She is one of the women-only divers known as the ‘mermaids’ of Atauro, a tiny island population 743 kilometres from Darwin, with an ancient kinship to the sea and an extraordinary sculpture tradition that honours it.

Long sold as tourist souvenirs in East Timor’s capital, these striking, elongated wood sculptures are now the subject of a world-first exhibition at Charles Darwin University (CDU) Art Gallery.

A contemporary example of a sculpture shows a fine-featured diver, in thongs and glass goggles, complete with miniature lenses.

To some extent that’s the case in East Timor (as well), but Atauro’s a little island, and somehow being an island culture they have managed to preserve this tradition.”

That tradition has transformed from one that worshiped ancient fertility deities and ancestors, to what is now a small industry in its own right – which a small but dedicated number of young men are choosing as a livelihood.

A contemporary example of a sculpture shows a fine-featured diver, in thongs and glass goggles, complete with miniature lenses.

Bringing to life ancient myths and the challenges of a new nation, The Sculptures of Atauro Island unveils a living, breathing art form to a new and lucky Darwin audience.

WHEN UNTIL SAT 15 JUL
AT CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
COST FREE
INFO cdu.edu.au/artgallery

By Rosa Ellen