

EYE OF THE CORVUS OPENING SPEECH: KIM V. GOLDSMITH
14 December 2019, Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo NSW

Thank you, Mayor Ben Shields, for your welcome, and Jessica Moore for your kind words. And thank you all for coming today, making this a truly memorable opening. I feel humbled by the number who have come this afternoon, and the many apologies received from those who couldn't make it.

I'd like to acknowledge we're standing on land steeped in the lives, stories, traditions and hopes of the Tubbah-gah people of the Wiradjuri Nation. Without the knowledge and wisdom of the elders of this Country - past, present, and future - we only have part of our collective story. A big thank you to Wiradjuri elder, Diane Riley-McNaboe for sharing just a small part of that with me for Eye of the Corvus and bringing my project full circle.

Eye of the Corvus is about survival and adaptation in the face of extinction and irreversible change - at a time when our world burns and melts away beneath our feet, our skies are choked with dust and smoke, and our political leaders dodge and weave around questions of responsibility, deriding and censoring narratives that don't fit the political rhetoric.

But we're all responsible and a lack of leadership at whatever level of Government doesn't mean we can't make changes that collectively have an impact. We all need to be held to account and question our behaviour, which is at the heart of great storytelling through the ages.

My muse for this immersive, visual story you're here to see today was Corvids - more specifically, the Australian Raven and the Common (European) Raven. This exhibition offers a contemplative window into their world.

Both species have co-evolved with us, weaving their way into our ancient and contemporary cultures. They're a spirit animal and symbol of cunning and evil, loved by the gods and often reviled by humans for the perceived impact they have on us.

I've spent two years studying corvids, but have a life-long fascination with them, having grown up on a farm north of Coonamble, where crows were considered a pest and subsequently dealt with, to a long-held interest in ancient history, Celtic and Norse mythology where the raven is a symbolic presence. I have my own murder of Australian Ravens at home who I've closely observed for more than a decade now.

When I was offered the opportunity to develop this exhibition on the back of my work in the national Artlands Festival in Dubbo three years ago, I had my chance to pay homage to these majestic, intelligent birds.

Eye of the Corvus has taken me across inland NSW and to the other side of the world.

My relationship and connection to rural and regional Australia is well documented over the past 30 years through my work in regional communications. My art practice of the past 20 years has been rooted in the issues of where I've chosen to live, my art exploring this territory in detail. I've often used birds in my practice for their role in science as an indicator species for the health of the environment.

But as you will see on the walls in this exhibition, there are images of a country almost as far away from Australia as you can get, a rural and remote country that fits into the Central West, West, and North West of NSW, three times over. Iceland. I spent 9 weeks there in September and October, in an artist residency in a village called Skagaströnd, on a remote northern peninsula four hours north of Reykjavik. With a population of 480, no public transport or car, I explored the town and surrounding country on foot, tracking the ravens.

In Iceland, the Common Raven is on the Threatened Species list. Human impact on the bird is the cause. In Australia, we have five species of ravens and crows, and overall, they're proving to be highly adaptable in the face of change. So, why does one species of raven struggle and another thrive? There are scientists more qualified than me to answer that question in a more direct way, some of whom I worked with in my research over the past two years - namely Professors Darryl Jones of Griffith University and Graham Martin of the University of Birmingham in the UK.

As an artist though, I made it my job to look at the world these ravens inhabit from their perspective; my research and observations informing how I used my cameras and sound recorders in the field. In truth, it was an almost impossible task and yes, there was a degree of creative licence applied in the post-production and installation. But my hope is that by immersing oneself in a landscape upon which we all have a heavy impact as producers and consumers, from the viewpoint of another species, it may spark a thought, a conversation, a small change that becomes bigger change. Anything is possible!

Some believe the loss of wild species would not be materially felt in the short term by any one of us. The disconnect from these losses happens because too few of us are personally impacted. But with that argument comes one that as moral beings, we have a moral obligation to ensure we co-exist with other species. We are, as many cultures with close connections to Country know, interconnected...and our futures are interconnected.

I'd like to wrap up by thanking those who have supported Eye of the Corvus over the past two years or more - in particular my family — Cameron and Georgia, who have long endured my follies, Alicia Leggett of Orana Arts and Andrew Glassop, formerly of the Western Plains Cultural Centre, who championed my work three years ago and continued to support my efforts to develop and fund the project, and my friends, fellow artists and extended family who are probably well and truly sick of hearing about the crows. I need to also thank my tech support, Adam Clark, for his willingness to work through the logistics of something new.

The fact I can stand here today and share my story of creating and exhibiting Eye of the Corvus doesn't just happen - it requires the support of those people I've just mentioned. Stories like mine, document the issues of our day, shape our sense of who we are, raise the difficult questions, and add colour and interest to our lives.

It's also an expensive thing to do at this level. I was fortunate to gain 46 generous donors of this project earlier this year through a crowdfunding campaign with the Australian Government's Australian Cultural Fund, many of whom are here today. Thank you! However, that support covered only 10% of my production costs. I funded the rest and was too terrified to even consider how much the hundreds of hours of my time were worth.

The Cultural Centre is run by Dubbo Regional Council, and it is only with their support that my project transformed into an exhibition. Big thanks to Kent Buchanan, Jessica Moore, Mariam Abboud and Phil Aitken, and other WPCC staff for their role over the past few months and weeks. This facility and its staff are one of this region's most treasured assets. And I must commend Dubbo Regional Council for seeking widespread community input for a 10-year Cultural Plan currently in the consultation stage, hopefully greatly expanding the scope of our cultural assets and creative talent.

Government support for the arts has never been more important and yet it has been undermined at all levels for years. Only this week it was announced the Arts would cease to be named within a Federal Department - instead becoming part of a department whose focus is essentially dedicated to infrastructure. Nationally, the arts are now invisible.

If you get the chance to support artists and the advocacy work of the arts sector, please do so. It's what makes projects like mine achievable.

I hope you enjoy Eye of the Corvus. Thank you for coming.

ENDS.