

# Coast VIBES

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## Nicole de Mestre

It takes an artist's eye  
to imagine creation in destruction



WORDS TARA WELLS



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A pile of kerbside rubbish outside a gutted Long Jetty fibro shack was just that: rubbish. A hodge-podge of discarded building materials, drawers spilling over with lace doilies, even a kitchen sink. But a scrap of vintage lino flooring had caught artist Nicole de Mestre's eye. It was blue with pink and yellow flowers and reminded her of her grandma's house. More than a decade ago, this was the moment that changed Nicole's creative direction forever.

'I grabbed the lino and some bits of wood and put it all together out on my back porch,' says Nicole. 'I just felt so at home using these old found objects in new works. It all just morphed from there.'

In doing so, Nicole added her artistic voice to the environmental art movement. Around since the 1960s, environmental art uses natural and urban materials to prompt viewers to consider the human impact on our planet.

Nicole's back porch is now a storehouse of creativity. There are corroded tin wash tubs stacked with driftwood, reels of salvaged fishing line and oversized rusted circus tent pegs. Baskets hang from the roof, full of marine debris, giant seed pods and an assortment of weathered bones. Her corrugated iron-clad shed – a purpose-built backyard studio – is chock-full of ephemera: jars of feathers, broken tool pieces, patinated bentwood. A stand of wooden crutches, a clutch of rusting metal bakeware and nine wooden tennis racquets (not manufactured since the late 1970s) point to the changing nature of what society owns and discards. Even before these raw materials become part of an art piece, it's clear a discerning eye has collected for colour, shape and texture.

But it's what Nicole makes with these resources that draws people in, first to admire the whole piece, then the detailed sum of its parts, like a series of boats created from timber off-cuts, old piano screws and a scrap of metal fan cover. Or a crab with kitchen tongs as pincers, Allen keys and coat hanger hooks for legs. And limpets, those cone-shaped shells stuck fast to rockpool sides, appear from woven coloured twine, copper wiring and disused building materials.

Coast life has inevitably influenced Nicole's creations, but region-specific flavours can also be found in the materials she uses. Like a locavore who eats only locally-sourced food, Nicole sources potential treasures between Macmasters Beach and Lake Macquarie. The area's



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OPPOSITE Repurposed hammocks, security fencing and shade cloth create 'Street Urchins' and 'nglorious Baskets'.

THIS PAGE (left to right) Nicole in her studio; 'Crossed Wires'; rusted guttering in 'Bush Baskets'.

OVER PAGE (clockwise from top left) metal baskets; 'Abstract Composition #3'; a work in progress; 'Tales of the Sea'.





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changing streetscape – modest fibro cottages being replaced with double-storey kit homes – is reflected in what people dump.

‘It’s not just throwing away physical things, it’s throwing away memories. That’s why I like those rusted, weathered, decaying pieces of metal and wood because they hold narratives that I’ll never know.’

It’s often this hint of a story that appeals to viewers admiring Nicole’s art. A larger environmental message is evident in the artwork’s unusual ingredients. It’s a message Nicole hopes will catch on.

‘I’m not going to change the world by using a few bits of recycled

materials. But if I can just change one person’s thoughts or stop them from throwing away one thing, or help them accept that it’s okay to recycle and reuse something, then that’s the statement.’

You can find Nicole’s work in temporary exhibitions up and down the NSW coast, with a permanent home at **KAB Gallery** ([kabgallery.com](http://kabgallery.com)) in Terrigal (Crowne Plaza Hotel, 40 Terrigal Esplanade) and Pymble (977 Pacific Highway). Her work is also part of the **5 Lands Walk** ([5landswalk.com.au](http://5landswalk.com.au)) on Saturday 24 June 2023.