

## SNAIL'S PACE

Caroline Baum finds inspiration in rock pools and the transient trails of sea snails



My family and friends will tell you that patience is not my middle name.

I pride myself on being punctual and am good at working to a schedule but my sense of time was always about meetings and deadlines, never about anything as cosmic as the moon. Until I moved out of Sydney to the south coast of NSW I didn't even know that tide charts existed. I had certainly never shaped my day around the lunar pull on the oceans. But when I came to live at Wombarra, a tiny settlement clinging to the edge of the escarpment, wedged between a sandstone cliff and the sea, the rhythm of my days changed completely.

The beach is widest for walking at low tide, so I had to take note of that. The sun goes behind the escarpment after three o'clock, so it's a good idea to get your exercise done before that happens. Gradually, habits changed, patterns shifted.

Other patterns drew me, quite literally, to note the tides. When the water was low, it exposed gorgeous intricate scribbles in the sand on the rock shelf, marine graffiti made by sea snails moving at, well, a snail's pace. Molluscs are not creatures to be rushed. They are simple organisms, basically not much more than a slimy gut housed in a shell. On my beach one species dominates, patterned in spiralling stripes of black and white like pop art turbans.

I started to photograph their trails, amazed at their variety and at the vivid colours in the rock,

especially the bright red, evidence of the presence of iron. In some places the doodlings stood out against an almost black surface, in other areas the palette resembled the desert ochres of Aboriginal art, with patches of orange and rust. In warmer months, algae added rich tones of lurid greens and streaks of softer blues. In spring a tiny splattering of dots appeared: a nursery of juveniles. No one believed the intensity of the colours in my images was natural, not photoshopped, until I took them on walks to where my favourite snail colony displayed a virtuosic talent for complex, intricate lacy drawings. Local fishermen walked across them without even bothering to look.

Gradually an idea dawned on me, to translate these gorgeous designs on to fabric. It took a couple of years for me to find the right collaborators, printers with the right kind of technology and the willingness to help an amateur understand the basic principles of textile design and to adjust my images to suit a new medium. I made a collection of scarves and to my surprise, they sold out.

But having first seen the snail patterns at my feet, I knew I wanted to find a way to translate their beauty to the same scale as their outdoor canvas, on to the floors of people's homes, to bring the outside in, to make the temporary into something permanent. I waited. I asked around, I looked at magazines for possible partners.

Almost as soon as the conversation with

Designer Rugs began, the GFC hit and stalled our plans. But the company kept their promise and faith in our project. Working with their senior in-house designer, my images were transformed into weaving maps to be sent to a village in Nepal. We selected wools and silks to do justice to nature's colours. Then came another setback: the weavers thought the diagrams were too complex and refused to undertake the work. I thought it was all over. But Designer Rugs simply went and found other weavers in a neighbouring village.

The task could not be rushed. Each rug takes four months to weave so I was not going to see my dream come true quickly. Samples arrived, but it was impossible to judge the total effect from a one small square. I held my breath.

I called the collection Sand Script - as the snails forage for food, they create a calligraphy only they can decipher, a map of a fragile ecosystem washed away at low tide and then rewritten differently every day.

This week my own rug arrived at last. Unrolling it, the first thing I did was lie down on it to feel its sumptuous texture. Then I moved all the furniture to show it to better advantage and came back to look at it in every light, noting how in the daytime, the sun caught the lustre of silk rippling through the weave and how in the evening it seemed to make the space glow like a fire.

I am still impatient but now at least I recognise that nature sets its own pace. ○

