

Jenny Berry



P O R T F O L I O

Edited by G. Symes. All artwork by
and photos courtesy of Jenny Berry

South Australian artist Jenny Berry creates marine life paintings and murals that portray the serene beauty and unique species found in underwater Australia. Her artworks feature underwater critters such as the giant cuttlefish, which has an annual mass breeding aggregation in South Australian waters that not many locals know about, raising awareness of special local denizens and the fragile ecosystems in which they live. *X-Ray Mag* interviewed the artist to learn more about her creative process and perspectives on the role of art in conservation.



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PREVIOUS PAGE: *Nautilus Rising*, by Jenny Berry. Acrylic on canvas, 90cm x 90cm

X-RAY MAG: Tell us about yourself, your background and how you became an artist.

JB: Like most artists, I have always been a creative person. As a child, I often drew and loved my coloured pencils. As I got older and turned my focus to starting a career, being an artist was not an option that was ever entertained. Like so many people, growing up in the '80s meant getting a "real job." For me, becoming an artist has been like walking down a long road that has many bends and forks where you must decide which path to take.

After high school, I studied graphic design as I thought that was a career option that enabled me to use my creative urges and have a steady income at the same time. My heart was not in it and I spent many years in other professions until I finally came back to where I was meant to be! It did teach me a lot about colour theory and compositional balance though, so eventually it was useful.

I continued to paint as a hobby in my spare time. I enjoyed the process and sold my work through local art shows. I started to also sell a bit through word of mouth without really trying to.

Taking a pause from an administrative career to have children later in life enabled me to think outside of the restraints I felt life had given me. I realised that what I had been doing as a hobby for years could actually be my career. I plunged myself wholeheartedly into not just creating art but having the courage to promote it and share it with the world.

X-RAY MAG: Why marine life and underwater themes? How did you come to these themes and how did you develop your style of painting?

"Macky" Spanish Mackerel, by Jenny Berry
Acrylic on illustration board, 25cm x 70cm



JB: In 2001, my husband and I quit our jobs and travelled around the stunning coastline of Australia for six months. I was lucky to spend almost every day surrounded by the beauty of the ocean. This time in my life changed everything for me. Two life-changing things happened for me during this trip.

Firstly, I learnt to snorkel. I cannot explain how profound this was for me. I had never really been underwater like that and I absolutely loved it. I felt completely immersed in a whole different world. A world with no man-made sounds, with my senses heightened in a completely new way. I learnt to control my breathing and be more present in the moment. It blew my mind and I began to discover



Seadragon Porthole, by Jenny Berry
Acrylic on linen, 75cm x 75cm



these creatures that I knew very little about that were totally fascinating. I snorkelled the Great Barrier Reef and saw the shapes and colours of corals that I didn't even know existed. From that time on, I never wanted to paint anything else. Even in my quiet moments of self-doubt, I cannot ever see myself painting any other subject matter.

The second life-changing thing that occurred at the same time was that I picked up acrylic paints

for the first time. My first-ever painting was of a coral trout. I fell in love with the vibrance of the colours, the texture and the patterning. I still have that painting on my studio wall today! I had the freedom to create what I wanted without fear of judgement, and I found my true passion.

Acrylic paints felt completely right for me. Their fast-drying and water-based nature made them easy to travel with. I practised with this medium for hours upon hours.

I completely taught myself how to use them through trial and error. In my early years of painting, I did not understand that I could touch up a small area at a time. If I had made an error in colour, I thought I had to repaint the whole fish. My early paintings must have had so many layers to them!

Gradually, a painting that would take me literally hundreds of hours became easier and easier. I learnt techniques that made my painting easier and better too. I am still

learning techniques today that are improving my artworks, and I love that I am still learning every day. I largely learn through trial and error. It feels like such a privilege to have a career in which I can still learn and grow on the job.

X-RAY MAG: Who or what has inspired your artwork and why?

JB: In my early years of painting, I did not really have any inspiration from outside. I felt completely

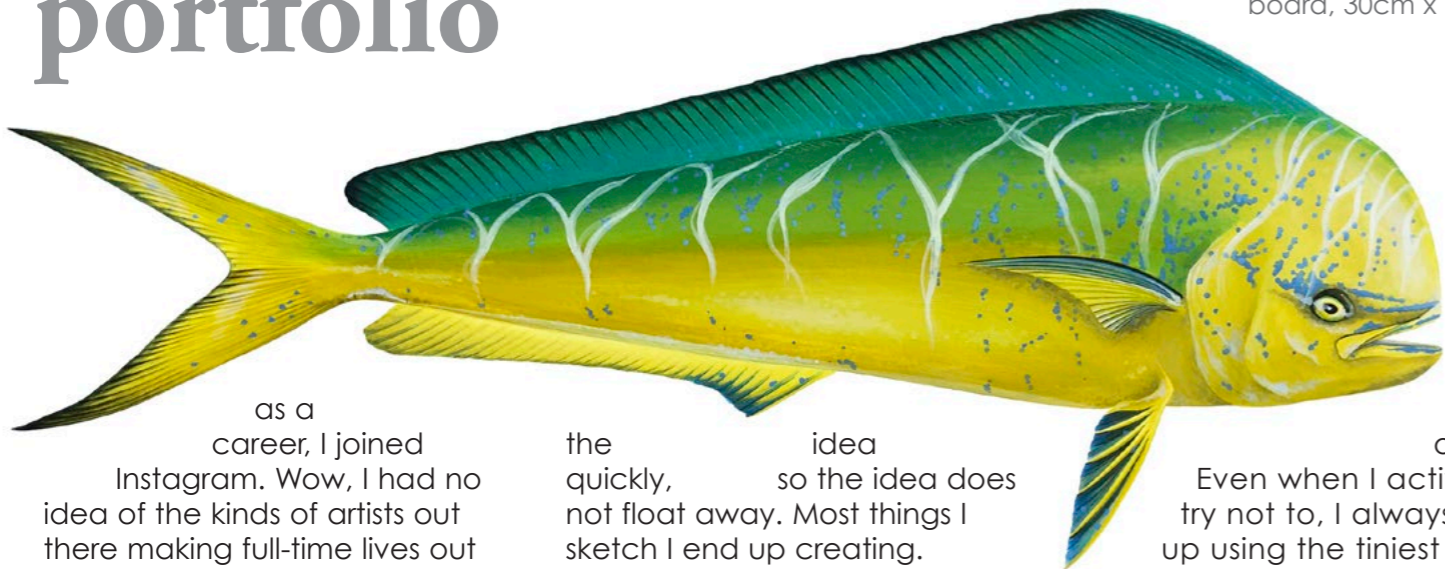
compelled to learn in my own way and was quite happy creating in a bit of a bubble. In my early years of painting, the Internet also was not what it is today. The accessibility to see what other artists were doing was not really there.

I took a local art class in which I could get some mentoring whilst still painting what I wanted. This was perfect for me as I steadfastly wanted to paint marine life. I had no desire to paint anything else. It did not interest me at all. Whilst

on some level I knew that must be self-limiting, I had this burning thought in my soul that it was not the right way for me. I gained some technical skills here; however, mostly, I confirmed to myself that I was on the right path. Practice and passion have always been my guides.

In Australia, it seems there are not too many artists who completely devote themselves to painting marine life. Once I made the decision to pursue painting

"Mahi Mahi" Dolphin Fish, by Jenny Berry. Acrylic on illustration board, 30cm x 70cm



as a career, I joined Instagram. Wow, I had no idea of the kinds of artists out there making full-time lives out of painting marine life. It was so cool to see what other people were producing. I found Roger Swainston, who is totally the most inspiring artist I have come across. He has done a documentary for ABC Television in Australia, and I highly recommend you look him up. Absolutely fascinating.

X-RAY MAG: What is your artistic method or creative process?

JB: My creative process has definitely evolved to where it is today. I feel my best pieces come from some sort of first-hand experience with the ocean. My initial idea is generally from something I have experienced myself. I have a GoPro camera, which I try to take with me every time I am underwater. I use burst mode to take photos as this enables me to quickly capture what I am looking at, whilst also capturing some movement.

Most paintings come directly from an underwater experience I have had. I will see something happening in front of me and know that I will create a piece based on it one day. Some I am compelled to create straightaway, and others have to wait. Maybe I have a commission or an exhibition I am committed to complete first. I will often sketch

the idea quickly, so the idea does not float away. Most things I sketch I end up creating. From my photos, I sketch an initial idea. I then do some online research. I will look for photos that others have taken and find out species names and affiliated habitat. I am very particular about replicating the ecology accurately. It is important to me to have the facts and basics correct. I will even research aquatic plant life to ensure the marine life I am featuring is surrounded by the correct environment. I have studied coral species for my paintings and learnt so much about symbiosis.

Once I have all the elements, I sketch them up into a design. Here, I play around with the elements to come up with a pleasing aesthetic. With the design in place, I do some colour studies. I like to use cohesion of colour in my pieces and the underlying hue will often be used across all colours. For example, I might choose a brown colour that I then mix in with every colour in the painting. For me, this provides colour unity and makes everything work together. I am very methodical, and cohesion is very important to me.

After my design and colours are laid down, I start applying paint to the chosen surface. I work on canvas mainly but also enjoy using reclaimed timber as

a substrate. From here, it is layers and layers of paint. Even when I actively try not to, I always end up using the tiniest of tiny brushes!

X-RAY MAG: How have your experiences underwater influenced your art? In your relationship with reefs and the sea, where have you had your favourite experiences?

JB: My experiences in the water influence pretty much every painting I create. Every artwork is based on a feeling I have felt in the ocean. It might be the colour of the water on a particular day or it could be the way a fish's fins

play in the sway of the ocean, the clarity of visibility, the cloudiness of the sea, the excitement upon seeing a particular species or even the light reflecting up off the ocean floor.

I have been lucky to have been in some terrific waters and had some awesome experiences. Ningaloo Reef (off the Western Australian coast) is astounding and the colour of the water is just superb. I travelled there in 2017

to swim with whale sharks and it was an unforgettable experience. The gentle nature of these huge creatures is totally humbling. Sometimes in life, I am filled with the swell of gratitude and this was one of those times. To spend a week snorkelling the amazing reef there and have it culminate in going into deep water and swimming alongside a whale shark is incredible. The deep cobalt blue of the water is stuck forever in my



Oceans Blush I and Oceans Blush II, by Jenny Berry. Acrylic on canvas, 61cm x 76cm each panel



portfolio

When Angels Dance, by Jenny Berry. Acrylic on board, 1m x 1m (right)

Jenny Berry



Ocean Between Our Love, by Jenny Berry. Acrylic on reclaimed timber, 20cm x 25cm

mind. I have tried to replicate that blue in a couple of paintings you see here.

Last year, I stayed on Fitzroy Island in the Great Barrier Reef. It was totally remarkable because you can walk to the beach in front of the resort, put your mask and fins on, and within five minutes, you are swimming with hawksbill sea turtles in their own habitat! I stayed, watching them hack away at coral with their beaks, and just felt astounded at their grace of movement. I was also struck by their ability to camouflage. I find it hard to explain the feeling of euphoria when you are peacefully swimming along, inspecting

coral and fish flitting past, when you realise you are a metre from a wild turtle!

It is fair to say every experience I have underwater is being filtered in my mind as a potential artwork. Everything is being filed away as reference for future pieces!

X-RAY MAG: What are your thoughts on ocean conservation and coral reef management and how does your artwork relate to these issues?

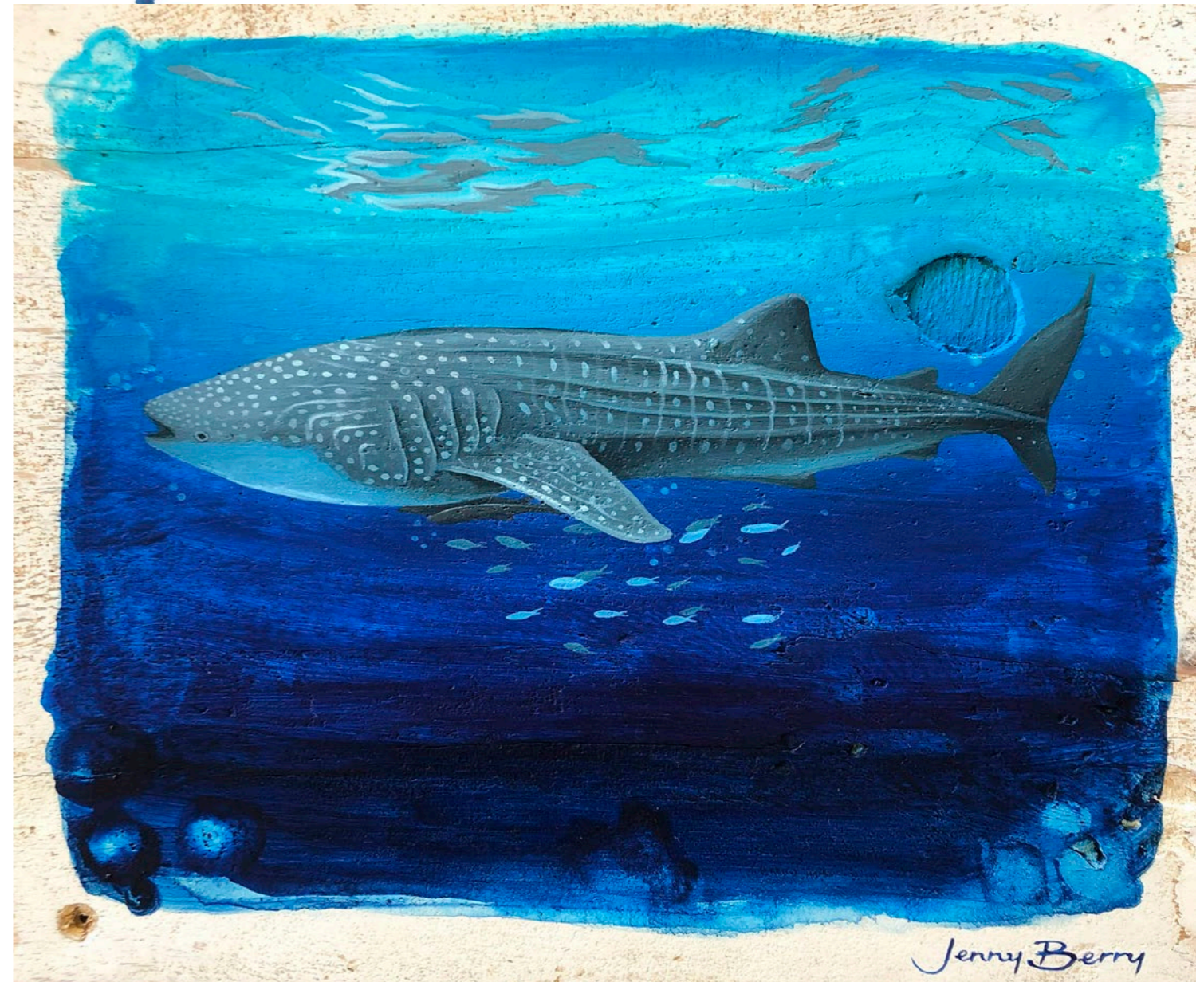
JB: Wow, both ocean conservation and coral reef



management are so important to me. I have such a profound and deep love of this environment that I want to share with every painting.

As lovers of the ocean, we understand the role it plays in keeping our planet healthy. We understand the life the ocean supports and why it is so vitally important to conserve it. If my paintings encourage viewers to think about this part of our planet and help them love it too, then that makes me really happy.

I like to use my art to educate people about particular species that they may not be aware of. A lot of people are completely unaware of the unique marine species they have on their own doorsteps. For me per-



Ocean Soul, by Jenny Berry. Acrylic on reclaimed timber, 20cm x 25cm



portfolio

Symbiotic Relationship,
by Jenny Berry.
Acrylic on canvas,
76cm x 122cm

sonally, I live in South Australia where the giant cuttlefish have one of the world's only known annual breeding aggregations. It amazes me that this fact is largely unknown in my local community. I believe that by painting this amazing species, we start a conversation about it. I was very pleased to see David Attenborough include this species in the *Blue Planet II* series. We cannot and will not be motivated to save ocean life if we do not know what is there. The first step in conversation is education. I hope my work helps people become aware of and educated about marine life.

I do like to use reclaimed timber to paint on. I have sourced old bits of timber from my husband's workshop and sanded them up and repurposed them. I like that this helps make my work more sustainable, but I also like the organic feel it contributes to the artwork.

X-RAY MAG: What is the message or experience you want viewers of your artwork to get?

JB: I really want to keep our oceans and its precious marine life top of mind for everybody. I do not mind that some viewers of my art might think it is just a pretty picture. What matters to me is that everyone that sees my art now has an affinity and appreciation for the life held in our oceans. You will not protect what you cannot see and do not understand. If you do not snorkel or scuba, you cannot have that deep appreciation for what is under there. I really believe that by giving people a glimpse into how gorgeous, unique and special our marine life is, they will in turn be compelled to want to save it.

I want my art to give people a sense of joy, calm and peace. The same feelings that I experience when I am underwater. I like



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"Kinky" Yellowtail Kingfish, by Jenny Berry. Acrylic on illustration board, 25cm x 70cm

people to feel happy, and I like the way my artwork can do that in people's homes.

X-RAY MAG: What are the challenges or benefits of being an artist in the world today?

JB: I feel especially lucky to be an artist in today's world. The connections that we have access to through social media and the Internet are absolutely incredible. I can sell art directly from my studio to anyone, anywhere in the world. In the past, to get your art out to the world, you needed to be represented by a gallery. Giving away a large percentage of your sales in commission was an integral part of being a working artist. Today, this is no longer always the case. I have so much control over how I sell my art.

Being so connected enables people, who are passionate about the marine world, to find my artwork. Finding people that share your interests has

never been easier. I try to connect with dive groups and clubs on Facebook, so I can share my art with like-minded people.

X-RAY MAG: How do people—adults and children—respond to your works?

JB: Both adults and children find delight in my artwork. Usually, they will connect with it through the subject matter. Every diver, snorkeller, boatie, sailor, fisherman and ocean lover has a story to tell and reminisce about—a time that my artwork will remind them of.

Recently, I have created a marine life mural at



portfolio

The artist with the mural she created for a local primary school in South Australia (right); School children and their teacher, who were able to see the development of the mural at different stages (lower right) enjoy seeing the finished artwork (below)



a local primary school. The kids here were completely enamoured with the whole process. I was told by a student, "You are my hero." Wow, it doesn't get any better than that, does it? I love creating art, and until that moment, did not realise I was inspiring other people to believe that they too can make a living from following one's passions.

I have painted a commission piece for a gentleman living in Paris, focusing on giant clams. He snorkelled Ningaloo Reef and sent me a wonderful note explaining that he and his wife get to be reminded of that wonderful time every day even though they live in one of the world's largest cities. That is the connection to like-minded people I was referring to in my last answer.

X-RAY MAG: What are your upcoming projects and events?

JB: This year, with the Covid-19 crisis unfolding, my forward planning has changed a little. An exhibition I have scheduled for August will now be online. Like everything, this has its own setbacks and opportunities. I am currently planning what this event will now look like. At this stage, it will be an online exhibition with a virtual tour and possibly a live Facebook chat about the work and my process. Check my Facebook page for more info!

I have also applied for a grant with our local government to create a mural about our local Port Jackson sharks. Like the giant cuttlefish, they too have a mass breeding aggregation annually that not many locals know about. I would love to give them a voice and help our community understand how lucky we are to have them in our local waters. Fingers crossed!

Over the last 18 months, I have

been creating a series of murals for a local primary school, and it has been an absolute pleasure and privilege to be doing this.

The murals are designed to focus on endemic species and inform the students about what is unique and special about their local environments. The first one is my passion area of marine life. I am amazed at how little our children know about their local waters. Painting the murals has given me a unique insight into how children think about their world. Their eagerness to learn and their innate curiosity is wonderful. Much like a lot of today's children do not understand how vegetables grow, they also do not really understand that the fish or squid they eat are living creatures that survive in our oceans. It has been wonderful to talk to

them about that and help them see that these marine creatures have lives and habits and are important to our whole world.

Although large in size, the murals have been created on large marine plywood boards, which has enabled me to paint in a spare classroom. I have opened the room up to the students during their breaks to see the artwork being created. They have loved being

part of the creation of these artworks. They have watched them go from a blank piece of timber to an artwork that houses a whole different ecology to the one they live in every day. For them, they benefit from the knowledge they

are gaining about the subject matter, but they also see that careers can take many different shapes.

For me, personally, I get to be surrounded by passionate little people whose eyes light up with joy every break when they come in to check on the progress—an audience that gives me quite unbiased and honest feedback every day and who love having me there. It's terrific! ■

For more information or to order original artwork, commissions and prints, visit the artist's website at: jennyberryartist.com.

