



Underwater Forests of Wellington - the story behind the new exhibition at Te Māra Toi Gallery

by artist and marine advocate Dr Nicole Miller

Much like the ancient forests of Zealandia Te Māra a Tāne and Ōtari-Wilton's Bush, the towering underwater forests along Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington's coast form rich and diverse habitats.

Often within a stone's throw from shore, these remarkable marine ecosystems are hidden gems that mirror the complexity and wonder of our land-based forests. The te reo Māori name for seaweed, 'rimurimu', reflects this connection: the small, scale-like leaves ('needles') of the rimu tree closely resemble the native green seaweed *Caulerpa brownii*.

Yet these ecosystems remain largely unseen and therefore undervalued, even as they face increasing threats from human activity and environmental change.

My exhibition Underwater Forests of Wellington invites visitors to explore Te Whanganui-a-Tāra Wellington's coastal marine space, the city's Blue Belt, from a new perspective. Through photography and artworks, the exhibition reveals the extraordinary diversity and the marine life seaweeds sustain within our coastal waters and highlights the urgent need to protect these vital ecosystems.

My inspiration for the exhibition comes from years of diving and documenting Wellington's coastline. I have seen first-hand how marine life flourishes within Taputeranga Marine Reserve and how reefs outside the reserve turned from thriving kelp forests into barren rocks. Unsustainable fishing pressure has reduced the numbers of urchin predators (rock lobster, snapper, blue cod)



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around Aotearoa New Zealand, and consequently, kina overgraze on seaweed and destroy entire kelp forests.

My hope is to capture a surprising perspective, spark a lasting sense of wonder and build an enduring connection with the underwater world. If we all take a vested interest in nurturing its current health, we can ensure all species survive and thrive in the future. Just as we have seen bird life return to our urban city through targeted activities, including the hard mahi by Zealandia, we can bring back marine habitats filled with seaweed, sponges, octopus, sea horses, nudibranchs and lots of fish!

I am inspired by the intricate details and striking colours of red, green, and large brown seaweeds and through my photography invite viewers to discover forms and textures that often go unnoticed.

I shoot in black and white photo to capture these fine structures in abstract detail and to reveal the sculptural presence of giant kelp in its natural environment, especially when displayed at large scale. I use wide-angle underwater photography to celebrate how giant kelp shapes the entire ecosystem, forming dense floating canopies that influence the understory and create a mysterious world between the surface and the reef.

I also contrast the thriving underwater forests and vibrant marine life with a photo series that documents human impacts on these ecosystems. There is a sequence where I highlight how kina grazing progressively strips kelp forests, revealing the step-by-step transformation from lush habitat to barren seascapes.

The exhibition not only raises awareness of our underwater forests, it is also a fundraiser for marine conservation. All profits from artwork sales will go directly to local marine conservation initiatives led by Explore Your Coast. Framed artworks are available for purchase in the gallery, with unframed prints, custom size orders, and folding cards available in the shop.

If you like to purchase artworks by Nicole Miller please get in touch by email info@oceanart.co.nz.

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