



A RARE BIRD IN THE LANDS
EVA FERNANDEZ







A rare bird in the lands, and very like a black swan *rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno*

When Western Australia was first visited by Dutch men the black swan (*Cygnus atratus*) was something to marvel over, as only white swans were seen in Europe and the black swan existed only in their imagination. The proverb *rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno*, written in AD 82 by Roman satirist Juvenal, which translates as, *a rare bird in the lands and very like a black swan*, became a popular metaphor for something that could not exist or was impossible.¹

This developed as 'the black swan theory', a metaphor that describes an event that comes as a surprise, has a major effect, and is often inappropriately rationalised after the fact with the benefit of hindsight.²

Eva Fernández contends that these notions can also refer to early ideas of representation of Australia's identity, inevitably determining notions of post-colonial and present day identity. Drawing upon colonial history and referencing the Daguerreotype, the photographic process popular during the early settlement of the Swan River Colony, her artworks reposition emblematic flora and fauna representative of Western Australian identity as trenchant symbols. They explore dark undertones of the state's brutal history; first contact of Europeans with the Whadjuk people and the impact of harsh colonial rule and dispossession of traditional lands.

The Dutch navigator Willem de Vlamingh named the Swan River after the many black swans he saw there when he visited in 1697. One diarist noted that the crew explored ten miles up the river and shot 'nine or ten swans'. He wrote that the local Aboriginal people 'were all very shy' and unwilling to reveal themselves. However the easy killing of numerous black swans, by the use of either boathook or gun, was also a message to the hidden but watching people witnessing strangers who could instantly kill a black swan merely by pointing a stick at it and making a loud noise.³

When Vlamingh arrived he did not acknowledge that the river was already named. Whadjuk Nyoongar people living in the area called the river the *Derbarl Yerrigan* and *Kuljak* or *Maali* were local Aboriginal names for the black swan, found all over the south west of Western Australia.⁴ Swans provided an important food source for local Nyoongar, and were especially associated with the season of *Makuru* (June-July) when swans moult and, being unable to fly, were easier prey. The black swan is also of spiritual significance and Nyoongar people have a deep sense of understanding about the role that *jirda* (birds) play within the spirit world.⁵ It is no accident that local Nyoongar artist Laurel Nannup's sculpture of a giant bird in a boat installed at Elizabeth Quay, *First Contact*, is inspired by the Nyoongar people's first visions of European settlers, whose distant sailing ships looked like floating birds bearing the white-faced spirits of their ancestors.



Kangaroo man with boomerang, 2018, 80cmH x 70cmW
Kangaroo lady with boomerang, 2018, 80cmH x 70cmW

The *Cygnus atratus* is similar in size and shape to the European species, but its plumage is black, often tinged with brown, and with white wing tips. The scientific name for the species 'atratus' means 'dressed in black'. The beak is red with a white band near the tip. Unlike the mute white swan, black swans make a musical bugling sound as they fly and are considered nomadic.⁶

Although adopted enthusiastically as the official state emblem of Western Australia – being depicted on the flag, coat of arms, the first stamp and many buildings, institutions and cultural objects – the black swan was also hunted to near extinction. By 1870 numbers were severely decimated but it wasn't until 1891 that Premier John Forrest promised legislation to protect all native game with closed hunting seasons (July to December for swans) and to make Perth Water a reserve where shooting of any kind was prohibited. In 1896 swaneries were established to allow black swans to breed safely. Eighty swans were handed to the Acclimatisation Society in 1897 and over the next few years swans were bred, pinioned and then released back to Perth Water.⁷ Their numbers however, have never really recovered.

The symbol of the black swan also retains a shadow relationship within popular culture and philosophy. Throughout European history, literature, music and theatre, the black swan has consistently been attributed with dark symbolism: white swans represent purity and black swans given a sinister and seductive association with evil.

The colloquially named 'black crow' is likewise associated with foreboding and death. There are five native species of Corvids (crows and ravens) in Australia. The Australian Raven, *C. c. perplexus*, is most common in Sydney, Canberra and Perth and can be identified by feathers forming prominent throat 'hackles'.

To the Nyoongar people of southwestern Australia, the Australian Raven was *Wardar* - the Watcher and was a wily and unpredictable 'trickster'. Whadjuk Nyoongar were socially divided into two moieties or family groups - the crows (*wardarng-maat*) and the white cockatoos (*marnetj-maat*).⁸

It was believed the birds helped to carry the spirits of the dead across the sea to the afterlife. The rocky coast just south of Cottesloe Beach, called *Mudurup*, was sacred to the crow spirit and regarded as the place where the spirits left the land for their final journey to paradise, at *Kurannup*, beyond Rottneest Island.

While Aboriginal people acknowledged the crows positive association with death, the bird, known as the 'undertaker of the bush' was seen as threatening by early Europeans. As early as 1832 pioneer settler George Fletcher Moore, as well as dining on crows⁹ complained of flocks of crows (known as 'murders') raiding his wheat crops at Guildford.¹⁰



Raven man, 2018, 80cmH x 70cmW
Raven lady, 2018, 80cmH x 70cmW



Raven couple, 2018, 80cmH x 70cmW
Raven family, 2018, 80cmH x 70cmW

These attitudes were a direct result of the global experience of Imperialism, as early European romanticism constructed the flora, fauna and the natives of Australia as exotic, repugnant and grotesque. For instance kangaroos created a furore when first exhibited in London and 'All that was categorically solid melted into air; for unlike faked mermaids this was live, it moved, was publicly displayed, admittance one shilling a person.'¹¹

Many years ago Fernández was given a 'found' photograph album that showed a collection of formal portraits taken of an unknown family. These photographs, taken in both London and Melbourne, suggested the family immigrated to Australia between 1860 and 1880.

Using photographs of this unknown colonial family the artist skilfully replaces the heads of the men, women and children with local fauna. She reflects the unconscious fears of the European settlers in these uncanny portraits of anthropomorphised fauna. Kangaroos, crows and swans become somehow resistant, almost threatening. Irony and juxtaposition exist in a space that could also hint at underlying tones of poison, madness and massacre.

The clothes in the photographs are fascinating. One can't help but consider the relationship between materials (silk, damask, wool), feathers, fur and skin. Clothes carry such complex messages. Are we looking at the traditional European black mourning dresses here? If so - for whom are we mourning? The photographs of kangaroos and swans also seem to carry a sadness and grace about them. They remind us of the valued connection kangaroos had to the bodies of Aboriginal people and especially of the traditional *booka* or kangaroo skin cloak, such as that worn by Whadjuk warrior Yagan who led a Nyoongar resistance in Western Australia from 1829 -1833. It is interesting in this context that Yagan also wore an old soldiers coat under his kangaroo cloak and despite his taking on some European ways, 'Europeans clearly recognised Yagan's considerable personal charisma, despite, or perhaps because of, his refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of white power.'¹²

In June 1832 Yagan was declared an outlaw with a bounty placed on his head and nearly a year later was killed. After being brutally decapitated his head was smoked, pickled and sent to Liverpool Museum as a curiosity. It was not until 1997 that a delegation of Elders brought Yagan's head or *kaat* back to Nyoongar country. It has since been reburied in a Memorial Park in the Swan Valley.¹³

In 2006, West Australian artist Julie Dowling painted her iconic painting *Yagan*, now held in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Painted 170 years after his murder, the image 'does not tell us of the violence of Yagan's death, but of the power and impact of his life'. No longer a 'prize' of white colonisation, Dowling quietly reinstates Yagan as a tall, strong and handsome leader.¹⁴ Something about the grace and dignity of her portrait of Yagan makes more apparent the 'uncivilised' behaviour of white colonial settlers.

This may also be the strategy of Fernández as she 'cuts off their heads' and then, in these reworked images, replaces them with gentler and perhaps more intelligent creatures. We are confronted with the question: How could Europeans, men and women¹⁵ all the while standing in their 'civilised' clothes, suits and decorous dresses, condone such actions and been so callous, so dehumanising? How could we have been such liars?

These questions are not just pertinent to past history but also to present circumstances. During the past 400 years, many objects from Western Australia have circulated through global collecting networks. While repatriation is slowly happening, body parts, including heads of Aboriginal people, are still held in the collections of museums in Britain, Europe and America.¹⁶

An earlier unofficial coat of arms had a Latin motto: *Cygnis Insignis*; translated it means *distinguished by swans*. This body of work, this suite of photographs, so carefully constructed, asks us to revisit a time of darkness and uneasiness. Fernández asks us to distinguish painful questions of a past time and to confront the same collusion in our present time. One of these might be to ask how we continue to dehumanise other people?

The beauty of this work surely offers hope, for one of the ways we can imagine a just and truly shared Australia is to confront the past openly, and with compassion, and build from truth.

Jo Darbyshire 2018

Jo Darbyshire is a Western Australian artist and social history curator.



Cygnus atratus, 2018, 80cmH x 70cmW

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- 3 RT Appleyard and T Manford, *The Beginning – European Discovery and early settlement of Swan River, Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, 1979, p. 75 and p.104.
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- 5 See various cultural references on the South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council website.
- 6 *The white swan from Europe was introduced and a colony established on the River Avon, Northam in 1910*. Vincent Serventy, *Wildlife of Australia*, 1968, Thomas Nelson Ltd, p. 66-7-68.
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- 9 *Letters Illustrative of the Early History of The Colony by Mr George Fletcher Moore*, Perth, April 1832. *West Australian*, Tuesday 18 January 1881, p. 3.
- 10 Peter Hancock, *Raven the undertaker of the bush*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 2013, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/raven-the-undertaker-of-the-bush-20130320-2gexp.html> (accessed 17.9.2018)
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- 14 Jan Idle, 'Yagan, Mrs Dance and Whiteness' in *Ngapartji Ngapartji: In turn in turn: Ego-histoire, Europe and Indigenous Australia* Edited by Vanessa Castejon, Anna Cole, Oliver Haag and Karen Hughes, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.
- 15 See especially the writings of Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up To The White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, University of Queensland Press, 2000.
- 16 Some of the material was stolen, others traded, some were offered for sale, and some were taken in the aftermath of violence, even massacres. Project to examine history of collecting in WA, University of Western Australia News, 18 May 2017, <http://www.news.uwa.edu.au/201705189617/arts-and-culture/project-examine-history-collecting-wa>, (accessed 4.9.2018)

BIOGRAPHY

Eva Fernández was born in Toronto, Canada and lives and works in Perth, Western Australia. Fernandez completed a Master of Creative Arts and has been a practising artist for over two decades, working across digital-based media and installation. Fernández's practice is concerned with the exploration and negotiation of the space which she inhabits in context to it's complex history and cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism.

Her work also interrogates her own pluralistic identity, as she negotiates cultural dislocation in context to contemporary issues of global displacement, particularly Spanish Diaspora in the 20th century, as the child of post Spanish Civil War migrants. She has had several solo exhibitions and been invited to exhibit her work nationally and internationally. Her work is represented in numerous institutional and private collections.

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Cover Image: *A rare bird in the lands*

Inside Cover Right: *Kangaroo lady with *Angiozanthos manglesii**

Inside Cover Left: *Kangaroo man with ferns*

Back Page: *Cygnis Insignis*

I acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the Nyoongar nation as the traditional owners of the land upon which I live and work. I recognise that sovereignty was never ceded, and I pay respect to elders past, present and future. Eva Fernández 2018