

# 'Carked' it like a Cassowary

## SASI VICTOIRE

THE CASSOWARY, Australia's largest bird after the emu, is now relegated to the endangered species list upon suffering steady decline. The phrase 'dead as a dodo' may soon enter the Australian vernacular as 'carked it like a cassowary' to herald the extinction of another species. In the Far North Queensland region it is the flightless Southern cassowary (*Casuarius johnstonii*) that has become easy prey due to shrinking rainforest habitat and fragmentation. There is no doubt that the fault rests squarely on man-made development and population sprawl; our dominance as a species and destructive impact on nature.

Tourism brochures suggest that one has only to step into Far North Queensland to encounter this fragile umbrella species. The fact that few, if any, people actually sight this magnificent bird in its true habitat, away from sanctuaries and zoos, suggests that the shameless mythmaking has begun to take shape. Redundant road signage around Collins Avenue, Cairns, for instance, warns traffic that cassowaries may cross on that section of road. Only three broad cassowary populations remain in the Wet Tropics from Cooktown to the Paluma Range, and on Cape York two separate populations occur; one in the McIlwraith and Iron ranges, the other around Shelburne Bay.

*This is Cassowary Country* opened at the Cairns Regional Gallery to herald the cassowary's entry into the realm of modern mythmaking through art. All the notions elucidated above were enunciated by seven artists through a fine body of work that extended beyond pleasurable investigation to provide the audience with food for thought. The artists served as sirens with a common concern: to raise awareness of the endangerment of the cassowary.

Mythmaking is also alive in music, with songs by Christine Anu, and in contemporary Indigenous Dreamtime stories by Arone Meeks through his picture book for children, *Sisi and the Cassowary*. To add to the intrigue, the cassowary has unfairly gained the reputation of being dangerous with unsubstantiated stories and warnings about attacks on people and animals.

Hanging nervously in the air was the resounding question of the position humankind plays in the careless destruction of a species through power and domination. In their work these seven artists performed a valuable



Gerhard Hillman, *Bird Seed*, 2009, photomontage on canvas, 76 x 35cm. Image courtesy the artist. All images this article also courtesy Laurel McKenzie.

function, asserting the rights of the cassowary as a living creature, to be entitled to the same rights as man to survive. This exhibition also magnified the silence of a species unable to speak on its own behalf, or protect itself against the 'advance' of humanity.

A variety of visual devices were used in this exhibition; underlying each treatment was the questioning of the status of this bird teetering on the brink of destruction.

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Using diverse and innovative use of media, each artist unpacked their position through active involvement with and evocation of the subject matter.

Here it is relevant to examine the role mythmaking plays, as articulated by renowned early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski:

Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom ... These stories ... are to the natives a statement of a primeval, greater, and more relevant reality, by which the present life, facts and activities of mankind are determined, the knowledge of which supplies man with the motive for ritual and moral actions, as well as with indications as to how to perform them.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of this exhibition the cassowary functions as a myth beyond a fable, fiction, invention or illusion, and provides a basis to examine the cassowary's role. As a device, mythmaking is manipulated by humans in an attempt to appease our conscience, to protect and preserve a heritage that may be experiencing threat or loss. In our attempt to hold on to a memory, perhaps it serves a transformative function and can alert us to alter our habits.

Mollie Bosworth uses ceramics to explore the keystone relationship of the cassowary with its environment. She explores the range of plant food eaten by the cassowary and establishes the fragile balance using decals and other mark making techniques on delicate porcelain. Through exquisite text and specimen drawings on porcelain ware she convincingly establishes the role the cassowary plays in supporting the sustainable biodiversity of the forest. By eating whole fruit the cassowary distributes seeds in large scats and contributes to the survival of many rare rainforest species.

Susan Doherty's *This WAS Cassowary Country* uses recycled material to represent the cassowary's horn-like casques to bear witness to this majestic bird. An installation in the form of assemblage uses old recycled, utilitarian implements as reminders of the destruction of the forest. These succeed as subtle condemnation of man's role in the destruction through land clearing. She also asserts her personal choice to recycle, to reduce her own footprint in the fragile landscape.

Barbara Dover's digital video, *Looking for Blue Arrow*, transports the audience into the site where loss is experienced. The sounds of the forests magnify the absence of the last cassowary called Blue Arrow (named after the walking path, the Blue Arrow) in Mt Whitfield. It was killed by two pet dogs in this enclave of rainforest surrounded by urban development. The audience is able to comprehend the amplified absence through the camera lens in Mt Whitfield Conservation Park, now a recreational site displaced by



TOP: Margaret Genever, *The Sacred Pecking Order* (detail), 2009, 33 x 48cm, mixed media drawing, digitally manipulated and printed; detail from column installation titled *Follies*. Image courtesy the artist; ABOVE: Susan Doherty, *This WAS Cassowary Country* (detail), 2009, installation with found materials. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Michael Marzik.

humans. The audacious invasion of the human feet of joggers in this former cassowary site, within sight of the redundant signage (still weaving the myth of its presence), highlights the attitude of exploitation and dominance.

Terry Eager evokes the element of chance in the survival of the species using a chess board game. The red and black glass pawns of houses and cassowary eggs are played out in the *Survival Game*. Eager also explores absence and presence through positive and negative glass representations of the cassowary head. Using recycled glass of computer monitors these pieces of cassowary head impart solidity, perhaps defiantly protesting the cassowary's right to exist as more than a memory.

Margaret Genever uses the column installation as a metaphorical device to link Rome's victory against the Dacians in the Trajan's Column (113AD) to the works on gallery pillars. She uses superb drawings, digital imagery and mixed media to establish that historical sources for our

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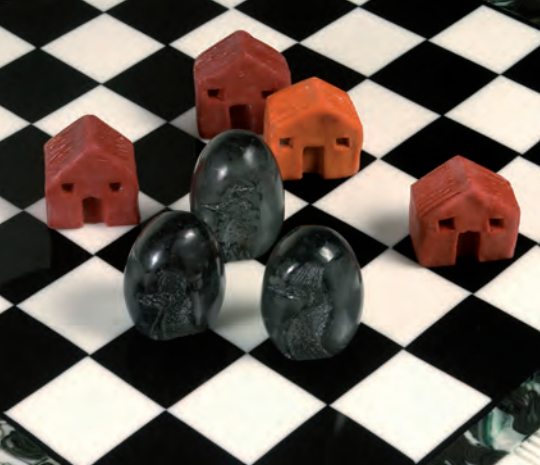


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TOP: Terry Eager, *Survival Game* (detail), 2009, fused and cast glass, 53 x 53 x 7cm; CENTRE: Susan Doherty, *This Was Cassowary Country* (detail), 2009, installation with found materials; ABOVE: Arone Raymond Meeks, *Cassowary Dream*, 2009, acrylic paint on canvas, 183 x 121cm. Images courtesy the artists. Photographs by Michael Marzik.

attitudes come from Western ideas of 'Human Exceptionalism' that ignores man's interconnectedness with nature. The works remind us that as a construct 'Human Exceptionalism' remains an important force in our culture, providing ideological conditions for inferiorising animals and for markets and property in animals, and is often behind resistance to sustainability thinking.<sup>2</sup>

This view resonates strongly in the work *The Sacred Pecking Order* where the humans foolishly triumph over lesser creatures to establish a hierarchical order. The drawings and installations draw on satirical humour in Genever's visual narratives to uncover man's arrogant dominance as a species.

Gerhard Hillmann in his composite photomontage directs the eye to the food source and the forest floor as environment to assert the precarious balance for the survival of this species. He draws on the research of the cassowary scats (droppings) to make his images which acknowledge the role cassowaries play in the biodiversity of the rainforest.

In recent times there have been grave environmental concerns held by Djiru traditional people and other rainforest tribes. The Giringun Aboriginal Corporation has attempted to protect the *goondoye* (cassowary) through educational films, and called for restrictions to development in habitat areas. These submissions are largely ineffective and numbers have declined drastically to severely impact the rainforest ecosystem.

Arone Meeks introduced the Aboriginal cultural significance of the cassowary in this exhibition, exploring human impact of progress on this species in large canvases of colour. Highlighting the plight of this magnificent bird can only serve to remind us to act now to enhance the quality of the environment and in turn our own lives.

Through the exhibition the artists used the cassowary as a device to initiate change for the greater good of the planet. However, there was an overwhelming sense of inevitability that permeated this exhibition with the cassowary acting as the proverbial 'canary in the mine'. The monumental impact of environmental destruction and the lack of man's resolve to turn this impending juggernaut around is a concern that stares the audience squarely in the eye. Following in the footsteps of other extinct animals this exhibition reminds us that the cassowary may only survive in a mythical form; that we need to exercise individual responsibility to protect the creatures in the world that live alongside us. Whether humanity listens in the face of short-term gain is debatable.

## Notes

1. Branislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, 1926; reprinted in *Magic, Science and Religion*, New York, 1955, pp. 101, 108.
2. Valerie Plumwood, 2007, 'Human Exceptionalism and the Limitations of animals: a review of Raimond Gaita's *The Philosopher's Dog*', *Australian Humanist Review*, Issue 42, August 2007; AHR is published by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL).

*This is Cassowary Country* was curated by Laurel McKenzie and exhibited at Cairns Regional Gallery 11 April to 24 May. The exhibition's seven participating artists – Mollie Bosworth, Susan Doherty, Barbara Dover, Terry Eager, Margaret Genever, Gerhard Hillmann and Arone Meeks – are members of the Kuranda Conservation Community Nursery which carries out research to identify and document the remaining cassowaries.

**Dr Sasi Victoire** came to Australia in 1970 and currently lives and works in Cairns, North Queensland. She has successfully coordinated many art projects and curated many art exhibitions throughout Australia and Internationally. She is a writer, exhibits widely, and works in education and in community arts development. [www.sasivictoire.com.au](http://www.sasivictoire.com.au)