



EYE OF THE CORVUS

MESSENDER OF TRUTH



KIM V. GOLDSMITH





FOREWORD

Eye of the Corvus has been a project defined by extremes and the connections found within extremity. From the start, the juxtaposition between Iceland and Australia seems contrary and binary, a simple comparison that seems to revel in their opposition. But these regions and the lives lived there are united in their adaptability, resilience and innovation.

As an artist, Kim V Goldsmith has consistently been defined by her desire to push her practice and the limitations of regionality. She has remained steadfastly committed to the connections possible, despite isolation, and with this work gravitates towards a form of universality found in extremes. From the almost drought broken landscape of Dubbo to the melting glaciers of Skagaströnd, both communities are struggling to reconcile a new normal. It is profoundly human to find commonalities in such conditions and as is so often the way, it is the artists who show us our potential for connection.

Kim is an example of what regional arts should be, not art just made regionally, but art that questions and challenges regionality as a limitation, that sees in extremes the opportunity to be revelatory.

Jessica Moore
Cultural Development Coordinator
Dubbo Regional Council



CORVUS: MESSENGER OF TRUTH

What's at stake if we choose to see things differently?

Change. Humans don't tend to like change. We much prefer to mould and shape our world to suit, isolating ourselves from those things that are perhaps inconvenient truths.

Yet, we live in increasingly uncertain times of political instability, rapidly changing climates, diminishing food and water security, species loss, migration and war. Perhaps it's time for a new perspective. What we're doing is obviously not working. The issues are complex but perhaps looking at them through a different lens might facilitate a new paradigm.

Birds have long been used as an indicator species for the health of the environment, but some birds have not only given us insight into the natural world, they've also taken on great cultural significance through the ages — from the Australian Dreamtime and Norse Mythology to Game of Thrones — the muse of artists, writers, musicians and community story-tellers. Those birds are Corvids, known more commonly as ravens and crows. I've had a lifelong fascination with "crows" (as we called the Australian Raven), growing up with stories of their smarts and savagery.

So, what would our anthropogenic world look like from the perspective of these cunning, sagacious birds? They live in a world of our making but experience it in great detail and colour, with an extraordinary field of view we can only imagine. Their territory is traversed from the tops of trees to the edge of sea cliffs, skimming across mountain tussocks and coasting on the warm currents above dusty ploughed paddocks, using their intimate knowledge of the seasons, the landforms, the people and built structures just to survive.

Helping me enter the world of Corvids over the past two years were bird physiology, behaviour and ecology specialists Professors Darryl Jones (Griffith University, Brisbane) and Graham Martin (University of Birmingham, UK). They directed my reading, responded to my queries and questioned my objective of bringing the world of Corvids to the viewer in an immersive and spectacular way that invites questions about what we see and know of the world, in order that we might re-evaluate what we're doing to secure our future in it.

Eye of the Corvus was never about making ravens and crows the subject of my work. My observations of the birds and the research I undertook was to simply to inform how I used my cameras and sound recordings to capture the landscapes as the birds might experience them — sometimes this is uncomfortable to the human eye. These landscapes aren't pristine; they're harsh, stressed rural and remote lands of Australia and Iceland where the imprint of human life is evident; two places that couldn't be further apart on the map with obvious differences but so many more similarities. My love of regional Australia is well documented but my fascination with Iceland is bound in its culture, unique landscapes and the familiarity of small town rural life I know so well.

Australia and Iceland both have native Corvids. Both are struggling with environmental issues — from droughts to melting glaciers, dust storms to warming oceans. In Australia, our ravens and crows are fast adapting to change; in Iceland they're on the threatened species list. Humans keep changing the goal posts and for some the change is too rapid. Is the change going to be too rapid for us too?

I'd like to thank all those who thought these questions worth exploring — my family, friends, project donors who supported my Australian Cultural Fund fundraiser, fellow artists, the Western Plains Cultural Centre, Orana Arts Inc, Professor Darryl Jones, Professor Graham Martin, Dr Georgette Leah Burns, Kristinn H. Skarphéðinsson, the community of Skagaströnd, and Nes Artist Residency in Iceland.

Kim V. Goldsmith
October, 2019







CROWS KNOW

Crows are everywhere. There is nowhere in this vast, diverse continent – from the snow-covered mountains of Tasmania, to the seemingly lifeless stony deserts – where that guttural, other-worldly caw is not heard. They have learned to make a living in every possible landscape, probing among the seaweed on the beach or plucking berries from rainforest vines. Of course, these may all be different species of *Corvus* (the defining genus in the family of birds we know as 'Corvids', including ravens), but for many of us they are just the abysmal black birds with the harsh call. It's the quintessential sound of the bush, as well as the bitter soundtrack to drought and desolation. No matter what the conditions, crows can cope.

This group of matte-black birds are among the most successful in the world. At a time when many other species are in steady decline, the crows and ravens are expanding and multiplying. This is most spectacularly evident in the cities of the world where they have slowly but undeniably moved in, making the most of the foraging opportunities and exploring new ways to exploit the resources offered by the human-dominated landscape. Their invasion of "our" world has been by stealth and quiet persistence. Rather than the brash, conspicuous extroversion of the Rainbow Lorikeets or the 'good cop, bad cop' method of the Magpie, the corvids approach has been careful and strategic, learning, observing and taking very few risks. In the age of the Anthropocene, as humanity blunders blindly along, seemingly unaware of the dangers and threats we are bringing upon ourselves, the corvids seem content to watch and wait. They will certainly survive whatever is coming.

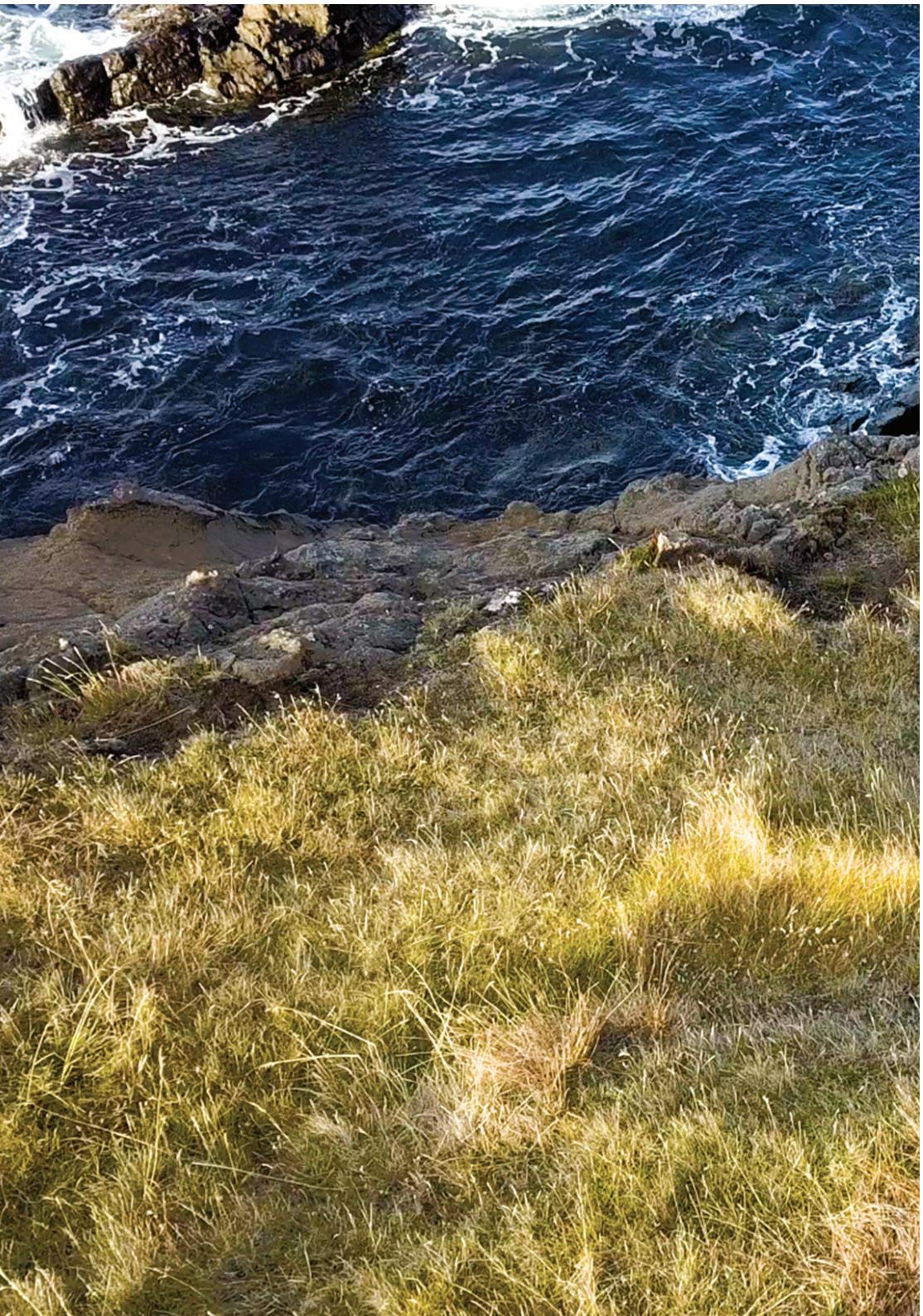
These mysterious, mischievous, modest and memorable birds are now known to be among the smartest of all animals. They have genuine language, culture, extraordinary memories, are able to plan and plot and anticipate. They teach and share their knowledge with family and clan members, and transfer ideas between groups in other places. Yet, these extraordinary animals continue to be treated with disdain, disgust and ignorance. They are seen as dangerous and disturbing, untrustworthy and possibly even evil. These attributes and attributions are almost universal, with crows and ravens long regarded as synonymous with death and danger: a murder of crows, a slaughter of ravens. We have transported these attitudes to Australia from many places in the world, leading to persecution and the perpetuation of endless negative concepts and myths. It's time to rethink these responses.

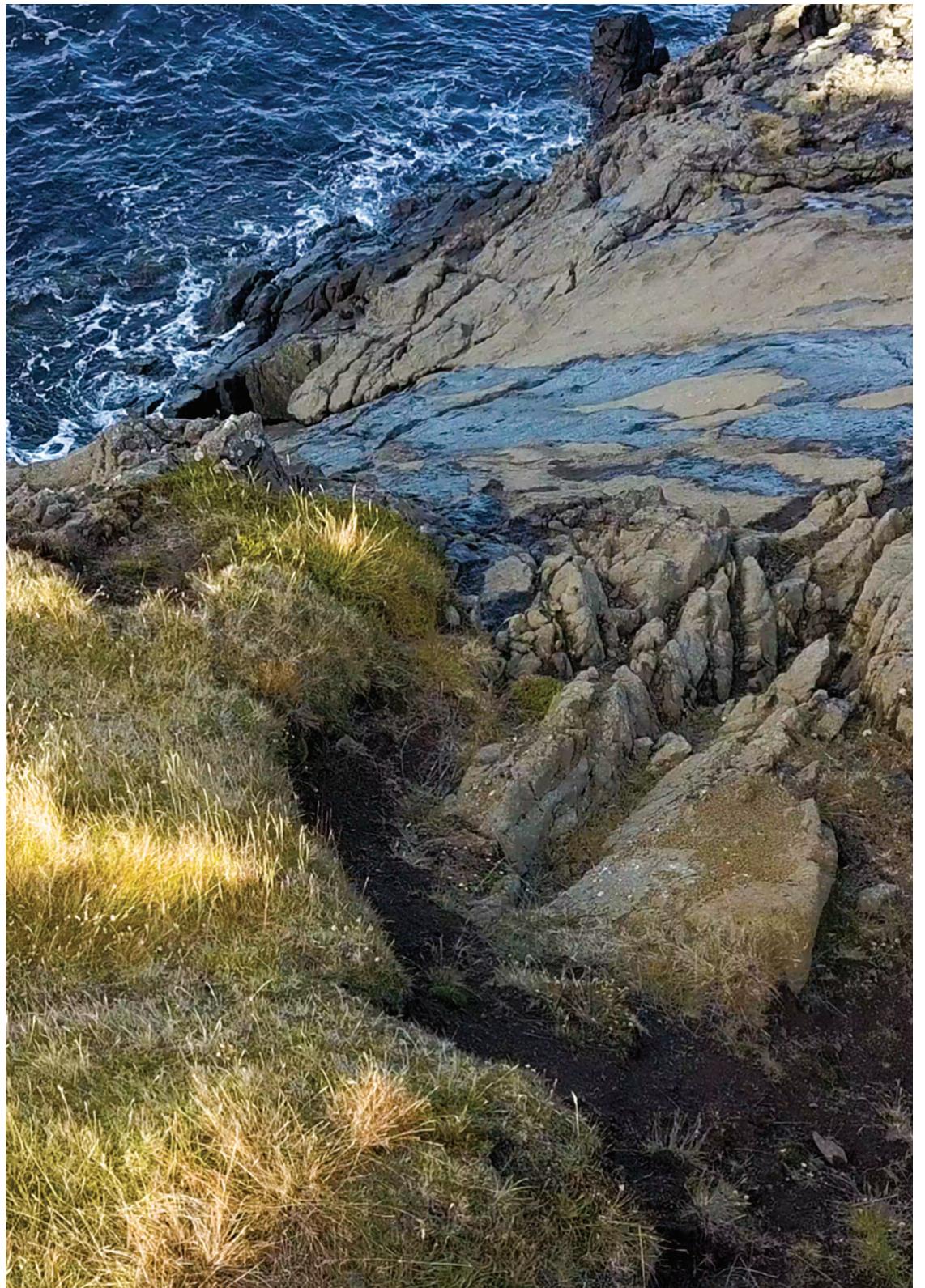
The crows of the world have certainly rethought their response to humans. From the frigid cliffs of Iceland to the jungles of Borneo, crows are constantly watching us. They recognise danger, fear and that pathetic destructive impulse when they see it, and sensibly keep their distance. But they also quickly see opportunities to engage and exploit when given the chance. They are constantly experimenting, observing and planning what next; they see the consequences of their actions. Do we?

We can see the advent of the Anthropocene – the current era that came about through the realisation that humans are now having an undeniably global influence – as vindication of our natural superiority, an acknowledgment of our singular success in the struggle for life on this planet. Or, we could accept the reality that the cumulative effect of our activities now endangers all of life and that it is time to take a long hard look at where we are and where we are headed. This will be no easy task, especially as a key proposition of the human manifesto proclaims our right to run things as we like, as though nature itself was a separate concept or possibly a redundant historical perspective. This "right" is rapidly becoming a fright, as we ignore our actual place in the intricacies of global interactions. The reality is that we are now, and have always been, simply a "part" of nature. Not separate or superior, a component, and that nature's future will determine our own.

Let's look at crows – commonplace, familiar, unlikeable – in a different light. They are witnesses to our follies and triumphs and yet cast no judgments. They don't need to; they know.

Professor Darryl Jones
Griffith University, Queensland





KIM V. GOLDSMITH

Kim V. Goldsmith's digital media and installation practice draws on her life on the Western Plains of NSW, where she also grew up. Her professional life as a journalist, farmer, communications specialist and artist is informed and sustained by her deep love for the land and the life forms that depend upon it. Her art practice of the past two decades has consistently explored human relationships with the environment, often using native birds as her muse.

Eye of the Corvus: Messenger of Truth, 2018-19
4-channel 4k video with multi-channel sound and VR
Courtesy of the artist.

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IMAGES

Cover: **Eye of the Corvus: Messenger of Truth (detail), 2019,**
digital photograph

- I. **Dust storm, Dubbo, Australia**
- II. **Dead tree, Coonamble, Australia**
- III. **Snow storm, Skagaströnd, Iceland**
- IV. **Sea cliffs, Spákonufellshöfði, Iceland**
4k video stills

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