

Sea butterfly plight turns science into art

WHILE the sea butterfly has a pretty name, it faces an ugly future.

The sea butterfly lives in the Southern Ocean of Antarctica and due to burning of fossil fuels the acidity in the water has increased.

The shell of the sea butterfly is susceptible to this acid, which makes it dissolve away.

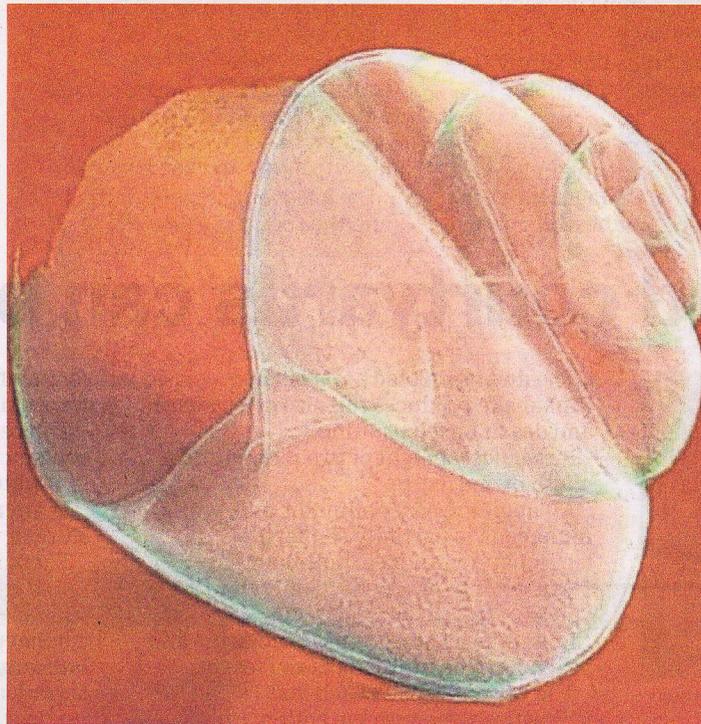
The plight of this animal, also known as the pteropod, has been captured in the exhibition *Dissolve II*.

The works by Launceston artist Melissa Smith are on display at the Devonport Regional Gallery.

If the sea butterfly were to become extinct, Smith said there would be far-reaching consequences.

“As the seas absorb more carbon dioxide, their chemistry changes,” Smith said.

“Carbonate ion levels decline and this element is an important building block for



A close-up image of the microscopic sea butterfly shell, which is not usually visible to the human eye.

the pteropod's shell.

“As a vital link in the marine food chain the demise of the pteropod will have a

compounding effect on the web of life.”

As the sea butterfly is microscopic, Smith provides

us with a view of the animal that we may not get to see.

She plays on the fragility of the shell in her works, which range across many different art mediums, such as a relief print onto rice paper and silk organza.

“The fragility of the materials are reminiscent of a dissolving sea butterfly shell,” she said.

An X-ray micro-CT scan of a sea butterfly shell has also been animated by a local scientist—and this is screened as an interesting addition to the exhibition.

“Slowly the shell falls into view and rotates to reveal its beautiful, delicate form,” Smith said.

“Just as we feel we could touch its fragile surface, it cascades away, the illusion dispelled. It is wonderful to use this scientific data for an artistic purpose.”

■ *Dissolve II* is on display at the Devonport Regional Gallery.