

Heather Shimmen — History Rhymes
Our histories are in a constant process of reinvention.

Empowering the animal world through myths, literature, poetry, nursery rhymes and cartoons might seem a common form of transmogrifying humanity's morals and politics, but it is an effective way to pull out darker stories about personal memories and historical events. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll and James Gilray gave animals distinctive personalities and names, characters who were capable of interventions or facilitating fateful and hilarious outcomes. Artists such as Goya animated his etchings with owls, bats and donkeys to great effect. In Heather Shimmen's recent body of prints and sculptural assemblages we find Indigenous Australian creatures enticing us into fabulous, metaphysical realms that weave around politics, environmentalism, racism and feminising tales of women adrift, adorned, lost or outcast. Excavating forgotten stories and sequencing images is one of Shimmen's main conceptual and aesthetic tropes and her repertoire of animals and visual narratives engage us at various levels. In her words, 'A bee in the hair is worth a hive in the hand', sometimes with a sting.

In Shimmen's installation wall work, *A rogue son and a royal visit*

2019–20, which includes *Coemu* 2019–20 and *The faraway tree* 2019–20, antipodean animals embroider the imperial trunk of colonialism. It is a work inspired by a satiric account of the first royal visitor to Australia, Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, whose 'Welcome to Country' in 1868 was lampooned by a cartoonist with a chorus of native animals holding a long scroll of formalities. Shimmen transforms this scenario into a totemic work of embossed aluminium, hand stencilled lines and faux fur — as she puts it, she likes to 'get the print off the page' — and the message, while animistic, is also political. Celebrating our indigenous animals, the kangaroo, cockatoos, marsupials, bush rats, swans, echidnas and emus, she reinstates their entitled position but also reminds us of their vulnerability to invasive Western ways.

Sighted 2021, a six-panelled linocut with a double-vision narrative, situates the iconic kangaroo — as depicted in the well-known engraving made after the 1772 painting by George Stubbs — as a colonial victim. The 'Kongourou from New Holland' became a kind of mascot symbol after the British discovery of Australia, but it is not just a quixotic antipodean animal for Europeans, rather a target for hunting parties, a recreational replacement for hounds and foxes — note the Rorschach revolvers in the upper section of the print. The warped concentric circles imply an historic bending of truth as much as referring to the shooting target, but these circles perhaps also extend to the attrition and dispossession of Australia's first nation people.²

Shimmen's intriguing imagery generally involves female figures, whether mythological, colonial or contemporary, and are statements about womanhood embellished with menageries and microcosms of insects and flora. Her lino prints have a marvellous sense of alchemic freedom, something she attributes to the experimentation encouraged by her RMIT teachers Len Crawford, George Baldessin and Andrew Sibley during her student years in the late 1980s. Many of her images 'step calmly out of her head', yet they are informed by the historical obscurity and misrepresentation of women — saints, martyrs and goddesses such as Minerva, the seven daughters of Eve, or the many types of Matilda, a generic identity for Australian women, or the misogynistic treatment of women as witches, naturalists and herbalists. By rehabilitating them into the picture Shimmen speaks of the immeasurable contributions they have made across time and place. Heather Shimmen's linocuts and semi-sculptural works also draw upon personalised experiences of her childhood and her present semi-reclusive coastal life in the bushland of South Gippsland. Anthropology, ethnographic and colourful tribal lore are pervasive threads, for as a child she moved between two very different cultures, the Anglocentric mores of Melbourne and the remote jungle plateaus of the New Guinea highlands where her parents co-owned a farm. Initiated into the tropical, not as tourist but as an innocent, she absorbed the fetishistic exoticism as simply another way of living; jungle tales were accompanied by a chorus of melodious native songs and chants, and rather than Western capitalism's Barbie doll craze, Shimmen played with carved wooden figurines and collected brilliantly coloured beetles and butterflies, often travelling with a throng of highland children who sang to ward off evil spirits. Heather's sense of songlines of protection permeates much of her work, hence the music scores that float across the paper, for instance the colonial *Waltzing Matilda* song. Indeed, the exotic acts as a mystifying force that saves us from banality and transports us elsewhere.²

In the linocuts, *The invisible hand* 2020 and *The wisdom of grasshoppers* 2019, Shimmen returns to the subject of body decoration, linking tribal scarification with the cosmetic excess of European women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the latter painted large beauty spots to conceal smallpox scars. Both prints refer to the transmission of viruses that have plagued humans, something that Shimmen has long been interested in, yet these works were made pre-Covid and now seem prescient of the devastating pandemic wave of 2020.

In her eight-metre frieze *The Ladies of the Pleiades* 2019, the largest work Shimmen has produced to date, a multitude of assembled stories about mythology, astrology and women create a galaxy in itself. Based around the star cluster *the Pleiades*, which has informed ancient and contemporary cultures across the globe, the star may symbolise divine three guidance, but its microbial features radiate beyond prescribed time, and Shimmen's small, decorative star-flowers also refer to the visual and viral nature of transmission. Heather Shimmen's art and sense of reality tantalisingly plays with Western patterns of male control, the force of the feminine and natural and mystical forces that merge into a highly individualised iconography. Her vocabulary of representation commands our attention with magnificent, mesmerising and at times confronting images that sweep across cultural zones and centuries, reminding us of the importance to imagine, revise and reinvent.

Sheridan Palmer, March 2021