

ALISON COATES  
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27 July – 17 August 2024

Alison Coates has her own geometric poetic. Concentric and un-furling her work mutates as it is encircled, changing completely at each vantage point. As an artist she is drawn to both spatial depth and intricacy, honing forms that evoke the strength of the pre-industrial world: secretive in its systems, inchoate to most eyes. Unified by a pale mottled palette, her new works lend the impression of coming from a single terrain, a place where skeletons and life cycles are left in peace. Visually her materials converge, but technically they are anything but simple objects of salvage. Here is sculpture as paradox, where the line between material and subject inverts: A lumpy net that looks like it fell of a fishing boat is in fact the severed side pocket of a billiard table. Delicate webs that resemble hair are bent wires and the patina of patterns sprouting on the stubborn flesh of vellum are subtly hand drawn.

In her newest works, Coates explores luminosity, weightlessness and the use of aerial space. Her use of geometric form is minimal and decisive yet faintly hallucinatory. Some of the hanging pieces look physically impossible; dancing up into the ceiling like a curl of smoke or unspooling like a tendril in water currents. For an artist that does not actually draw, Coates cleaves a fine line using cane, wire, chalk paint and tiny knots that puncture the void. Although her elliptical forms patched in squares of vellum strongly resemble early experiments in flight, it is important to see the work in its own abstract terms. The playful beauty of each sculpture teases out the reflex to 'find' a source, but her literacy in shapes makes a single historic or biological reference obsolete. For a long time, Coates has been tethered to her origins in experimental intensely primal floristry. She spearheaded the use of large-scale natives and earthy palettes like a Botanical Fauve, and that image clung to her work like a vine. In their graphic geometry and minimalism, this new collection shatters several clichés at once.

The post-minimal sculptor Eva Hesse rebelled against the same idea that organic lines belonged to either the natural or man-made world. Her position was to allow her sculptures and installations to exist within their own logic; ‘Don’t ask what the work is. Rather see what the work does.’ This is a very useful compass when walking through the forest of Coates making. In the stage of a white gallery the congestion of her studio and the fertility of her ideas can breathe. Here are small standing sculptures that echo pods and Cubist masks. There is a fuselage like ellipse honed from stubborn cane and wire. Unlike earlier work, a gathering of new pieces are table bound and strike an elegant contrast to the vertical coils that draw the eye upwards. In this collection, the idea of air and light is made whole through intrepid forms:

‘I was drawn to vellum for its potential to be illuminated, although hardened there is a lightness to this material. And the shapes that emerged summon windblown things that become part of the space and dissolve into the light. It is taking me on a journey into the beginning of things and into the air. Both spawning seeds and weightless clouds.’”

It is important to Coates not to moor each piece to a fixed terrain. ‘I don’t set out to make something that looks like something. I just start working with the material’. Such a rationale sounds simple but it is steeped in the paradox of deftly meshing the organic to the industrial. Her Sydney studio is famous as a cabinet of curiosities, full to the brim with every useless useful thing. A serial collector of surprising and agile materials, the only logic of it all is her visual code. A love of early technologies is un-mistakable in the materials she chooses. Things that need stitching and binding, objects threaded together to form a whole feed the details that slow us down to really study each piece. Vellum, though technically man made, is still a skin. Susceptible to the shrinkage, buckling and ravages of exposure. To Coates the material bears an uncanny luminosity and a primal tactility. Yet culturally it is also wed to literacy, history and early media. The first Gutenberg volumes were printed on Vellum and medieval Botanist preferred the rigidity of its surface for recording plant life.

‘Ventricles’ is a large wall bound piece that evokes the curled remnants of a destroyed library. The collation of five bands of vellum pieces was painstakingly wired and threaded together within a frame not quite a square. Some may see a shelf, a ledger or the curve of animal spines. For Coates, the work is not terrestrial or even particularly historical. To her eye this is the seabed: moving with thick gleaming sheathes of kelp, tugged by the invisible thread of the tide. Gazing at her studio wall she speaks of walks in Tasmania, lumps of sea vegetables at her feet, the sky sucking the weight of the sea into the haze of the sky. What she brings home from a ramble is the sway of a place she cannot see for the form of a sculpture she has not yet made. Her attention bleeds into the peripheral hum beyond a fixed sight line. Over months and then years, hard materials then yield to fluid movement and the result are works that radiate and almost pollinate, the spaces they enter.

The impact of thoughtful work created over long periods of time is one of stubborn optimism. Giving dead materials breath. Making fresh connections between the known and the obsolete. Sculpture, so often compressed into a thrusting monolith, is splintered here. Allowed to be frail, messy and obtuse. Not just one place, just not one thing.

**Anna Johnson**

Artist & Arts Writer



*Uplift #1*  
vellum, rattan, cane, string & wire  
110 x 110 x 110 cm  
\$5,500



*Carapace*

bamboo, rattan, clay, cane, vellum,

string & wire 265 x 90 x 45 cm

\$5,500



*Plankton #1-17*

vellum, cane & copper wire extra  
small - large (dimensions variable)

\$400-\$1,100



*Epicentre*  
vellum, fibreglass, cane, string &  
plywood 145 x 145 x 50 cm  
\$6,000



*Raft #1 & #2 & #3*  
vellum, rattan, cane & wire dimensions  
variable  
\$6,500





*Pupae #1 & #2*  
vellum, rattan, clay, cane & string  
290 x 80 x 40 cm (overall)  
\$5,500



*Uplift #2*

vellum, rattan, cane, string & wire

170 x 110 x 100 cm

\$5,500



*Uplift #4 & #5*  
vellum, rattan, cane & string  
dimensions variable  
\$6,500



*Uplift #3*

vellum, rattan, cane, string, wire & clay

140 x 48 x 48 cm

\$5,500

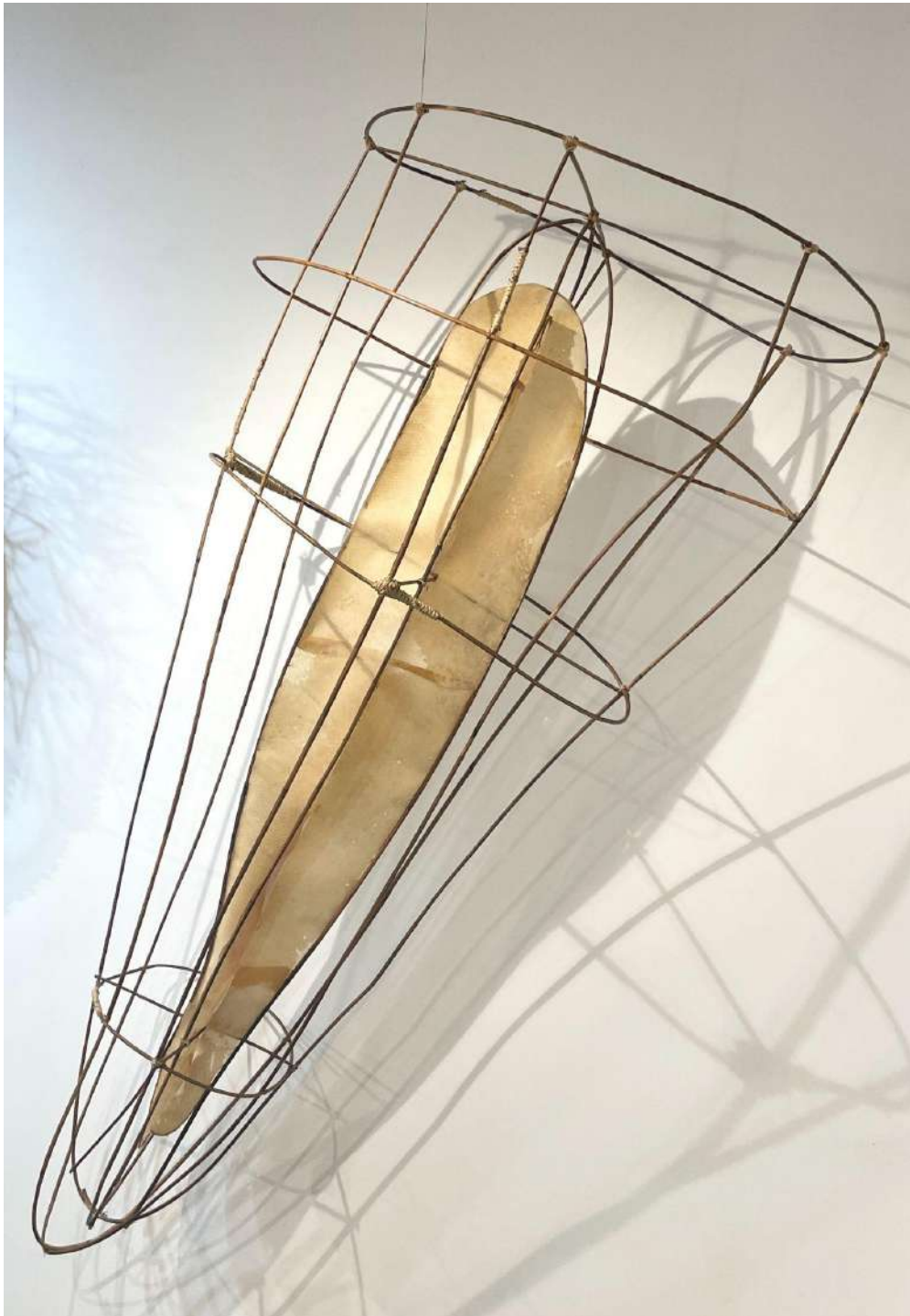


*Ventrices*

vellum, rattan, cane & string on metal bedframe

105 x 160 x 10 cm

\$7,500



*Uplift #6*

vellum, rattan, cane & wire

235 x 127 x 70 cm

\$6,500



*Spore #1*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
70 x 15 x 20 cm  
\$2,200



*Spore #2*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
70 x 15 x 20 cm  
\$2,200





*Spore #3*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
57 x 18 x 15 cm  
\$1,800



*Spore #4*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
50 x 30 x 30 cm  
\$1,800



*Spore #5*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
49 x 30 x 20 cm  
\$1,800



*Spore #6*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
48 x 41 x 35 cm  
\$1,800



*Spore #7*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
49 x 18 x 16 cm  
\$1,500



*Spore #8*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
43 x 23 x 14 cm  
\$1,500



*Spore #9*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
43 x 18 x 15 cm  
\$1,500



*Spore #10*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
37 x 18 x 18 cm  
\$1,200





*Spore #11*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
42 x 20 x 20 cm  
\$1,500



*Spore #12*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
33 x 17 x 17 cm  
\$1,200



*Spore #13*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
42 x 20 x 18 cm  
\$1,500



*Spore #14*  
vellum, cane & wire on metal stand  
33 x 17 x 14 cm  
\$1,500



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