

Martin King's art is usually regarded as being synonymous with the iconography of Australian birdlife. In his impressive painterly works on paper, birds are the emblematic force through which layers of cultural history and the values we have inherited are explored. The presence of birds as silent witnesses, unbounded and soaring spectators or those that co-exist with human habitation are interpreted through a rich Gothic imaginary in which irony, beauty and the mesmerising sublime are frequently combined.

The idea of an Australian gothic began with colonial settlers, and often their perverse translation of the antipodean world. Some thought the flora and fauna exotic, while others described the vast eucalyptus forests as melancholic, the kangaroo a 'hybrid of incompatible parts', its biformity consisting of a squirrel's head and the forequarters of a small deer, while the black swan was a 'sooty' trespasser.¹ While we might discern an echo of an anthropogenic crisis in King's work, there is equally a richly crafted optimism. The sublime and the beautiful are superbly expressed in the stillness and precarious tranquillity found in many of his drawings, etchings and watercolours, while in his larger works silhouetted avians glide across mellow skies and his energetic mark-making coaxes the sensory towards the surreal. Collaged with graphite, pigment, gold leaf and wax, King draws upon his ledger of bird species, a compendium to which he returns with regular reverence. He also pays homage to artists who have influenced his graphic imagery—Albrecht Dürer's owl and magnificent watercolour of a bird's wing; Casper David Friedrich's moody, existential ruins, and William Strutt's panoramic paintings of fleeing birds and animals.²

Indeed, King belongs to a twenty-first century school of neo-romanticism, one which has become increasingly vital over recent decades as the global gothic advances. Felix Guattari's words come to mind with King's passion for the ornithological—'Birds sing to mark out their territory'—but what happens when the singing stops?³ A bell jar of ornithological specimens, a crystalised tree, taxidermy birds whose feathered tails resemble bleached coral, and books of lost avian souls: these are King's testimonials to the preservation of nature as much as a *cri de coeur* for regeneration, both of birds and the landscapes that support them; hence his etching *The Tree of Life*. The poignant watercolour of the falling corpse of a white barn owl—or is it a resurrection—is a warning call about mortality and vulnerability, and equally a metaphor for all creatures. Throughout his life Martin King has observed birds emerge from nowhere, only to disappear spontaneously and then reappear. This is a form of the eternal return and signifies hope, a powerful message that is aesthetically embedded in all of King's work, even when the lyrebird's magnificent display of tail feathers is weighted by human skulls, as in *Ghost Dance II*. King's art is not so much a requiem but an acknowledgment of the immense beauty and freedom that birds carry, and it invites reflection on how we must protect the dreams of the ornithologist and ensure that the bird song continues, especially in an Australian, or indeed, a new global era of the gothic.

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¹ Barron Field 'Kangaroo', in *First Fruits of Australian Poetry*, 1819.

² King's 2017 State Library of Victoria Creative Fellowship explored native flora and fauna in William Strutt's 1864 painting *Black Thursday, February 6th 1851*, in the collection of the SLV.

³ Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, Bloomsbury, 2014 (first printed in 1989), p. 5.