

# Don't Put a Bird on It. The rise and rise of animal-centric art in Australia

Art+ Animals

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Yvette Watt, *Duck Lake Project*, Photograph by Michelle Powell, 2016.



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Artist and horse lover Madeleine Boyd examines the key differences between art featuring animals and animal-centric art.

There is a hilarious episode of indie TV show *Portlandia* that features an artisan business called Put a Bird on It. As you might imagine, décor and clothing are transformed by application of bird stencils into objects of hipster desire. The skit lampoons contemporary street fashion. It was not long ago that every shop in the Sydney suburb of Surry Hills was overflowing with images of owls, foxes and deer.

A popular animated movie featuring a fox, directed by Wes Anderson, was

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released in 2009 titled *The Fantastic Mr Fox*. About this time, American artist [Kathy High](#) exhibited in Australia her digital photographic print titled *Mr Fox*, 2012, in reference to the film. The large print features a detailed portrait of a fox laying prone on a tarmac road surface. The camera recorded the fading glow in his eye, and the trickle of blood from his mouth. The fox is both idolised on the high street and treated as vermin on the country road. This tension is nowhere more clearly realised than in High's clever work using both image and title to make an impression.

Art and fashion sip from the well of a shared zeitgeist, and it is not surprising then that exhibitions with titles such as *Human / Animal / Artist*, *Birds: Flight paths in Australian Art*, *Wildthing: Animals in Contemporary Australian Art* and *Why Listen to Animals* are springing up with astounding frequency in the local art listings. For the animal lover there is nothing not to love about this trend. The question for those who seek a deeper analysis is whether animal-centric shows are mere fashion, or are they revealing narratives best heeded in these uncertain times?

## What the keen gallery goer or local artist may not sense is that the rise of animal themes in the arts mirrors a similar trend in philosophy and cultural studies.

Falling under the umbrella of Animal Studies, academic research centres are popping up globally.

We might guess that this sudden human interest in all things flying, furry, creeping and crawling has a deeper root cause. It does not take much analysis to recognise that the global phenomenon of climate change has caused 'Spaceship Earth' to shrink. Not in physical proportions, but in the manner by which our human minds are able to perceive the planet as a singular, interconnected space with limited resources shared by many species.

French philosopher [Bruno Latour](#) freely uses 'Gaia' in reference to the whole of living systems that make up Earth, once considered a somewhat 'hippie' term. Hipsters and hippies share more values than might be perceived on the surface, and ethics of everyday living is on the rise in Australian metro centres.

Art concerning the 'animal-other' has an established tradition in the UK, Europe and the USA, and is finding a firm place in Australia. Theorists such as Steve Baker and publications such as *Antennae: Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, both originally UK based, are go-to sources for this history. And Australia has leaders at the forefront of this wave: artists Janet Laurence and Patricia Piccinini have been internationally exhibiting their works which deeply engage animal and posthuman perspectives for decades. Interest in the animal-other is a serious area of inquiry and one that has surpassed the whims of street fashion. But, is all animal art equal? Of course not.

The best examples of animal-centric art dance to a different beat, a non-

human beat, a non-human aesthetic even. As a way into animal-centric thinking, consider this analogy: not too long ago it abruptly became deeply unfashionable, even offensive, to wear a North American Indian style headdress to music festivals. What changed over night was the realisation that these icons of fabricated fables failed to engage with the realities of atrocities experienced by indigenous peoples during waves of Anglo-European colonisation over their homelands. Appropriation of representational icons such as the headdress is another form of colonisation that cuts deeply. Parallels can be drawn between the plight of *Mr Fox*, icon and outcast all at once, and the appropriation of indigenous icons.

In the popular mind, empathy with a fellow human's experience has made steps forward in terms of multiple dialogues on cultural sensitivities. Yet for the animal-other (the multitudes of other non-human species) is art and culture still reproducing icons, or genuinely engaging with animal perspectives? I have recently completed a five-year doctoral study on making art with animals. In this time, I have produced artwork with horses, as well as co-curated exhibitions, such as *Animaladies* in July 2016. And I have developed some questions (and the answers) that can help to determine whether or not art is truly animal-centric.

**Question:** Is the work a mere representation of an animal? **Answer:** No.

**Q:** Does the work contain animal parts? **A:** No, although exceptions might be made for museum specimens undermining the concept of archiving death.

**Q:** Is the work unapologetically cute? **A:** No, unless the cuteness device is used to deliver a disturbing message on species extinction or animal cruelty.

**Q:** Was an animal involved in the production of the work? **A:** Yes, as long as the animal participated with an option for non-participation.

**Q:** Does the work draw the viewer into animal perception such as sound, sight or smell? **A:** Yes.

**Q:** Have you walked away thinking that you will immediately give up everything to join Sea Shepard and fight the cause of ocean people? **A:** That would be very helpful, but extreme, isn't it? (Or is it?).

Australian artists making animal-centric art to watch out for include: Hayden Fowler and his posthuman installations and performances drawing attention to endangered bird species; Lynn Mowson who reflects on cruelty in the dairy industry; Yvette Watt and her 2016 *Duck Lake Project* performance in which she and her troupe shielded wild ducks from the bullets of hunters; Barbara Campbell, who maps human responses to bird migration through drawing and performance; and Perdita Phillips, whose termite installations deconstruct language.



Yvette Watt, *Duck Lake Project*, Photograph by Michelle Powell, 2016.

This might seem to be a limited and somewhat lesser known roster compared with the regular names that appear in exhibitions such as *Wildthing*. Yet, remember the metaphor of the headdress and understand that a porcelain pot adorned with a rare species of bird does nothing to break down anthropocentric and Eurocentric sensibilities that maintain the divide in shared perspectives and empathy between human and non-human species. Animal-centric art is deeply philosophical and political, as the title of leading Australian Animal Studies author Dinesh Wadiwel's recent book, *The War Against Animals*, reveals.

Considering the use of an indigenous analogy in this article, it must be noted that the voice of Australian Indigenous artists is a strong and important contribution to art that considers animals. The exhibition *Why Listen to Animals* included a performance by Indigenous whale song man Bunna Lawrie of the Nullarbor, Great Australian Bight.

We can map a difference in the perspective of Indigenous artists for whom the relationship with lives of wild animals has been more culturally integrated in recent generations, compared with those of artists of European descent whose ancestors have practiced intensive agriculture for centuries. There exist strange conflicts and coincidences in Indigenous and non-indigenous animal art, in particular on the ethics of killing and eating animals with whom perspective is shared.

As the genre continues to develop maturity and the distinction of longevity, some artists have come to realise that there is more to animal-centric art than just putting a bird on it.

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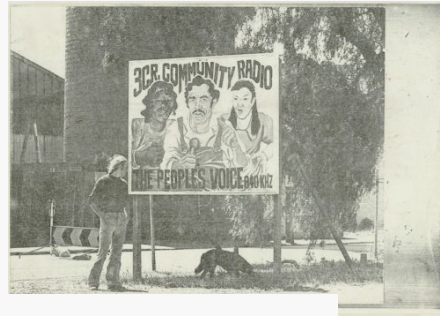


**Dress Code**

The art that emerges here has little to do with wearability, instead it has generated work that may conceal the body as much as reveal it.

PREVIEW

By Louise Martin-Chew



**If People Powered Radio: 40 years of 3CR**

Curated by Helen Hughes and Spiros Panigirakis with the full support of the station itself, the exhibition blurred the lines between museum-style exhibits and newly created artworks.

REVIEW By Dylan Rainforth



**Jana Vodesil-Baruffi wins 2017 Black Swan Prize for Portraiture**

Western Australian artist Jana Vodesil-Baruffi has won the \$50,000 2017 Black Swan Prize for Portraiture with her aptly titled work, *Black Swan*. The Black Swan Prize is now in its 11th year.

NEWS By Tiarney Mickus

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