

the beach

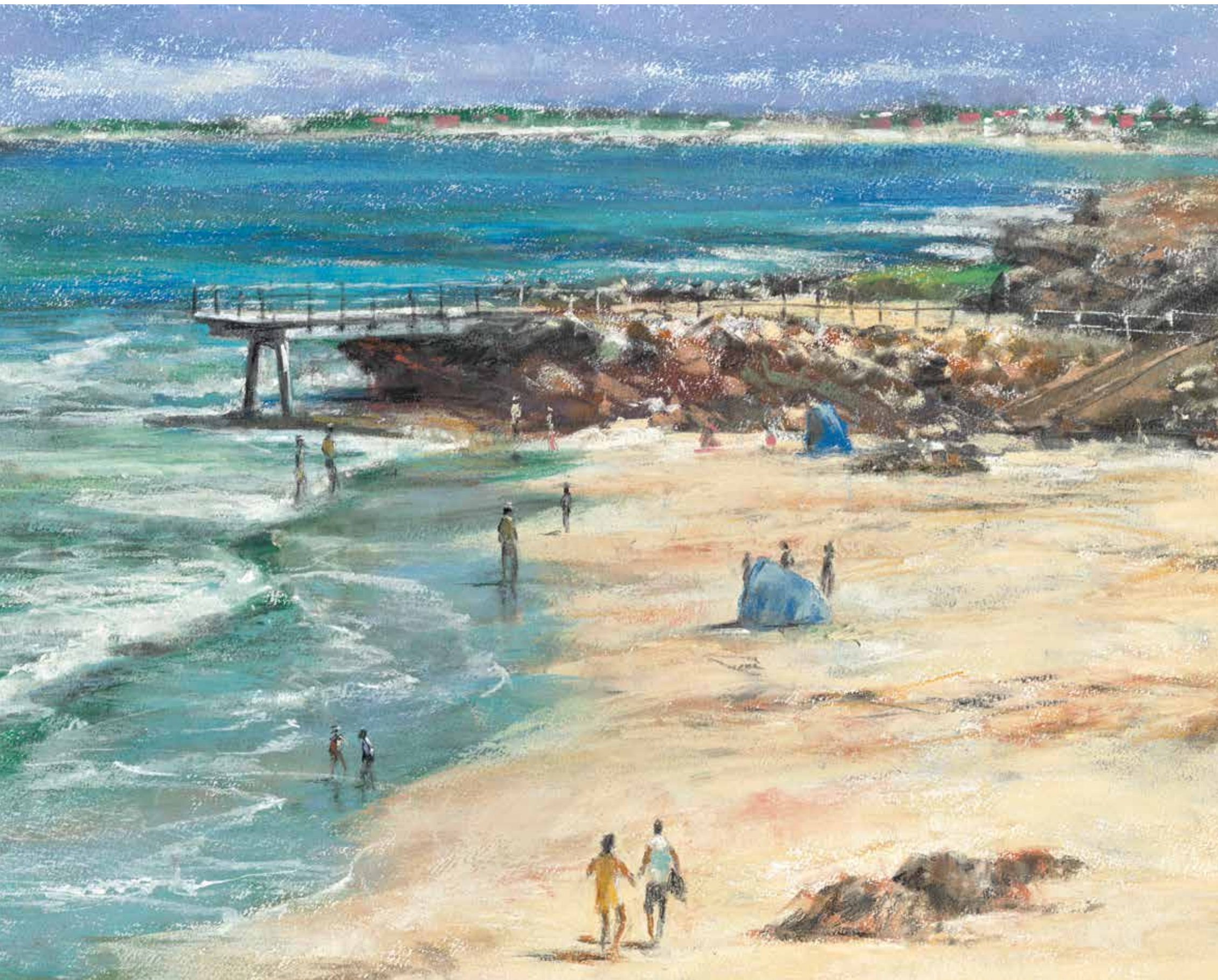
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Cottesloe Beach



Introduction

At the beginning of this project I asked myself, what does the beach mean to me? A perfectly simple question with many answers that draw on different layers and times of my life – from being a toddler in the gentle river beaches to swimming lessons at school, and from camping holidays that were always at the beach to the teen years at Scarborough that lasted into early adulthood.

I've defined the beach as being a division between the 'real world' and the sea, but it is also so much more than that. Beaches hold a magical place in the Australian psyche. They can be something solitary to enjoy alone or a social place to be with friends and family. To a very young bather the beach means fun and splashing, and to an adult it often means the experience of wide, sweeping space and the rolling, tumbling power of the ocean at the shore. In our famous West Coast sunsets, the beach becomes a kind of theatre and there are many layers of meaning that give it an exceptional and individual character with as many definitions as one can imagine.

I'm no longer a swimmer, but from a toddler to a man in my mid-twenties I was what you'd call a beachgoer, someone who simply enjoyed what the beach had to offer. The earliest memory I have is a holiday in a rented beach shack in Scarborough, somewhere close to where the Rendezvous Hotel is now. Back then the area was an endless strip of sand dunes speckled with holiday houses, literally built into the sand of the beach. After my dad was bitten by the camping bug following his time in the army during World War II, beach camping became an annual event. There were friends, relatives, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and more. It was the highlight of the year. The days were mainly sunny and the turquoise ocean was often peaceful; swimming was an everyday event in the morning and afternoon. The sea breeze would come in around two p.m., the sea would change colour and become a little choppy and that's as rough as it got. I still feel nostalgia for the beaches of those idyllic days as a kid when I was always sunburnt – when peeling skin through the summer was common and getting a suntan was compulsory, dangerous though we know it is now – as I'm sure most older Western Australians do.

The dunes that I remember from that long-ago holiday are long ago gone, replaced with apartment buildings. A five-star hotel now stands in place of the holiday houses that faced the Luna Park gates. The smorgasbord of activities that were there during my teenage years, when I was discovering who I was and where I fitted in, are only memories now – the car and motorbike enthusiasts in the car parks, the rock'n'roll crowd jiving at the Snake Pit, the hamburger and milkshake shops. The memories I have of that place at that time are mine to cherish, reminders of a part of my life that, for better or for worse, was real.

North Beach

Now, as a professional artist, I find that my interest in a beach is in the rock formations, or the way the ocean breaks up at the shore, the colours of the wet sand reflecting the sky versus the not-so-wet in a different colour, or, different again, the perfectly dry beach that has its own texture and its own personality. There are beaches and there are beaches: there's a natural diversity among them, especially in Western Australia. Each has a character and something interesting in the way it's developed – the rocky cliffs and red sand of the north give way to wide expanses of soft white sand and mangroves, while in the south, great mounds of granite that have been rounded by time and weather frame secluded bays, and at the other end of the scale, there are the metropolitan beaches that owe their appearance to us, trimmed and cared for as urban playgrounds. But beyond their aesthetic value, our coastlines hold millions of years of history, both natural and human, from dinosaur footprints in the ancient cliffs of the north-west to the myriad bird, aquatic and other species that inhabit these places, to the tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal occupation.

Making artwork of all this takes a bit of thought, and there's also the question of perspective: the beach plus the ocean or the beach plus the land. Both are interesting depending on mood or feeling when one sees it. Mostly it's the ocean and beach coupling that gets the attention, with the other surroundings being somewhat ignored. I didn't have any particular view in mind and simply waited for something interesting to emerge and catch my eye. The memory and a few photos of the place are the best references for preparation. The memory holds instincts and emotions, where art begins, and the camera is there to offer reminders in things that were noticed, but not really seen – the photo is there for guidance, but not to be strictly copied.

Beaches are similar in some ways, but never identical. There's a kind of personality that identifies them, and it's this that I wanted to capture in this book. Each one has a certain something, perhaps a rocky outcrop that's compelling to see and hear when the ocean breaks up against it, engaging several of our instincts – excitement and a sense of danger only a few metres from the softness of beach sand. Other beaches are wide and empty, and reach for the horizon, like a giant ribbon stretched across the earth. I try to find a point of interest, something close, something moving; perhaps the tiny waves at the end of the ocean's reach – the frilly little bubbly ones that sparkle – or the ubiquitous gulls wheeling through the sea breeze. The scene created is enchanting and restful and at the same time powerful and exhilarating. Expressing this is the essence of my paintings and drawings.

The beach defies any singular explanation or definition. Its compelling attraction belongs to us all, and it's for us to give it our own meaning and value. I hope readers will enjoy this picture book and be reminded of their own memories and experiences of the beach.



Beach cricket



*Right: Beach Bar, Scarborough
Following page: Hellfire Bay, Esperance*





I feel like I need the beach – just sand and water, those two simple things, nothing else.

Deb Fitzpatrick,
Have You Seen Ally Queen? (2011)

Above left: Trigg Beach
Left: Rottnest Channel Swim, Cottesloe Beach
Above: Surf lifesavers



Above: Building sandcastles
Right: Playing near a jetty





Beyond the strip of beach
the big bay sparkled in
the sunshine, the special
Dunsborough blue-green
emerald shallows of clean
sand stretching away into
the Indian Ocean behind the
boats and yachts anchored
in the bay like baubles
shimmering on a big
blue dress.

Wayne Ashton, *Equator* (2010)

Meelup Beach, Dunsborough