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The Art of Refusal

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Summary:

Artist Lucienne Rickard and partner writer Keely Jobe have created a collaborative project around the Christmas Island Pipistrelle, a small Australian bat that was recorded as extinct in 2009. Keely wrote a non-fiction piece about the Pipistrelle in response to Lucienne's drawing, with Lucienne then drawing in response to Keely's writing.

Author bio:

Keely Jobe is a writer and PhD candidate living in nipaluna (Hobart). Her writing is heavily influenced by ecofeminism and queer ecology.

Lucienne Rickard is a Tasmanian artist who has worked exclusively in the medium of drawing for the past 10 years. Her recent focus has been on environmental issues.

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THE ART OF REFUSAL

Artist Lucienne Rickards and partner writer Keely Jobe have created a collaborative project around the Christmas Island Pipistrelle, a small Australian bat that was recorded as extinct in 2009. Keely wrote a non-fiction piece about the Pipistrelle in response to Lucienne's drawing, with Lucienne then drawing in response to Keely's writing.

"On a surface level, I'm writing about the ways in which Lu's project Extinction Studies has seeped into our household. I use Lu's revisiting of the Christmas Island Pipistrelle as an example of this. On a deeper level, this piece is about penance (from the artist's perspective) and refusal (from the species). Lu has come to see the process of laborious, highly invested drawing, followed by erasure, as an act of penance for the lost species. She has also noticed that the species she is drawing, often finds ways to refuse this act of penance, and that this refusal points to a final or posthumous instance of agency. I then look at other examples of this refusal/agency." Keely Jobe

The Art of Refusal is the written component of this process, and will be joined by Lucienne's artwork in mid-May 2020. Even though this piece is situated in the Indian Ocean, it grapples so powerfully with some of the central concerns of The Living Archive that we felt compelled to include it here.

"You'd think extinction would be a straightforward topic. I mean, a full stop is pretty straightforward. But sometimes I feel like I'm being too intrusive."

Lucienne is in the sunroom of our house, leaning over a piece of paper, making minute marks with a 9B graphite pencil. She's drawing a Christmas Island Pipistrelle for the second time, a thumb-sized insectivorous bat endemic to Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean. The pipistrelle is mostly wings, but it also has large elfin ears with delicate veins and folds, eyes like ball-bearings, a slight snub nose, and fur that sits stiff like a toupee. It is miniscule. Small enough to pop in your pocket.

Scientists recorded this flying mammal's abrupt end in 2009 in what has become a legendary story of extinction. On August 26th, Dr Rupert Baker was tracking the echolocation of the last pipistrelle on the island, unaware of its ominous ranking. At that time a captive breeding program was still the aim, or the hope, so they

had nets in place to catch this individual. They were still not entirely certain what had caused the once abundant population to decline, but it happened very rapidly, over the space of twenty years.

There were some likely culprits. Disturbance at roost sites. Disease. The introduction of incompatible species such as the common wolf snake, the giant centipede, black rats, feral cats or yellow crazy ants. One alarming theory was that the bats were dying of insecticide poisoning – there had been attempts on the island to control the increase in crazy ants and the methods would have been devastating to an animal subsisting entirely on insects.

Dr Baker watched through night-vision goggles as this last bat flew towards the net, only to do an about-face at the last moment and fly away. Soon after, the bat's echolocation stopped. It didn't start again.

Lucienne glances at an enlarged photo of the bat on her computer screen.

“How do I get these wings right? The skin is so thin here it's translucent.”

“What happens if you get it wrong?”

“Then I haven't paid enough attention.”

Later, she finishes the wing and it really is stunning – a web of sinew that you could almost touch. She has, in fact, managed to do what I thought improbable, she has captured the fragility of the membrane. It might feel like parachute material, this part of the wing, or *Cling Wrap*.

Still, despite her considerable talent, Lucienne hasn't managed to bridge the gap. Yes, her drawing is beautiful, and yes, it helps me grieve for the loss of this creature, leads me with a gentle hand to the fact and the tragedy of its disappearance. But it's not the real thing.

“It's just a drawing,” she admits.



This isn't the first time Lu has drawn the Christmas Island Pipistrelle. In September 2019 she began a year-long project at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) called *Extinction Studies*. For one year she would draw recently listed extinct animals or plants. When each drawing was complete, she would reach for her eraser without so much as an admiring pause, and swipe at the drawing until it was gone. The plan was to use the same sheet of paper for the entire project, laying each species over the ghosts of those that came before.

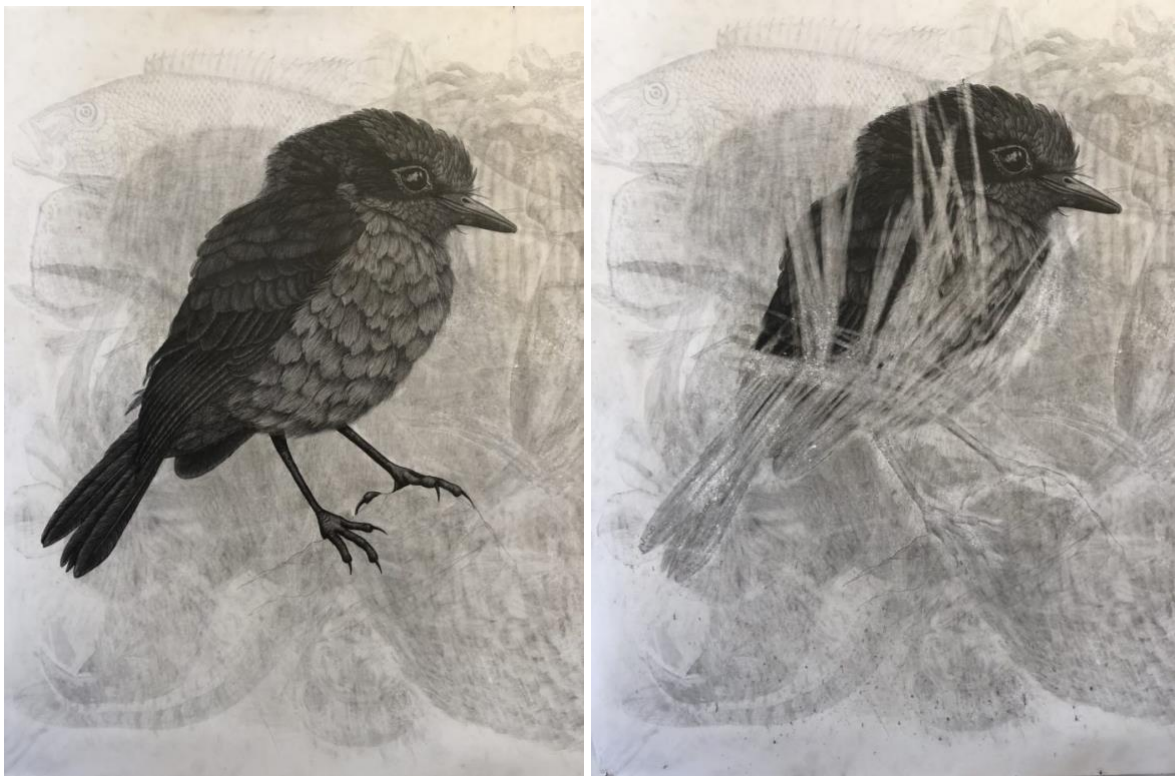
Lu's drawing style has always been meticulous (a reviewer once described her preoccupation with detail as 'monkish'), and the investment in this project was to be no different. Each drawing would be slogged-out over days or even weeks. In this time, Lu would get to know the species she was drawing – the circumstances

of their decline, certainly, but other things too. How their bodies moved through the world, how they raised their offspring, how they communicated, mated, charmed, deceived. She would find the story of their evolution. Their duration and adaptation, their varied and voracious becomings.

And then they would be gone. Days of work erased in minutes, leaving only the faintest trace on the paper and a dispersion of eraser shavings on the floor. Lu refused to clean up this mess, and as the months wore on, the shavings gathered around her boots like drifts of dirty snow.

In early October, Lu drew the pipistrelle for the first time. It took her five days to complete and around five minutes to erase. In March, she took *Extinction Studies* to the Sydney Biennale. By that time, the vast smudge of spectres had worried the paper thin and the bat was buried beneath the added layers of loss.

Days after Lu returned from Sydney, TMAG, along with the rest of the city, shut its doors as the impact of Covid-19 finally crossed the Bass Strait.



In isolation, Lucienne continues her practice without an audience. I don't ask why she's revisiting the Christmas Island Pipistrelle. I know that some species haunt her more than others. This second bat is smaller than the first and even more detailed. She has time for more detail now.

She asks if I mind that the project continues from our home. Of course, I don't, and in any case, the project had seeped into our house long before the virus struck. We yell at the telly more than we used to. We spend more time in the garden and in the bush. We scan the sky for birds and seek out small crawling things on the ground, naming them when we can and looking them up when we can't.

Sometimes, when we're going to sleep, we hear that little bat flapping around the room.

I find the final recording of its echolocation online. The signal is jubilant; a sharp, jumpy clicking, like something frantic you might hear in a nightclub on Oxford Street but more complex, less predictable. It's a marvel to me, this language quite literally shaped by the world. It is a trace of the present, at once reaffirming the individual and its place in the world, endlessly locating the body and its surroundings. It's as if the pipistrelle speaks and the world answers.

I am here.

You are here.

Our language doesn't work like that. It only goes in one direction.

Ten seconds into the recording, the silence hits. It's so precipitous, arrives so abruptly that it feels violent somehow and I lose my breath. It's an awful sound, that silence. Really awful. I listen to the recording again and again, and the silence is so much worse than the way it has been described in news articles. *An irretrievable failure. A bat's end. The final nail in a coffin. Too late to save.* Such insufficient words against that resounding silence.

I wish I had known this animal before it disappeared, but it was already gone when I first laid eyes on it. There are remnants, of course, pixels and soundbites. But they are like our language. They only go in one direction.

After dinner I hear a sound like a washing-machine coming from the sunroom. Lu has abandoned the eraser and is rubbing circles into the drawing with her index finger, making a mark like a blackhole on the wing. It's not a pretty mark, but it's not meant to be.

"You're going to rub the skin off if you keep doing that," I say.

"I'll switch fingers," she says with a smile.

Later, she takes sandpaper to the drawing, but soon comes into the living room looking dejected.

“It’s fucked. I fucked it.”

When Lucienne was dreaming up *Extinction Studies*, she became fixated on the idea of *pentimento*, a visual art term deriving from the word *repentance*. *Pentimento* refers to the part of a painting that’s been covered over by a later painting, and specifically to the re-emergence of that sublayer. The word literally means a *correction*.

Certainly, the suggestion of ritualistic penance was a drawcard when dealing with the topic of extinction; an ethical approach to stories and bodies marked by colonial and capitalist exploitation. That she would have nothing to show for her work after a year of drawing also seemed appropriate; if *Extinction Studies* would, by connotation, criticise extractive economies and a market contingent on environmental degradation, breaking the artist’s contract seemed the only choice. So, for one year she would work and produce nothing saleable, she would create beautiful pieces only to destroy them. She would leave nothing for the commercial world.

In the weeks leading up to the opening of *Extinction Studies*, Lu bought erasers in bulk and began storing them around the house.

And then *pentimento* came to mean something more. Lucienne read that the artist Jean Michel Basquiat used the concept of *pentimento*, not to conceal work, but to draw the audience’s attention. By crossing-out (correcting) images or words on the canvas, he knew the eye would inevitably be drawn to them, would seek to reveal them. Basquiat recognised that his viewers were more interested in what was omitted than what was present.

“It’s like these animals and these plants that are no longer with us.” Lucienne says one day. “Would we pay them any attention if they hadn’t been crossed out?”

Sure enough, the audience at TMAG has been more provoked by the erasing of the drawings than the drawings themselves. Some get teary, some get snippy, some get defensive. A troubling number of visitors go out of their way to tell Lu she is doing the wrong thing by erasing her work. When they do, she politely suggests that they’re proving her point, that there’s a fine line between human

endeavour and human exceptionalism, and the latter is what got us into this mess to begin with.

Whether they get it, or they gripe, it's the act of erasing that prompts the greatest engagement.



Lu is on her third attempt and the pipistrelle will not cooperate. She only has a handful of grainy online photos to go by and there are parts of the little body she can't make out. I can see that she wants to turn the bat over, inspect it like a mango, because drawing the thing would be so much easier if she could feel its contours, its different textures, the soft spots, the hard spots, the bits that spring back. It's no use. There's only so far you can zoom in on an image before it blurs into obscurity.

A decade on and the bat continues to dodge the net.

"I just have to fill in the gaps. I'm never going to be entirely certain of what I'm looking at."

It's certainly not the first time we've seen this kind of refusal from lost species or those on the edge; conservationists regularly confront bratty behaviour from their beneficiaries.

Wood's hau kuahiwi, a small tree related to the hibiscus, was discovered in Hawaii in 1991. Only four plants were located and attempts to propagate failed when the flowers produced no fruit and the pollen was found to be unviable. It was declared extinct in 2016, only to be rediscovered in 2019 when three specimens were found, via drone, growing on the side of a cliff. They were out of reach. *The Cry Pansy*, a type of violet, became a rare species due to habitat loss and was consequently collected into extinction. When the plant disappeared from the wild, decades of human intervention couldn't bring it back. The plant simply refused to be cultivated. The *Yangtze Giant Softshell Turtle* is now functionally extinct after the last known female died during attempts to artificially inseminate her. *Aurochs*, the ancestors of domestic cattle, were hunted to extinction almost four hundred years ago and have since held off numerous attempts to be bred back. Results have thus far born little resemblance to the original. And the *Thylacine*, macabre emblem of Australia's most southern state, victim of a colonial campaign of eradication, continues to turn its back on any form of reparation we might offer. In the early 2000s, a de-extinction program funded by the Australian Museum was thwarted when DNA samples collected from a thylacine pup were found to be contaminated. This shouldn't have come as a surprise; countless curators had handled the specimen throughout its long period of confinement in what Hannah Stark describes as an "undesired and necessarily unreciprocated"(10) history of touch.

When the unusable DNA samples came back, I imagine that 150-year-old pup rolling over in her glass jar of alcohol and giving those researchers the finger.

Can we begrudge these last-ditch instances of plant and animal agency? I don't think so. Not when the circumstances of their extinction have yet to be remedied. Not when the allegiant habitats they relied on continue to be squandered.

What would have happened to that first test-tube thylacine? Did anyone actually think that through? Was it going to be released into old-growth forests that continue to be logged? Would it be free, or would its body and mind be retained by the group that funded its return, a living commodity of flesh and blood? Was it going to end up where its forebears did? Pacing tiny cages with concrete floors, gawked at, taunted with chunks of meat.

Ventures like this will continue to be proffered as penance, a better-late-than-never correction of past mistakes, complete with fine print at the bottom. Is it any wonder lost species refuse such an offer?

Lucienne is happily drawing again. She spent last night studying an image of the pipistrelle's skeleton and fell in love with a particular joint in the wing. The bones convening here would have been thick as toothpicks, and the animal was heavily dependent on them for its aerial acrobatics. On this day, the miracle of mammalian flight is the way back in.

She is becoming accustomed to the instabilities of engaging with extinction – that relentless play between welcoming-in and shutting-out. Sometimes she seems almost gleeful when the species she is working with turns its back on her and won't budge an inch. It's a reminder. She is not the one in control.

Lu stands back and looks at her work.

“Getting rid of this one is really going to sting.”

I think she feels that sting every time.

Early in the project, a young boy watched her erase a drawing and afterwards asked the most salient question to date. How does erasing a drawing help stop extinction?

I remember Lu fumbled for a second. The kid had a point. What was to be gained from the project? Why invest so much time in something that offered no return? Months on, she is resolved. The project works precisely because any notions of gain are off the table.

“We often think of extinction in those terms. How the loss of a species might affect our own lives, how saving it might ensure our own wellbeing. But the loss of a single species is a tragedy in its own right. Each species has its own innate value, entirely separate to the value we prescribe it. I think that's all the incentive this project needs. I can give these species some of my time. It's a small thing. And it's something they've run out of.”

Works Cited

Stark, Hannah. "The Cultural Politics of Mourning in the Era of Mass Extinction: Thylacine Specimen P762." *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 63, May 2018, pp. 65–79.

