

'Dear Gilbert,.... '
(Song for the Ichthyologist)
by Jacqueline Gribbin

Nomad Art Gallery
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Hours: Tuesday - Friday 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday 9 am - 2 pm, or by appointment

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*Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Whitley's Sunfishes', relief, etching and chine collé, edition of 6, 20 x 25 cm, 2017.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.*

‘Dear Gilbert,.... ‘ (Song for the Ichthyologist)

Darwin Printmaker Jacqueline Gribbin has revived a collection of old and forgotten relief blocks created from scientific drawings by Gilbert Percy Whitley (Ichthyologist and Curator of Fishes, Australian Museum, 1922-1964). The blocks served as a means to print illustrations for Whitley’s many published papers, journals and books.

Through a series of prints, which incorporate the blocks, Gribbin has connected with Whitley’s cheeky humour, passion for all things fishy and his prodigious scientific output. The prints are a melding of Gribbin’s created marine environments with Whitley’s scientific work.

Journey of the Printing Blocks and Whitley Archives

For some years the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) held several hundred old printing blocks of fishes, which were originally from the Australian Museum in Sydney.

During Gilbert Whitley’s time, books, magazines and other publications were published using the letterpress printing technique. Whitley’s original drawings of fishes would be sent to the “block maker” who created an etched plate of the image, for printing on the letterpress. However, with the advent of offset printing in the late 20th century, letterpress printing was gradually discarded and the blocks became obsolete.

Given the opportunity to view the blocks, I found a treasure trove of exquisitely detailed fish images, some still wrapped in their original papers, with hand-written notes from around the 1930s-1960s. Many of the images were by Whitley although some were by other ichthyologists or collaborators. In consultation with MAGNT and the Australian Museum, I loaned some of the blocks and secured copyright release for the purposes of research and creating new art works.

During my research, I discovered that there were many more blocks held in Archives and Records at the Australian Museum as well as other Whitley related material, and so I visited the Museum.

There is an extensive collection of Whitley’s work within the Archives: original ink drawings, watercolour sketches, doodles, notes, cut and paste diagrams, and instructions to the block makers. Doodles on lunchtime paper bags and a sketchbook teeming with fishes showed a man clearly obsessed by all things fishy. But a cartoon sketch of his mother’s trip to Italy and a doodle of mermaids and mermen also revealed his humorous side.

The further I delved into the collection I began to understand not only more about the world of ichthyology but to develop a sense of Whitley himself.

Creation of Works

After researching Whitley’s archives I knew that the project was not only going to be a marine based response to the fish blocks but would be an homage to Whitley’s ichthyological research and personal observations. Whitley was highly professional and dedicated to his field but he also took the opportunity when possible, to insert some humour and idiosyncratic commentary on various fishes.

Creating a balance between my own marine environments and Whitley’s precisely detailed scientific drawings was a key factor in the creation of the prints. The fish blocks have a forensic quality to them, and are not 3-dimensional, making them tricky to place directly into a marine environment. I therefore, began a process of over-layering images; fishes, text, and maps with my seascapes. As Whitley’s images bring “science” to the project, I am attempting to create marine environments that are not literal but something a little more magical and free flowing.

This way of working has also allowed me to deepen the scope of the project by drawing on environmental threats currently affecting the marine world, and historical contexts through the use of Whitley’s research papers and his observations at that time.

I have approached the project as a series of mini worlds and each world is all consuming before I move onto the next one, whether it is sharks, rays, pipefishes or soles. Having so far only utilised a small portion of Whitley’s collection, I am looking forward to the next ichthyological adventure.... which hopefully, is something Gilbert would appreciate!

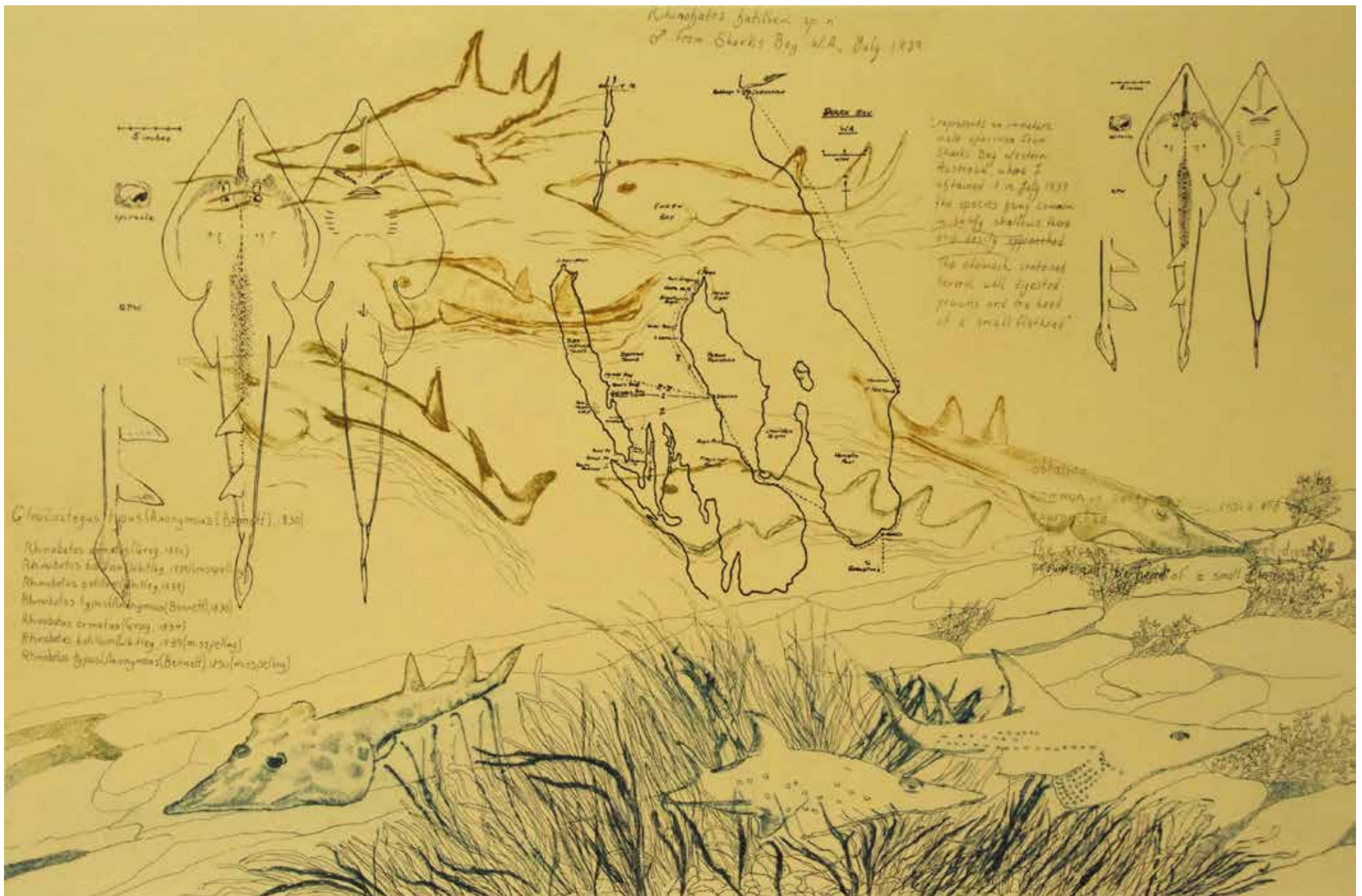
Jacqueline Gribbin, 2017



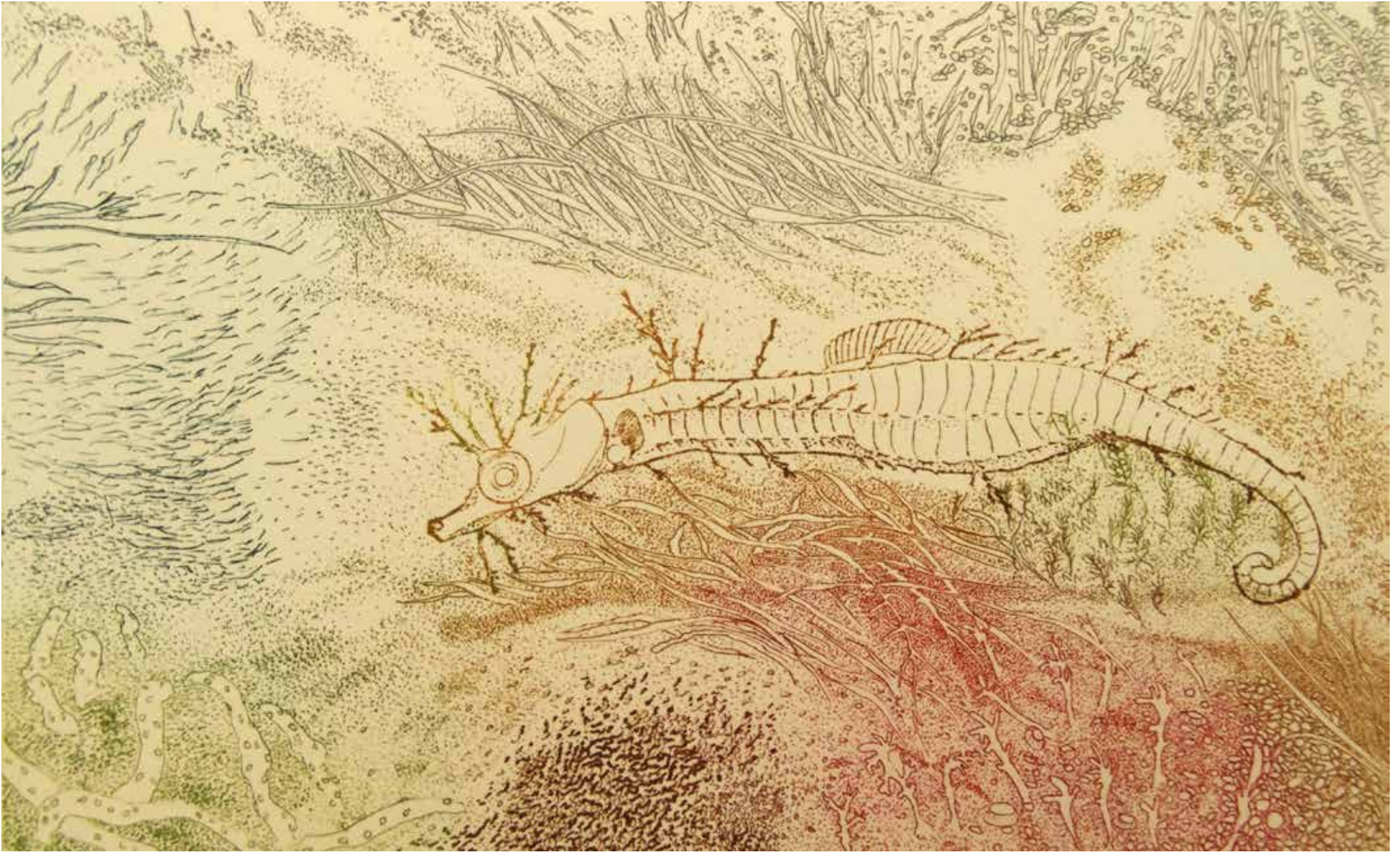
Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Soles', relief, drypoint, edition of 6, 24 cx 32 cm, 2017, \$250 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Walking Fishes of the Derwent', relief, etching, drypoint, chine collé, edition of 6, 12.6 x 24.7 cm, 2017, \$185 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



Jacqueline Gribbin, '*Glaucostegus typus* (Anonymous [Bennett], 1830) Giant shovelnose ray', relief, etching, drypoint, chine collé, edition of 6, 32.6 x 49.5 cm, 2017, \$330 unframed. Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Fringe Dweller I', relief, etching, edition of 6, 12.5 x 20 cm, 2017, \$185 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



Jacqueline Gribbin, *'Fringe Dweller II'*, relief, etching, edition of 6, 2017, 12.5 x 20 cm, \$185 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Stalking Star', relief, etching, drypoint, chine collé, edition of 6, 12 x 19.5 cm, 2017, \$185 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



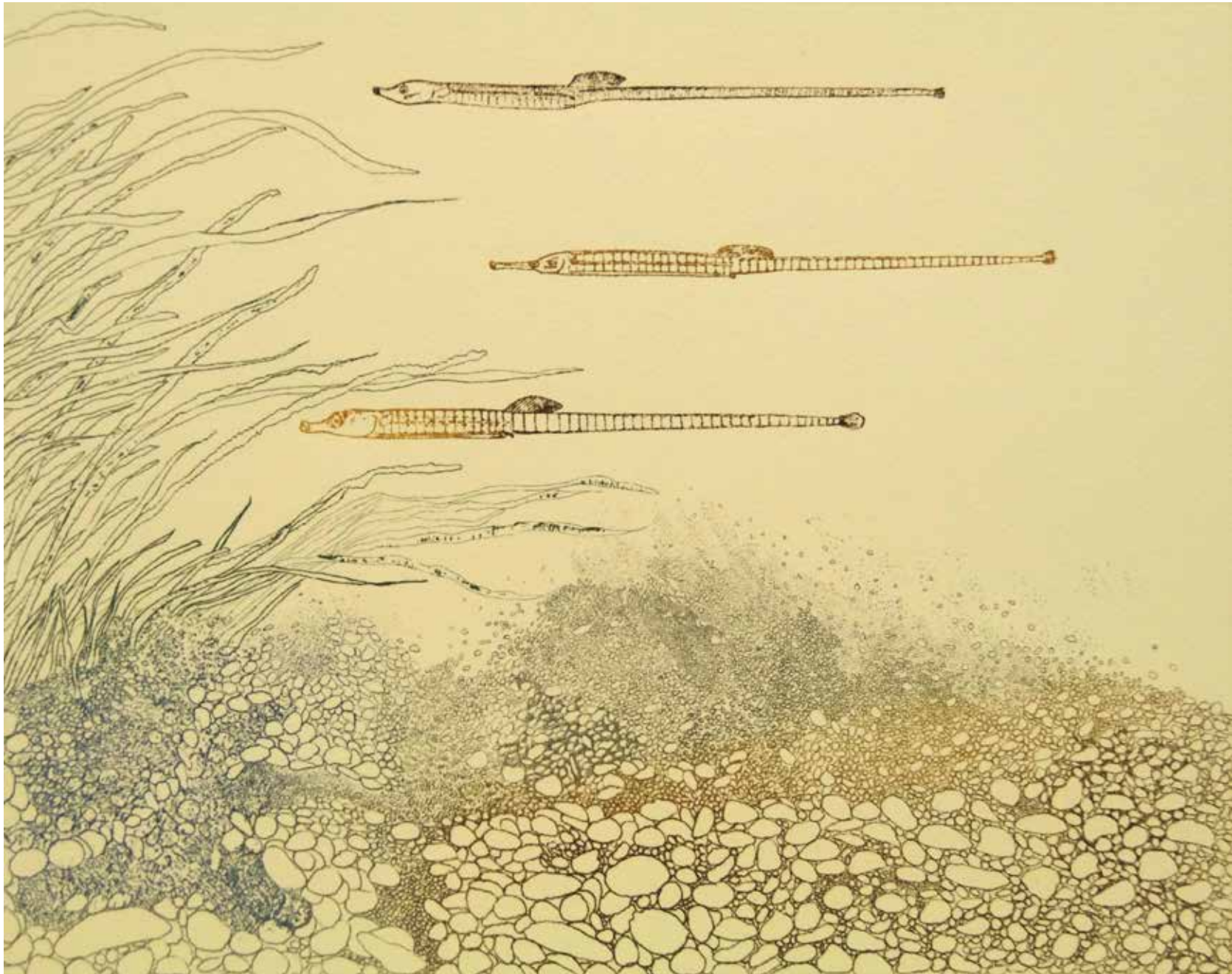
Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Whitley's Sunfishes', relief, etching, chine collé, edition of 6, 20 x 25 cm, 2017, \$250 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Cat's Whiskers', relief, etching, chine collé, edition of 6, 20 x 25 cm, 2017, \$250 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Selachimorpha'; relief, etching, chine collé, edition of 6, 32.6 x 49.5 cm, 2017, \$330 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.



Jacqueline Gribbin, 'Down in the Weeds', relief, etching, edition of 6, 20 x 25 cm, 2017, \$250 unframed.
Relief printing blocks courtesy of the Australian Museum.

Additional notes

Walking Fishes of the Derwent

Gilbert Whitley describes the Handfish thus:

“A little fish which walks on the deck of the trawler which catches it, ‘legg’ed like a man! and his fins like arms!’ for such are its pectoral and ventral fins.”

Handfishes are found in coastal waters in southeast Tasmania, with the Spotted Handfish and Red Handfish principally being found in the Derwent Estuary. They move by using their fins to crawl across the seafloor and were previously referred to as “walking fish”. Both the Spotted Handfish and Red Handfish are listed as Critically Endangered due to habitat degradation and the threat posed by the Northern Pacific Seastar.

Ziebell’s Handfish is listed as Vulnerable. Due to a lack of recent sightings of it, current populations and threats remain unknown.

Fringe Dweller I

Gilbert Whitley described the Pipehorse as an “intermediate” between the Seahorse and Pipefish.

Pipehorses have heads, which are less angled than those of seahorses and they hold their bodies horizontally. Female Pipehorses tend to have slimmer bodies like Pipefishes whereas males look more like Seahorses.

Fringe Dweller II

In his 1958 book, ‘The Sea-Horse and its Relatives’ Gilbert Whitley refers to the Pipehorse as the Fringed Hobby Horse (*Acentronura breviperula*). Its current accepted name is Shortpouch Pygmy Pipehorse. They are usually seen in pairs and may be monogamous.

Stalking Star

The Spotted Handfish (*Brachionichthys hirsutus*) is found principally in the Derwent Estuary, southeast Tasmania. It moves by using its hand-like fins to propel itself along the seafloor. The Northern Pacific Seastar is an invasive species that eats the stalked ascidians (sea squirts), upon which the Handfishes lay their eggs and is seen as a contributing factor in the decline of the species.

Whitley’s Sunfishes

Gilbert Whitley describes Sunfishes in his book, ‘Freshwater Fishes of Australia’. Sunfishes are now referred to as Rainbowfishes.

In the image, the large Rainbowfish at the top, was described by Whitley in his original notes as a “Specimen from Howard Creek, Koolpinyah Station, c 30 m, inland from Darwin, N.T.”.

Jacqueline F Gribbin

Jacqueline Gribbin is an Australian/British national who has lived in the Northern Territory since 2007. After graduating in the UK, she moved to Japan and trained as a Printer, living there for 11 years.

In 2005 she was Printer-in-Residence at Singapore Tyler Print Institute and Senior Printer from 2006-2007. Gribbin was Workshop Manager at Northern Editions Printmaking Studio, Charles Darwin University for five years.

In 2012 she was invited to MI-LAB Artist-in-Residence Program in Japan under a grant from the Agency of Cultural Affairs in order to further engage in "mokuhanga" or water-based woodblock printmaking.

Gribbin collaborated with woodblock artist Ralph Kiggell in 2013 on a printmaking project with migrant children in northwest Thailand. She also exhibited work at H Gallery, Bangkok, in 'Metamorphosis and Flux: An International Exhibition on Translation', which toured to China, New Zealand and Artspace Mackay, Australia in 2015.

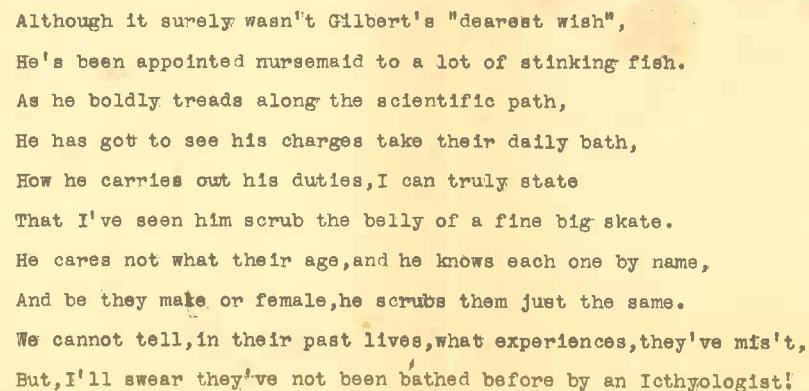
In 2015 she was invited to be Artist-in-Residence at Territory Wildlife Park, N.T., Australia. She also took part in the project and exhibition 'Secret World' at Nomad Gallery, Darwin.

She exhibited work in the exhibition 'PriNT' as part of the Print Council of Australia's, 'Year of Print', at NCCA, Darwin, in 2016.

Gilbert Percy Whitley

Emigrating as a teenager from England with his family in 1921, Gilbert Whitley joined the Australian Museum, Sydney a year later whilst still studying. He became Ichthyologist in 1925 and then later Curator of Fishes until his retirement in 1964.

Gilbert was prodigious in his output, publishing over 550 papers and five books, including the 'Marine Fishes of Australia' and 'The Sea-Horse and its Relatives'. He travelled widely both in Australia and overseas, and discovered 320 new species. As well as a lifetime commitment to fishes and the marine world, Whitley found time to play piano and was a lover of the arts. He was also known for his humour and wit. Continuing to travel and research after retirement, he died in Sydney in 1975.



Although it surely wasn't Gilbert's "dearest wish",
He's been appointed nursemaid to a lot of stinking fish.
As he boldly treads along the scientific path,
He has got to see his charges take their daily bath,
How he carries out his duties, I can truly state
That I've seen him scrub the belly of a fine big skate.
He cares not what their age, and he knows each one by name,
And be they male or female, he scrubs them just the same.
We cannot tell, in their past lives, what experiences, they've mis't,
But, I'll swear they've not been bathed before by an Ichthyologist!

Poem courtesy of the Australian Museum.