

Wild Life Australia 2019

Notes written on the works by Anne Zahalka

Koala, Yarra River at Woori Yallock, Victoria, 2019

Three koalas with a joey safely cling to the branches of their eucalypt, high above the Yarra River. Land clearing and road building has led to a decline in koala numbers and driven them into remaining bushland. Usually territorial, koalas are fussy eaters and only thrive in habitat where certain species of eucalypt trees grow. Koalas primarily hydrate by eating water-filled eucalyptus leaves, and the trees are among their most important habitats. Hotter, drier conditions means leaves are drying and forcing koalas from certain areas of bush. Sadly this group are cohabiting a single tree as a result of the destruction to their home.

With rising temperatures, land clearing and irregular burning back, an uncontrolled fire has erupted in the background with billowing smoke that spreads rapidly, threatening to further erode their habitat and food source.

Original diorama from Museum Victoria. Backdrop painted by George Browning

The Mallee, near Benetook in Sunraysia Region of Victoria, 2019

The Mallee, where the Mallee Emu-wren, Black-eared Mine Red-lored Whistler and Malleefowl once roamed, is now stripped of ground vegetation and the only sanctuary is a eucalyptus tree where a reduced number of parrots survive. The First Nation peoples unique cultural practices are visible on the scarred tree, where the birds perch. Barks were harvested for the creation of shields, collomons, canoes and shelters without impacting the survival of trees. The scar tree in the diorama scene serves as an archaeological relic in the museum habitat display and is an acknowledgement of Aboriginal practices before white settlement and the craft and care they bestowed on the land.

A panel-van races through bushland with a fire erupting in its wake symbolising the destruction of habitat caused by land clearing and the loss of country. Controlled burning established by Aboriginal people were practiced and provided important management of agriculture and the land.

Original diorama from Museum Victoria. Backdrop painted by George Browning

Wedge Tail Eagle, Mt Bellfield in Serra Valley, The Grampians, Victoria, 2019

The Grampians, overlooking Serra Valley, is represented before the Age of the Anthropocene, an epoch dating to the commencement of the Industrial Age. The first atomic bomb detonation heralded a significant human impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems compounding the effects of climate change. The pristine landscape presented predates white settlement to a time where First Nation peoples maintained and lived in a carefully nurtured landscape. Water extends as far as the eye can see in this abundant paradise, a place that is home to the revered Wedge Tail Eagle, regarded as a creator deity, culture hero and ancestral being in Aboriginal mythology.

Today the eagle are killed by apprehensive farmers who fear their lambs will be slaughtered when this bird has little interest of domestic sheep, taking the weak ones, if at all.

Breeding eagle pairs are disturbed by forest harvesting, road building, land clearing, agriculture, housing and intensive recreation causing their numbers to decline and a great reduction in habitats. The subspecies *Aquila audax fleayi* are Endangered in Tasmania.

Original diorama from Museum Victoria. Backdrop painted by George Browning

Platypus, Burragorang Valley, Macarthur Region of New South Wales, 2019

Areas of the Burragong Valley can no longer sustain life. The habitat of the platypus that once lived here has been destroyed. The valley has endured significant environmental change due to a long history of coal mining. The Warragamba Dam construction resulted in the inundating of the valley, flooding the entire town [in YEAR]. The Wollondilly River has since been preserved as a national park but not before catastrophic degradation to waterways in the region caused by coal seam mining. Mining caused cracking rock and riverbeds that allow water to drain. When the water emerges further downstream it is contaminated with strong iron. Areas are completely closed off to the public and access can only be gained through the conservationists and activists who record degradation.

Burragorang is said to derive from the words *burro* (meaning *kangaroo*) or *booroon* (*small animal*) and the word *gang* (meaning *to hunt*). Therefore, Burragorang is believed to mean *place to hunt kangaroo* or *place to hunt small animals*.^[1]

Hand-coloured photographs from Australian Museum collection with

Original diorama from Australian Museum, installed 1934-37. Backdrop painted by Ethel A.King

Lyrebird, Garigal National Park, Sydney region New South Wales, 2019

The establishment of national parks, international networks of public land protecting the natural world are often taken for granted. These parks allow us to experience nature in an almost pristine state where we access is through parking lots, leaving our cars to follow pathways, viewing platforms and stairs. Nature made easy. While this opportunity to be in 'nature' and trek to remote areas can be exhilarating but also frightening, the suburban outcrop of houses along the ridge are a reminder of the preciousness of these preserved habitats and how easily they can be destroyed.

Having ventured into the Garigal National Park in search of lyrebirds, I found myself traversing bushland that seemed ancient yet signs of the footprints of recent joggers lay on tracks leading along the lake and under a mysterious profile lay the handprint of an Indigenous man. As I made my way back along the path, I heard the sounds of a series of bird calls all emanating from the one area. As I approached, I say the exquisite

Super Lyrebird / Frenchs Forest - Davidson Reserve - Garigal National Park (also called "Lyrebird track")

Original diorama from Australian Museum, installed 1923 (Constructed 1934-37). H.R. Gallop (backdrop) / Ethel King 1937 new dome/ Phyllis Clarke: painted texture in the rocks.

Sea Bird Colony, Admiralty Rocks with turbulent seas, Lord Howe Island, 2019

The concentration of sixty nesting specimens included on the rocky outcrop is representative of the large sea bird populations that once thrived on Lord Howe Island. There has been a dramatic decline in sea bird numbers due to loss of habitat, plastic debris and failure to develop. Parent seabirds travel far and wide over the oceans, mistakenly collecting alluringly coloured plastic fragments and shards. On return to the colony, these plastics are regurgitated and fed to the starving fledglings as food.

Thousands and thousands of helium balloons are released into the atmosphere each week from a birthday, a wake or a wedding. The balloons float up through the skies, burst in to small pieces then descend into ocean tides with fatal consequences. The plastic balloon, ties and string contaminate waters where sea and bird life mistakenly take coloured particles for food.

Original diorama from Australian Museum, installed 1923. Backdrop painted by

Sea Bird Colony, Admiralty Rocks with calm seas, Lord Howe Island, 2019

The picturesque sanctuary of Lord Howe Island is not protected from the impacts of human pollution which is limited to 400 visitors per day. But airplane contrails slash through clear blue skies crystallising in altitudes preventing warm air from being released and contributing to rising temperatures. Plastic debris washes to shore through tidal flow and in to the seabird colony. The birds, often mistaking waste products as a source of nutrition in their search for food are heavily impacted. Parent birds are mistakenly feeding their fledglings plastic fragments in the place of food causing their young to not develop and survive.

Plastic shards litter the sea shelf where Sooty Tern, Masked Booby, Common Noddy, Grey Ternlet create nests with plastic ribbons and ties. Mt Gower watches over from afar powerful and untouched by the changing tides.

Original diorama from Australian Museum, installed in 1937. Backdrop painted by Ethel King - H.R. Gallop (backcloth) / Ethel King 1937

Fruit Bat, Nepean River, Sydney Region of New South Wales, 2019

The fruit bat, found along the Eastern seaboard darkens Sydney skies at dusk travelling from caves in the north to feed on Moreton Bay fig trees in Centennial Park in the south or sweep along the Nepean River to camp in colonies near water to quench their thirst, sleeping in trees in clusters by day. Considered a pest to fruit farmers historically, the fruit bats were heavily culled and later netting was developed, some of which cause painful slow deaths. Now a protected species, bats play a unique role in the pollination and seed dispersal, while their populations have been dramatically affected by rising temperatures. During a recent heatwave where temperatures soared to 42 and higher, the vulnerable fruit bats suffered extreme heat stress, causing their brains to boil and dropping dead from the trees. More than 1300 of the animals, most of them female and their dependent young, died in one day. Heat related deaths of bats due to climate change have been recorded in other parts of the country. In November last year a record 23,000 speckled fruit bats died in two days and in January this year over 2000 died of heat distress in South Australia.

*(Background repainted 1940) Photographer: George Clutton / Farr, July 1989
Typically Australian setting, such as might be found along the Nepean River /*

Original diorama from Australian Museum. Backdrop painted by Mr A. Gallop

Galah, Mt Connor near Uluru, South Australia, 2019

Set in a landscape that is both ancient and alien, futuristic in appearance while also primitive, a group of galahs gather around a dried up water hole. Staring in disbelief, their usual boustrous and loud behaviour seems to have been silenced by the loss of their water source. In the sky a tourist load of outback adventurers angles down toward a circular landing pad forming an Aboriginal flag drawn in the ground, reminding the visitor of who this land

belonged. Situated between a solar field, the panels provide power for a growing tourist industry. Circumnavigating the flat-topped sandstone capped sand and rock of Mt Connor (affectionately labeled Fool-uru by locals) are a number of tourist buses treating this country as a theme park to be traversed and captured accessing it through private land. While most of the land nearby of Uluru belongs to the National Parks or run by the Central Land Council, Mt Connor is owned by the Severin Family who have created a booming tourist business.

Since urbanisation, galahs have fared well in other parts of the country enjoying cleared forests where there is provision of water for stock. They don't survive as well in dry open plains.

Original diorama from South Australian Museum, installed in 1937-8. Backdrop painted by George Whinnen & Robert Waden

Emu, Riverina District of New South Wales, 2019

The emu, now extinct in Tasmania is the largest living bird on the mainland and is a cultural icon of Australia appearing on the Coat of Arms. It is important to Indigenous Australians and features prominently in mythology. It is sufficiently common to be rated of least concern species established by the International Union for Conservation and Nature. Surviving in extremely arid climates, the emu are important agent for the dispersal of large viable seeds, which contributes to floral biodiversity. Travelling in pairs, the emu are a gregarious and mygnomous. They provide a prominent place in Indigenous mythology and in creation legends.

Emu leave minimal footprints on the land and do not compact the surface of the soil in comparison to sheep and cattle and have provided an important food source. They are successfully farmed providing a rich source of Anti-wind-farm websites are awash with these astonishing claims that seem to have escaped the relevant authorities but there is no official corroboration in government or official investigations that support this. In contradiction to anti-wind turbine advocates, the emu live harmoniously amongst these long-necked energy providers and there is no evidence to suggest they are harmful.

Original diorama from Museum Victoria. Backdrop painted by George Browning

Gnarnayarrahe Waitairie from Roebourne, Western Australia in the region of New South Wales, 2019

'Born in a paperbark-lined hole on the banks of the Harding River, between a wattle and a gum tree, a little blue joey kangaroo came over at the time of Gnarnayarrahe's birth, inspiring his first name and totem by his mother. Waitaire means 'born under a spring in the Dreamtime'... Taken away from his parents at the age of four and placed with missionaries.... He ran away and returned to his tribe and was subsequently recaptured. During his numerous escapes, Gnarnayarrahe mastered age-old Indidjbundji songs, dance and tribal lore life has been marked by struggle'. Robyn Ryan

Gnarnayarrahe developed as a songman, dancer, artist, storyteller, bushman, tracker and didjido player learning from King Wally of Broome when he was in his 20's. He was the inspiration behind Not Drowning Waving's very successful album Claim with track Terra Nullius.

In revisiting the portrait of Aboriginal Elder Gnarnayarrahe as a dancer/bird made in 2007, I wanted to represent him as a survivor who has endured great hardship, walked through fires that have decimated the landscape and to control the burning that surround him straddling both white and black worlds.