



## SIXTEEN LEGS: ENTER the CAVE!

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Dr Niall Doran and colleagues have been researching the life and times of the Tasmanian Cave Spider, *Hickmania troglodytes*, for 23 years. Some ACKMA members may have seen this magnificent spider on earlier cave visits during ACKMA Conferences.

Niall and his colleagues have put together a truly magnificent exhibition on *H. troglodytes*! The Sixteen Legs name of the exhibition refers to the unusual mating relationships of the large lady spider and her smaller – and probably to be eaten – mate! The exhibition was staged by the Bookend Trust ([www.bookendtrust.com](http://www.bookendtrust.com)) backed by a variety of sponsors.

The exhibition is presented in a beautifully restored ~1818 sandstone barn and the associated Rosny Park School. We start in the schoolhouse: five rooms containing backlit panels talking about caves with wonderful background cave images. The backgrounds are often overlaid with further images. Two additional panels are of art work depicting The Siren's Song - the imagined emotions of a female cave spider - are found in each room. All in all there are 64 beautiful panels. These are fabulous backlit displays.

Around the walls of the schoolrooms we find 30 artworks produced by school students – many of these are simply stunning – they will be judged and the winner gets a flight over Antarctica. In a late development one of the sponsors has appreciated the talent of all the students and is providing additional prizes! There are also two very evocative musical pieces based on the students' cave experiences.

A sign outside the schoolhouse reads:

*This is not a standard exhibition with open space and clear lines. It has darkness intruding on light, unsettling shapes and unusual layouts.*

This makes moving through the rooms a “cave-like” squeezing and manoeuvring experience.

Then off to the 1818 Rosny Barn – beautifully restored by the City of Clarence - it must have cost them heaps. Here we are in a much darker environment than in the school house. We have another 36 panels telling us more about this wonderful spider and the project itself. There are two more student's displays – a Tardis-type tent with stalaclights [sic] – beautifully illuminated plastic stalactites. The other student project here is a DVD of a body being wrapped in gladwrap – a wonderful analogy to the creation of an *H. troglodytes* egg sac. And – at the stunning finale – in the ceiling are two huge spider models underneath their web in the roof. Underneath there are the remains of a caver eaten and



*Caver 'eaten' by the spiders*  
Photos: Andy Spate

discarded by the Queen of the Night! And next to these two queens of the night is a stunning illuminated video of the about to hatch baby spiders in their egg sac.

Also here we have a great looped DVD describing the project – inducing the incidental involvement of Dr Who. Who? And a naked lady wearing spiders! Almost all of the more than sixty back-lit panels have wonderful photographs taken by the world-renowned American cave photographer, Dave Brunnell.

To quote from the Bookend Trust press release announcing the winners of the school students' art works:

*[Twenty five] student works covering a variety of interpretations, styles and materials – including paint, graphite, plaster, preservation of webs, dreamcatchers, dioramas, living ecosystems, sculptures, photography, musical compositions, video installations, and constructions that could be viewed and even entered into! The standard of the entries in this competition was incredibly high, and the judges (Kirsha Kaechele from MONA and Professor Peter Davies from UTAS) spent several intense hours*



*ACKMA gets a mention on this panel*  
*Photo: Andy Spate*

*examining and discussing them in detail. The judges commented: "It's really inspiring to see all of the work. It's amazing how much great work there is, in quality and diversity. The competition is so serious - it's really tough."*

### ... THE WINNER IS:

A tie.

Not just a tie between the judges, but both judges arrived at the same tie in their individual assessments. When questioned in detail by Bookend, it was clear that it was a genuine tie with both judges unable to decide between the two entries. Those entries and the judges' comments were:

- *Vocava Musica* - Julia Parker, Smithton High School (stunning work, showing really well-developed musicality and compositional sensibility).
- *The Howling Mute* - Sophie Ambler, Clarence High School (fabulous, sending shivers up the spine, and demanding to be re-watched).

The judges felt Julia's work was simply beautiful and sensitive, with an ability to evoke space in sound. They would love to hear her soundscape of Antarctica, but they felt she would also benefit from an edge of the radicality shown in Sophie's filmmaking. In contrast, Sophie's work was visually arresting, and conceptually deep. It had a strong emotional effect and was timed perfectly, but the judges felt her work would benefit from original musical components.

Both judges wanted to see more work from both students, and believed they should work together. They

felt both would gain something from this experience and that it would take them both to the next level.

On the basis of this, Bookend is prepared to offer both Julia and Sophie a place on the 4-day Antarctic Experience program in February, including the flight to see Antarctica - provided they are prepared to work together to deliver a combined short piece for public display after the trip.

All in all this was a stunning exhibition - Niall, his colleagues and helpers must be heavily congratulated. This - after three visits - I think is the best cave-related display that I have seen in my viewings around the world. The Grotte Vache in France would beat it - wonderful archaeological/anthropological material and beautifully presented - but go Sixteen Legs! For more information and to order the upcoming book *A Visit to the Queen of the Dark* showcasing Jodee Taylah's *The Siren's Song* art go to [www.sixteenlegs.com](http://www.sixteenlegs.com). It is expected that there will be a further book of images and the science of the Tasmanian Cave Spider forthcoming as well as potentially a DVD - keep visiting the website. I am working with Niall to see if Sixteen Legs can get to museums and cave sites (including Naracoorte for next year's ACKMA Conference).



*A student's 3D work of art of a cave in a hillside*  
*Photo: Andy Spate*