

Extinction Studies(d)

‘I would like art to save things that are in danger of disappearing’

Frank Auerbach

Lucienne Rickard embodies the idea that art is work. It is devotion and dedication. Hands blackened from pencil carbon, shavings accumulating at her feet, she has worked in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) foyer for 16 months, meticulously drawing 39 extinct (or near extinct) species from the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Taking to heart Iggy Pop’s TED-talk advice to never be stingy, each drawing is precise to the point of being scientific. Then, at the completion of each study, she erases the drawing, again in front of an audience, and it is impossible to not be moved by the symbolic act. Some members of the public cry, or protest the waste, the loss, which is, of course, the point.

The idea of drawing and erasure mirrors that of evolution and extinction. Each drawing occurs on paper carrying the grey shades of

the drawings before it, like a fossil memory. Three of the species chosen were/are Tasmanian.

‘The more I invested in each drawing, the higher the stakes when I finally erased it,’ Rickard said at the final erasure on January 24 this year. That drawing was of a swift parrot, not yet extinct, but with only 300 individuals left in the wild, the species is at serious risk of disappearing.

Amanda Davies’ arresting portraits of Rickard for the 2021 Disappearing exhibition at Bett Gallery capture the intensity of the work. *H.O.L. 2021 (after Auerbach) Head of Lucienne* captures something too of the bird featured in Rickard’s last drawing, a dab of orange on the neck, a region associated with the throat chakra, which represents speaking truth and listening, Amanda explains.

It is an idea that rings true. At our first meeting at the museum, Rickard told me Extinction Studies was all about the conversations she was having with passers-by.

‘It’s a bit like working in hospitality,’ she said. But she welcomes the constant interruptions and the connections, the opportunity to teach

people the stories of the species she was drawing and the threats to them from habitat loss.

Davies' striking depictions of Rickard's darkened hands (*Hands of Lucienne*) also evoke the idea of disappearance. Rickard's hands are hidden behind layers of pencil 'lead', evidence of the 1920 hours Lucienne spent drawing during her latest exhibition. In Davies' portraits, there are shades of Richard Flanagan's *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, where a character's body parts disappear one by one, yet no one seems to notice, a metaphor too for species loss. The portraits are even more poignant with the knowledge that Rickard was recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which she describes as a disappearing of certain parts of the body. It was this diagnosis, and the urgency to do a big project now, that was the impetus for Extinction Studies.

And Rickard's own response to her work and its themes? At the start she was angry at the loss of species, but she says, 'It had to become about something more than anger. It became a celebration of the incredible life that is around us.'

‘I’m still bloody angry, but the more time I had with each drawing, all the species were just so seductive. And regular people are generally sympathetic (to the need to protect species).’

Davies pointed me in the direction of German artist Frank Auerbach, whose own dedication and self sacrifice to his work has been noted by critics and whose self reflection shares more than a little in common with Rickard. In response to a critic’s question about his devotion to his art Auerbach replied, ‘In the first place, the world is very interesting, life is interesting and seems an unearned gift; perhaps one wants to give something back.’

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Sources:

Lampert, Catherine. Frank Auerbach: Speaking and Painting, Thames and Hudson, 2019 p 162-63.