

# JODY GRAHAM      Witness



Sweet Surrender charcoal & sap on paper 132cm x 104cm 2019

**JODY GRAHAM**'s fascination with birds began long ago as an almost involuntary response to the warbling of magpies and the strange desolate cries of crows. The sounds of birds, distant and near, absorb us like a canvas absorbs paint, resonate within us, come to our ears unbidden, reminding us that we are watched and witnessed from above, from all directions. Jody had been obsessed with producing images of these birds crying out into space, watching us from above, when she was offered a residency in Grafton in October 2017. The artist announced to

friends that she would be traveling there with the resolute goal of putting aside her fixation with birds and figurative art in general. Her rigorous, ascetic project during this sojourn would be to explore the pure possibilities of repeatedly marking a surface with an implement.

All of this changed when Jody met Frieda.

The bird had introduced itself to the artist as she took a short break from studio work. Jody noticed that Frieda could only hop along the ground. He had been partially crippled by string wrapped so tightly around his now

useless limb that it had become embedded in the flesh. Jody, bird lover and obsessive collector of bits of coloured string, felt compelled. Over the next week she would spend hours winning Freida's trust, eventually coaxing him to perch on the back of a chair where she was able to stare directly into the bird's eyes, as if each were hypnotising the other; exploiting her well-honed dexterity to gently unravel and cut away most of the offending twine with a pair of scissors.

The minimal modelling of form demonstrated in the ensuing line drawings becomes even more startling when one learns they were drawn in real time, without any preparation or correction, Jody using her 'wrong' hand and refusing to look away from the bird to check the drawing for accuracy. These are among several tactics Jody uses

'ello Freddy 2019, 27 x 37cm, charcoal, sap and hand-stitching on paper



while sketching, in the hope of undercutting her own automatic mastery, allowing a freer, more spontaneous response to the moment. These devices dedicated to interrupting the familiar mechanics of drawing include a series of strange tools improvised from found objects - including a glove-prosthesis that turns the artist's hand into something resembling a bird's claw, with drawing and scratching implements for talons.

The encounter with Frieda left its own indelible mark on the artist. It would no longer be enough for Jody to

imagine or even observe the lives of birds. She needed to encounter them as living strangers and potential friends.

On her return to Sydney, Jody found that she could not shake her newfound fascination with magpies, and even more surprisingly, that the birds did not seem capable of shaking their fascination with her.

Birds filled the blue sky of Jody's imagination. She would go on to pursue encounters with magpies, crows, eagles, butcher birds, kites and others. The images Jody brought back from these meetings achieve an extraordinary spectrum of 'bird expression'.

It is evident Jody's natural preference is for raptors and other hunters; birds with hooked beaks and tearing claws. One pragmatic reason for this apparent inclination might be that birds optimised for killing offer the best encounters for portraits, simply because they are not consumed by perpetual fear and their eyes look forward, allowing accurate targeting. But it is more than that. Jody clearly loves these vicious beaks and talons. She embraces the lethal power expressed by the body of a winged creature designed for hunting.

There is no Bambi complex in Jody's vision of nature. Her birds are rarely 'polished' at the level of form and never 'prettified' at the level of content. Everything in this world seems broken and scarred by the very process of life.

Jody looks into the eyes of birds designed for killing and knows she has zero right to judge. Their violence is expressed in bodies evolved over thousands of years to play a specific role within an ecological niche; our violence is imposed by technologies that allow us to transform or destroy any niche or habitat at will.

Beaks are simply not 'expressive'. They can stab or shriek, but never smile or frown. In place of subtly expressive musculature, birds have a kind of rigid carapace, an attacking-repelling beak, bony and impenetrable. Beaks carry scars and pockmarks more easily than momentary expression.

Jody's birds all have deep character; they wear their lives visibly in the scars, but they are ultimately impenetrable.... Jody's art confronts and affirms the impenetrable element in the gaze of these aerial witnesses, like the impenetrable black dot in the middle of the flat white disc that is the eye of a crow.

We know that birds evolved from dinosaurs and were one of only two lineages to survive the impact of an asteroid. Today, whether observing from high above or descending to our level to look straight into our eyes, it seems nearly certain birds are witnessing the inexorable progress of another mass extinction event, one caused by our own human activity in a geological age defined by that very fact, the Anthropocene.

Birds truly are our witnesses.

**Bill Schaffer**  
**'Witness' was held at**  
**Lost Bear Gallery,**  
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JODY GRAHAM  
Pest Control 2019, 21x14 cm  
ink on paper

*Jody Graham*