

Songbirds are everywhere

I like to watch the birds around me, fascinated by their complex social life and their seeming indifference to the humans living alongside them. I'd give a lot to understand better what's going on with them, but mostly it remains a mystery. A discovery I made in 2010 intensified this interest—the existence of the paintings of the so-called artists of the First Fleet, available on-line on the website of London's Natural History Museum. The colonial artists (some were convicts) painted the birds they encountered on their arrival, and that shared their strange new world, more often than any other subject. It surprised me how very many birds there were, so many of them have since vanished from the city.

The paintings are detailed and descriptive, full of character and individuality. Under the influence of Inga Clendinnen's book about first contact, *Dancing with Strangers* (2005), I found myself imagining the encounters that might occur between races or species of birds that were new to one another. This led to a video work, *Songbirds are Everywhere*, where brief encounters play out (across the stage of my upper body) between small bird shapes traced from the original paintings.

Most of the artists gave their painted subjects an English common name; some have persisted while others have fallen into disuse. My regret for the loss of bird names like *agile creeper*, *bold vulture*, *doubtful thrush*, *velvet-faced crow* is real, but mild compared to the loss of the indigenous Eora names that at least one colonial artist made a point of recording. In this series photographs of small handmade nets flung into the air preserve some of these obsolete English names in the form of titles.

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