



BIRDLAND

THE CREATION OF ARTIST AND CURATOR MIRIAM WILLIAMSON, *Birdland* was the final project in a series of contemporary art events held between 2017 and 2020, each exploring flight and provoked by the big skies over the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

The first was *Space Oddity* at the Linden Observatory, a tribute to David Bowie. This was followed by *The Altitude Project*¹, a multi-artform event referencing astronomy and aviation, held across three historic sites – Linden Observatory, Kingsford Smith Park and Melrose Park - as well as events at The SLAB², an artist project space in the mid mountains.

Williamson's premise for *Birdland* included reflections on Charles Darwin's 1859 'Origin of the Species'³. She noted

This page: Tea with Mrs Ward: ceramic and moulded silver, Jacqueline Spedding. Photo Ona Janzen, Mt. Victoria Museum

Opposite: Tea with Mrs Ward: moulded bower bird call in silver, Jacqueline Spedding. Photo Ona Janzen, Mt. Victoria Museum

how Darwin's journey to Australia was a foundation to his theories of Natural Selection and that after his return to England, with a collection of species and illustrations, an era of increased travel began, in order to collect exotic creatures for exhibition and entertainment in the museums and homes of Europe. This consequently changed the way people viewed their relationship with companion species on their shared evolutionary pathway.

Williamson also noted that now in the era of the Anthropocene we are becoming increasingly aware of the impact the acceleration of industrialisation and development is having on the decline of every species but our own. Indeed, many artists, writers and filmmakers have been exploring this theme and related issues in recent years, and Williamson quoted Australian artist Hayden Fowler in relation to his motivation for producing such works: We are at a critical tipping point in extinction and loss of our ancient relationships and physical experience of nature particularly in the wild⁴.

In support of her premise to focus on the avian for the *Birdland* project Williamson quoted David Attenborough: *Everyone likes birds. What wild creature is more accessible to our eyes and ears, as close to us and everyone in the world, as universal as a bird*⁵.

Birdland invited a group of artists to research and develop works in response to ornithological collections held in the Blue Mountains and the observation of birds in the World Heritage Area. The project was funded from the Blue Mountains City of the Arts Trust Cultural Grants Program, and collaborations with Mount Victoria Museum and The Blue Mountains Heritage Centre (National Parks and Wildlife Service) which loaned its bird collection to the project. The Heritage Centre birds became the subjects of two drawing workshops facilitated by artist and National Art School teacher Pam Vaughan at The SLAB.

Birdland I ran throughout November 2019 at the Mount Victoria Museum. It was opened by Rebecca Dallwitz, Senior Object Conservator of the Australian National Maritime Museum and featured artworks by Brad Allen-Waters, Emma Rooney, Jacqueline Spedding and Pamela Vaughan. Their work responded not only to the *Birdland* project and the Museum's taxidermy collections, but also created a conversation with other items found in the Museum which is located in the 16-room heritage listed 1868 Mount Victoria Railway Station. *Birdland's* underlying theme was the collision course of the avian and human species; it left unanswered the question 'will museum displays be all we have left of these creatures?'

Brad Allen-Waters is a self-taught multidisciplinary artist working mainly with sculptural and light forms. *Containment 2* is the second work from a series of sculptural installations drawn from his time working across many disciplines and departments at the Australian Museum, particularly taxidermy and the conservation of the bird collections. This has given him an acute appreciation of the art of imbuing life and the complexities of infrastructure.

Containment 2, with its delicate Tawny Frogmouth skull connected to robotic-like structures encased in the clean lines of transparent rectangular prisms, is a powerful meditation on the meeting place between the fragile yet wondrous hollow-boned creatures of the air and the catastrophic effects of human-centred activity.

Everyone likes birds. What wild creature is more accessible to our eyes and ears, as close to us and everyone in the world, as universal as a bird.
David Attenborough

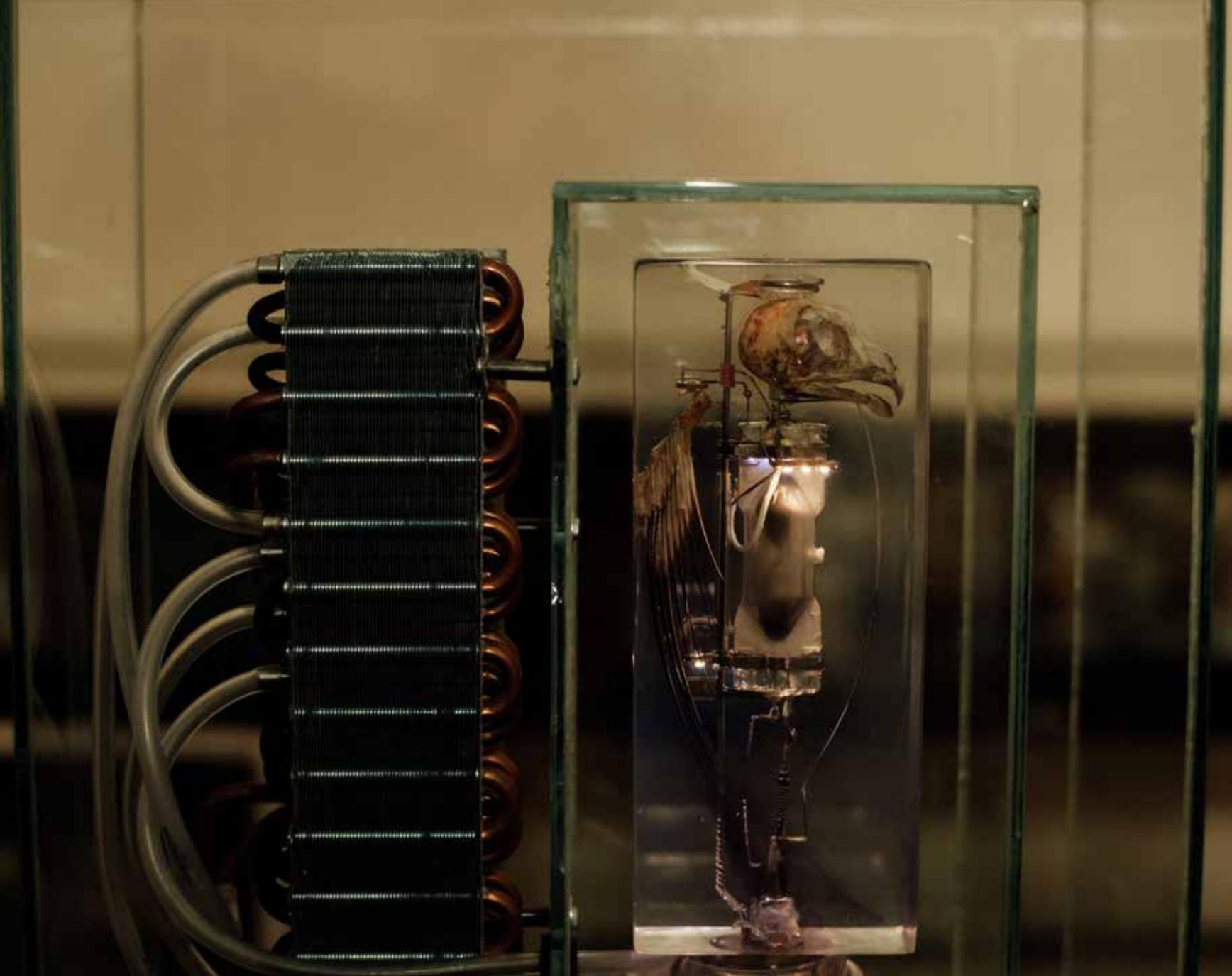
The work explores themes including evolution, extinction, ecological management, climate change and control. The presence of feathers, usually a sign of flight and freedom, is tainted by their frantic, mechanically driven and restricted movements. Dim lighting and the accompanying eerie creaking, cracking sounds made by slow glacial movements, the sounds of ancient structures as they move towards disintegration, all contribute towards *Containment 2* operating as 'a metaphorical warning beacon, a graft of ecology and twentieth-century industry and commerce, a prison of malfeasance contained and never forgotten'.

The display of *Containment 2* in the Museum's room of now outdated and sometimes barbaric-looking medical technology underscored the harshness illustrated in this work. Allen-Waters acknowledged the contribution of artist Damian Castaldi for the Arduino build and programming in this piece.

Artist and educator Emma Rooney's *Birdlandia* displayed her experience in creating for site specific installations across a range of artforms. Her love of birds, especially in their natural habitat, and her sad awareness of the mass extinction of bird species, was potently conveyed in the various components of her installation as they conversed with the surrounding museum displays of lifeless specimens, there only as items of curiosity and wonder.

The bird net, created from smaller hair nets, reverberated with multilayered meaning – a veil, fascination, a softener,





protector; a trap. Arrows made from typewriter ribbon and feathers, piercing unread books, spoke of ongoing and devastating practices, writing a dialogue of death and wilful ignorance. They denoted writing and recording as an act of hunting, the complexity and interchangeable nature of the hunter and the hunted, intention, inaccuracy and limitation.

Rooney's field recordings conveyed exquisite bird songs, resonating with poignance – a once live soundscape now fragmented, dislocated and decontextualized. Her engaging watercolour waveform paintings, translations of the sound recordings, were similarly double-edged, offset by their

This page:

Containment - Glass, bird bones, resin, LED lighting Brad Allen-Waters Photo Ona Janzen, Mt. Victoria Museum

Opposite Top:

Containment by Brad Allen-Waters. Photo Alex Gooding.

Below: *Birdlandia* - Arrows feather typewriter ribbons and lily stalks Emma Rooney. Photo Ona Jansen, Mt. Victoria Museum

referencing medical technology's heart monitors used in situations of concern for wellbeing.

Similar meanings were received from beautifully observed drawings displayed behind glass, amongst other interesting but obsolete museological items. Finally, the initial experience of the great beauty of bird flight and sounds in her digital video was also disrupted as she slowed down the speed. The call of the Black Cockatoo - reminiscent of a prehistoric creature – was powerful as it sounded out through the Museum but portentous in its implication of birds becoming creatures of the past.

Ceramicist and former museum worker Jacqueline Spedding's *Tea with Mrs Ward* celebrated the cabinet of curiosities. The precursor to our modern museums, the Wunderkammer is a piece of furniture displaying natural specimens, artefacts and objects. Its aim was not to vulgarly provide too much information, but just enough

to be educational, and entertaining. Mount Victoria Museum is the ultimate Wunderkammer; where exotic bird specimens and refreshment paraphernalia coexist in one room. Much of the Museum's bird collections belonged to Melbourne Ward, a naturalist and also an actor. To take tea in Mrs Ward's day was a performance in civility. However, *Tea with Mrs Ward* subverted a tradition of china decorated with bird motifs, a tradition attempting to civilise wild things, to keep them palatable and under control. Beautiful in detail but tragic in subject, the installation included settings of teacups, saucers and plates decorated with images of the remains of a satin bowerbird accompanied by souvenir-style teaspoons cast from her clawed foot.

In contrast, Melbourne Ward's birds are stripped of any sign of their moment of death, their empty skins arranged for spectacle. They exist locked in dusty cabinets oceans away from anyone who knows anything of their living behaviour or habitat. Conversely, Blue Mountains residents are familiar with satin bowerbirds – wild, sharp clawed, luminous purple eyes, gravelly calls, darting about eating fruit, flowers and seeds. They fall prey to cats, dogs and foxes, their bloodied remains sad reminders of their once vibrant life. Spedding acknowledged the expertise of Stuart Humphries, Claire Tennant, Pure Casting, Valerie Odewahn and Decal Specialists, all of whom assisted in the production of this work.

Pam Vaughan's mixed media drawings of Wood Ducks and Magpies recorded her conversation and connection with her subjects, in particular their 'aliveness' – an ongoing investigation in her practice.

For Vaughan, being alive is more than being a particular size and shape. It encompasses movement, thoughts, emotions, energy, behaviours, personality and agency. She employs a range of ways of seeing in her drawing - her eyes and analytical left brain, as well as her other sensory mechanisms, including a whole-body intelligence and way of perceiving. This approach is influenced by research in a range of fields including art, philosophy and spirituality, together with her experience of yoga and mindfulness. Vaughan enjoys contemporary subatomic physics research which explains that everything is alive, interconnected, is energy, and is in motion.

Asked how working with taxidermy lines up with exploring the 'aliveness' of her subject matter, Vaughan says her process also involves spending time around and drawing breathing, animate creatures, allowing her to converse with their wider range of characteristics. She uses taxidermy specimens or photographs simply as tools to remind her of the experience of being with the biologically ticking creature, not as something to be meticulously copied.



Vaughan's drawings in this exhibition, through their mark-making and gestural line, conveyed the vitality and presence of the living birds, while the effect of her tonal palette referenced black and white photography and things past, reinforcing the intentional placement of these drawings next to the Museum's motionless specimens, once more raising the spectre of the living species' fading presence.

While differing in approach, the work of these four artists, displayed in dialogue with the collections in the Mount Victoria Museum, stands firmly in a movement of those who are raising the red flag in relation to the ruinous impact of humans on the environment and its non-human inhabitants.

Jacqueline Spedding in her artist statement put into words the collective hope of this group:

The days of separating ourselves from nature are over. We coexist in a complex web of interdependencies and need to turn our urgent attention to protecting our shared environment from the increasing harm of human activity.

Birdland II

Between the first and second *Birdland* exhibitions the devastating 2019-20 bushfire season reached its peak. Millions of hectares incinerated, an estimated one billion animals perished, 80% of the Blue Mountains National Park blackened. The fires burnt literally to the doorstep of the Blue Mountains Heritage Centre in Blackheath, the location of *Birdland II*.

Below: *Birdlandia* watercolour Bird-call Oscillations, Emma Rooney. Photo Alex Gooding

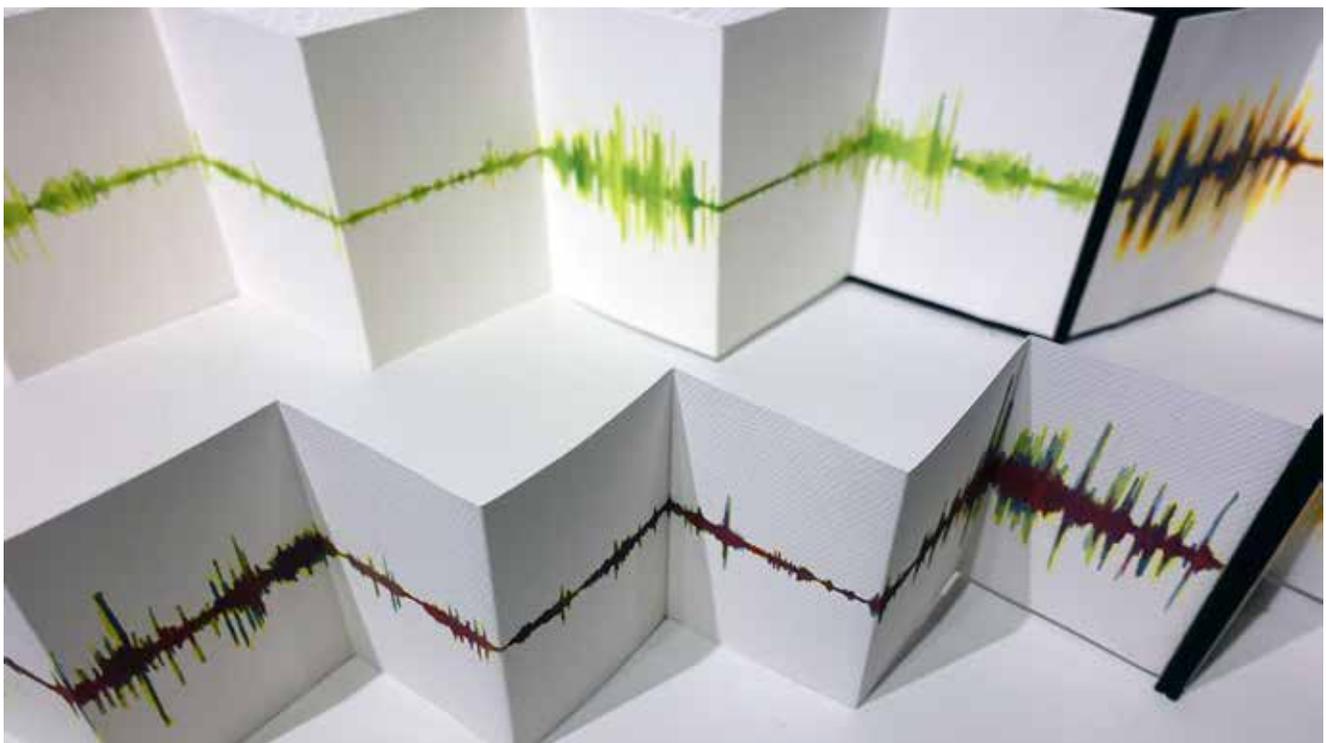
The urgency of the themes explored in this project sprang even more powerfully into life. As a result of a traumatised community and artists reaching out, this second exhibition accepted participants from across the community who wanted to respond to the project's premise. In addition to work by the *Birdland I* artists, work was exhibited by Anne Bowman, Monika Viktoria Diak, Kelcie Bryant Duguid, John French, Jody Graham, Tim Jones, Amber King, Jess Leffley, Denise Lithgow, Freia Noss, Sean O'Keefe, Julie Paterson, Fiona Vaughan and April White.

Birdland II was opened on February 8, 2020 by Trish Doyle, Member for the Blue Mountains, on a weekend when welcome rain finally arrived in torrents. The gallery space was full to capacity, with the celebratory feel of a community coming together after an ordeal. The artwork across many forms included visual and written reflections on aspects of the fire season, work made by charcoal from the bushfires, work from *Birdland I*, drawings created in the *Birdland* workshops, sculptures, photographs, fabric work and paintings. *Birdland II* stood as a memorial to birdlife lost and also as a symbol of hope that the trees, plants, birds and other wildlife will return.

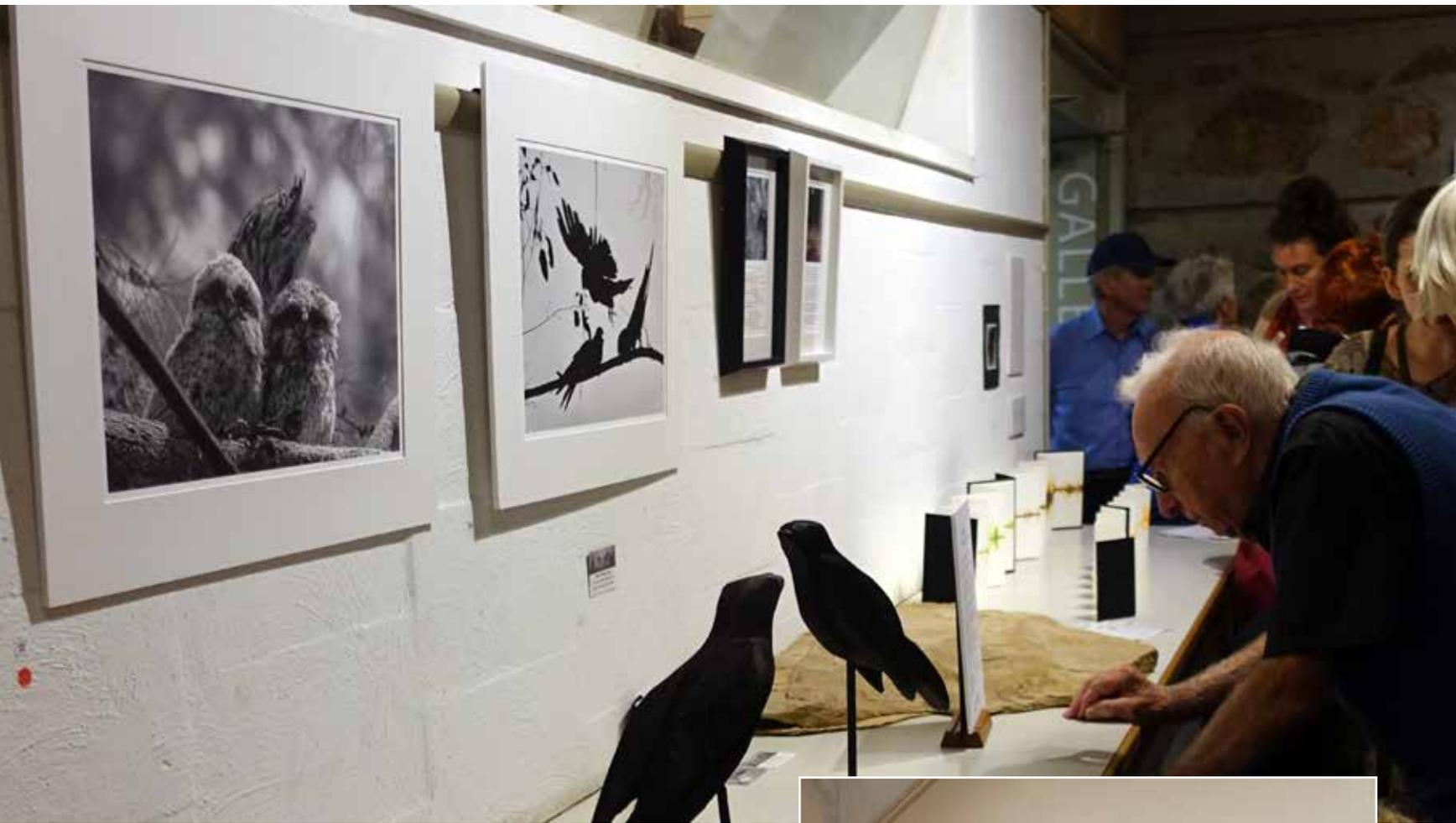
Pamela Vaughan

Footnotes:

- 1 www.thealtitudeproject.com
- 2 www.theslab.net.au
- 3 Darwin, C. On the Origin of the Species [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Origin_of_Species_\(1859\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Origin_of_Species_(1859)) Accessed 13/06/2020
- 4 Artlink Issue 38:1 2018 Considering the animals Editorial pg. 7 Artlink SA Australia
- 5 <https://www.pbs.org/lifeofbirds/sirdavid/index.html> (accessed 18/03/2020)



OR



Above: *Birdland II* NPWS Exhibition. Tawny frogmouths, Amber King. Photo Alex Gooding.
 Below Drawings from the NPWS Bird Collection Workshop Artist Tim Jones. Photo Alex Gooding
 Right: Charcoal and pastel on paper & mixed media drawings, Pam Vaughan. Photo Ona Jansen, Mt. Victoria Museum

