? How do the locals of Geraldton imagine the cuisine of the Asian restaurant tables that the crays grace?

CrayVox is suitably complicated, an elegant work and an elusive piece: the sound scratching and



surfacing this history of aquaculture extraction. This pointing to the poignant question as to why only 4% of Australian waters are protected as marine parks and reserves and globally only 0.36% of the oceans (which account for 70% of the planet's surface) are afforded protection.

1 Nigel Helyer, <http://www.sonicobjects.com/index.php/projects/more/crayvox/> 2011

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INTERVIEW WITH RIC MCCRACKEN MICHELLE SLARKE

How did Nigel go about the project? How did he gather information and material?

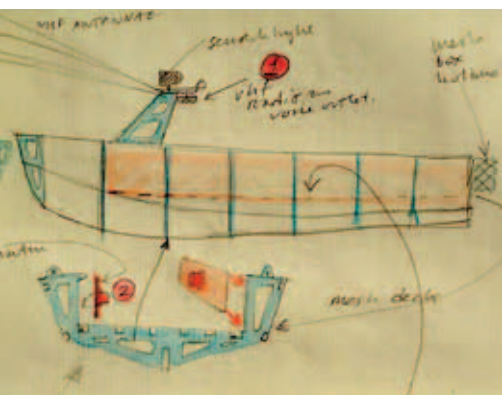
Ric McCracken: My contact with Nigel was through another project and he developed this idea for going out to the Abrolhos Islands. I made contact with the fishing co-op here; all the fishermen live in Geraldton or around and only go over to the islands seasonally. We organised for Nigel to go over on the barge and be hosted. You have to be hosted, you can't just go to the Islands and camp. Then Nigel developed his own network around the islands and was moved by the boats from one

place to another and handed on through a network of the fishing folks.

There are 120 islands: about 40 have shacks on them. About 30 years ago, there were a lot more fishermen and the season was much longer to the point that there were schools on two islands. The fisherman's whole family would move over and live on the island. Now, because of faster boats and smaller quotas, the season is much shorter and there are no schools. The government officials have gone except on the North Island where there are weather and marine people. It's a much reduced community.

How do you think the local people experienced the project?

They would have seen a fellow pottering in boats, recording noises and taking photographs. Then he had this highly suspicious friend turn up: a scientist who took water samples and did technical things. The fishermen are quite suspicious of scientists because they just regulate everything that happens on the islands. Being Nigel, he was friendly, open and approachable. He would have told them, 'I'm recording and I'm going to make this thing to do with the sound of



the Abrolhos'. Then he became really interested in the cray recipes and produced a recipe book. He ran a competition that I helped organised where he asked for stories, poems and drawings relating to the Islands. That was run through the Geraldton Regional Art Gallery. All that Nigel was seen to be doing was collecting. Nobody saw the completed project until the exhibition and no-one from the Abrolhos has seen it yet.

How do you think the people and the place influenced that artwork?

It's a very place-specific work. The sounds are so authentic. Anyone who has been on a boat knows those noises: the human voice occurring from time to time, the sounds of the boat moving through the water, the pots hitting the water. Like all Nigel's work, a lot of observation went into it.

What do you think Nigel learned from the residency?

He certainly learned a bit about life, the life of crayfishing. If you're going to go out on a boat, you're up at four o'clock in the morning and then you've got all this work in the afternoon. And he would have learned the rhythm of the Islands.

Did the artist consider the impact of the residency and the artwork on the community?

Nigel would have been very aware of that because it's very hard not to feel like an intruder there because you're new. The families are very closely bonded. You've got third-generation fisherfolk there. The 'huts' (they are houses really) are all home-built and owned by individuals. There's not any brick and mortar over there: it's all fibro and tin, corrugated iron.

Do you think Nigel's residency made a difference to the local community?

I think it will make a difference when the artwork comes back to Geraldton. The crayfishing people will be really interested to see what came from the project. I expect quite a discussion. I hope it's understood when it goes to other places. Throughout the whole group exhibition, you do get a sense of place and it's nice to see small places being part of the agenda.

