

# Art Speak.

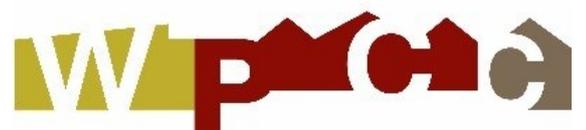
With the **Western Plains Cultural Centre.**

The prime collecting theme for the gallery is **The Animal in Art**. This is inspired by the Gallery's rural location and its proximity to the Taronga Western Plains Zoo. The Animal in Art seeks to examine issues surrounding the representation of animals in the Visual Arts.

The Animal has been used extensively as a **symbol, trophy, object and metaphor**. The permanent collection tackles some of the wider possibilities of this rationale through works that use the animal as a means of expression whether in a literal or metaphoric way.

Please enjoy these dialogues on artwork selected from our permanent collection.

WESTERN PLAINS CULTURAL CENTRE



# John Reid.



A naked figure, lying as if road kill on the side of the road. This was a sight that was presented to the occupants of 25 passing vehicles 50 km's outside of Dubbo in July 1989.

**John Reid** went to university originally to study Geology or Forestry. Instead, he became a visual artist focusing on the impact of European occupation of this land, the situation of the indigenous peoples and the environmental impacts of agricultural and pastoral development. Reid also taught at the Canberra School of Art where he would push students to consider inspiration for artwork in places beyond the studio. Reid would tell them that the world was hungry for powerful visual imagery and that the arts can speak to the emotions as well as the intellect.

*Performance for 25 Passing Vehicles*, purchased in 1995, is a work in two parts. The first part was the performance itself conducted at the side of the road. This image, a dynamic work in itself, is essentially the documentation of that performance Reid did as he travelled from Dubbo back to his home in Canberra. He had stopped overnight at Dubbo as he travelled back home from conducting fieldwork in the in the Sturt National Park.

"I had resolved to do a work that addressed the impact of European culture in Australia by referencing the roadside slaughter of kangaroos by passing vehicles. My thinking had developed to the point where I had planned to lie down beside a dead animal and compose an image for the camera."

# John Reid.

The location was chosen as Reid drove by. Passing the site, he was struck by the allegorical potential the elements in the scene offered. The edge of a busy highway, the road signs, the fence line with the pastures beyond, and the flora and fauna. As Reid turned his car around to return to this spot on the highway, his “**image for the camera**” developed into a performance piece with a timespan measured by passing vehicles. It was to be a performance for only a select few and was to last as long as it took 25 vehicles to pass by his naked body presented on the edge of the Newell Highway, mimicking that of a road kill kangaroo that lay just a few metres beyond.

The performance was to last approximately 18 minutes and its audience were those that passed by his motionless form in those vehicles, unsuspecting viewers of a performance work as they travelled along a rural highway. 25 was an arbitrary figure chosen by Reid as he undressed to take up his position on the edge of the highway at the opposite end of a road sign to a road kill kangaroo and of those vehicles, none were to stop to check on the well-being of either Reid or the kangaroo. The kangaroo of course, as with any wildlife road kill, is quickly passed on as not being unusual, as being a form of **collateral damage** to the processes of rural travel and an expected sight along the roads that cross the country. But the sight of a human form, naked and twisted, must surely generate questions. Why is he there, what has happened to him, what should I do in response, should I stop and render assistance? One’s personal safety must of course quickly come to mind, particularly if travelling alone on rural roads. Besides, someone else will stop, surely?

Here, Reid is presenting the idea of the dead animal as a casualty of our high-energy, high-speed, and at times careless lifestyle. That our fate, as was this kangaroos, is bound into the fate of others. This image shows our impact on the natural environment, but it also shows us how vulnerable nature is, and of existence. This is about the rural **Australian landscape** and the roads that track across it. Roads are part of our landscape, they are integral to our needs for travel and trade, but they have a consequence.

Outside of the field of view, on the opposite side of the road, was Reid’s VW beetle, his large format camera, and his family. Perhaps the sight of this collective looking on at his naked body, still and seemingly lifeless under the road sign posing with a dead kangaroo was enough to tell those that travelled past that all was ok and that this was art imitating life, or a ‘what the hell is he doing!’ response.

Interestingly, the black and white chevron beam that hangs above both figures, framing and reinforcing their connection to each other and to the roadside as **unfortunate victims**, is hanging upside down. In this instance however, the angles of the chevrons conveniently point to the gap between these two motionless figures, highlighting this space and making the image that much stronger. It is the story of the landscape, impacted by human intervention and the consequences that it brings. Reid brings these elements together in a powerful image that, as the advice he gave to his students, pitches to the emotions and to the intellect.

# George Lambert.



**George Washington Thomas Lambert** was born to an American father and an English mother in St Petersburg in 1873. Lambert's father was working as a railway engineer in St Petersburg at the time but was to die before Lambert was born. Soon after his birth the family moved to Germany and then to England where Lambert was educated. In 1887, at the age of 13 they migrated to Australia and with his mother and three sisters Lambert arrived at Eurobla, near Warren, a sheep station owned by his great uncle Robert Frith. By the time he was 14, Lambert was working as a shipping clerk in Sydney. During this time he attended night classes at the Art Society of New South Wales. After several years Lambert returned to the country and worked as a station hand for two years. This, and his initial experiences on the sheep station were to give Lambert an enduring love for rural themes. He then returned to Sydney and while working as a grocer's assistant by day his evenings would be spent attending art classes.

By the mid-1890s Lambert was exhibiting regularly with the Society of Artists in Sydney and contributing pen and ink illustrations and cartoons for *The Bulletin*, a political and economically focused magazine first published in 1890. In 1899 Lambert won the Wynne prize for his large landscape '**Across the Black Soil Plains**'. This large work is his best known bush image and depicts a team of draft horses pulling a wagon heavily laden with bales of wool. It is described as a heroic portrayal of bush life and recalls his days as a boy working as a station hand. It was acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and remains as part of their collection.

# George Lambert.



***The Firefighter.*** 1898

Oil on panel

Here at the WPCC we have 6 works by Lambert, paintings as well as pencil and ink works on paper. One of those is ***On the Black Soil Plains***, painted in 1899 prior to and thus considered as a study for his major work ***Across the Black Soil Plains***. This much smaller painting perhaps shows more of the all-pervasive sky out here in this vast pastoral landscape, a landscape that disappears into the horizon. The horse and wool wagon get but a small mention, a mere suggestion of human involvement in this intimate work that demonstrates the enormity of this region. As we take everything in, our focus on the horse dances down to the sheep, back the wool wagon and out into the spread of the landscape under a dramatic sky before being brought back to the horse once again. It is a small work, but it expresses well the harsh expanse and what it means to be in the middle of it all. We are but a small entity trying to make our mark.

***The Firefighter*** is another small but very expressive painting. Lambert's brushstrokes and his use of colour help convey the severity of the position the firefighter is



***Horse Feeding.***

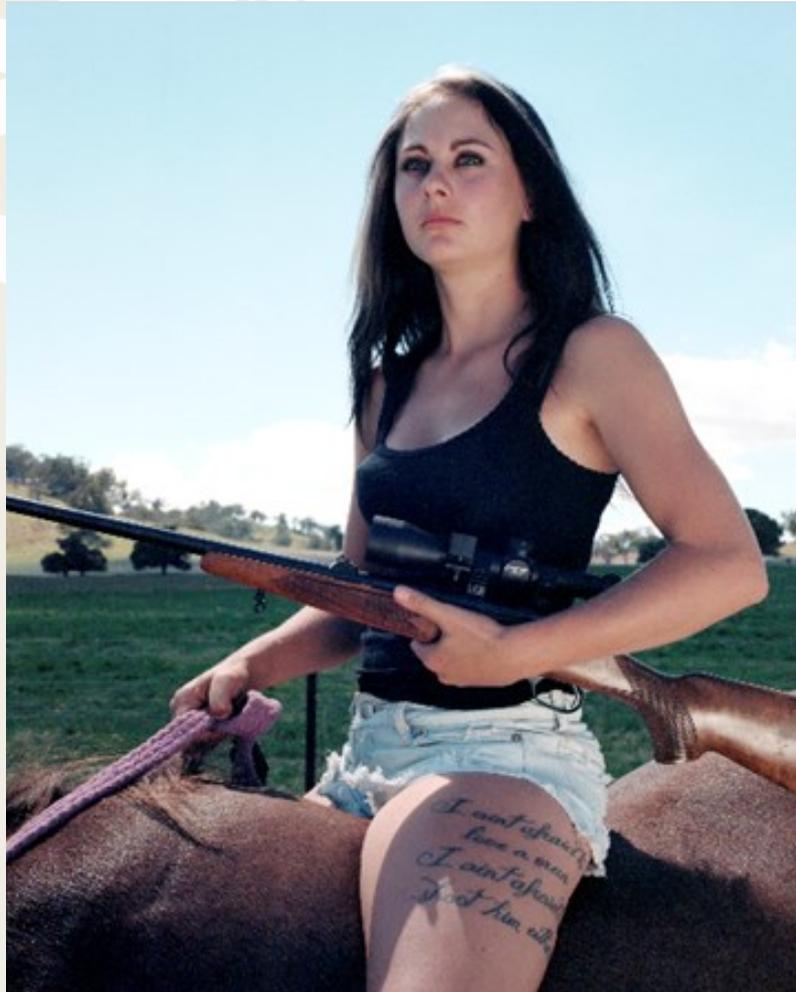
Pencil on paper.

in, adding to the drama of this work. It appears to be a futile and dangerous situation as he tackles a fire that looks to be ready to engulf all that is around him. There is an intensity to this work that shows courage and desperation. Once again Lambert is presenting the viewer with the realities of life in the bush as humanity battles nature, it can be immediate and urgent. The simple timber frame, rich in colour and finish adds to the work, keeping the focus inward and on the potency of the scene.

An undated pencil drawing ***Horse Feeding*** demonstrates Lambert's command of form and his control of media. From simple renderings in pencil to important and commanding works such as ***Across the Black Soil Plains*** Lambert captured a pivotal period in Australian history and Australian art. He was a portrait artist, a landscape artist and during the First World War, a war artist.

George Washington Lambert died at Cobbity in 1930.

# Emma Thomson.



*Rachel* 2013

Lambda Photographic Print

We look up at the subject, *Rachel*, as she looks back over our shoulder out to the horizon behind us, it is as if we are not here. This image is from a series of work entitled *Take Your Best Shot*. A series of work that Emma Thomson created during a residency here at the Western Plains Cultural Centre in 2013.

Thomson is a photographic and moving image artist based in Sydney. Her work challenges the nature of contemporary portraiture through her collaborative approach with the subjects and the themes that she explores. Thomson often uses classified adverts in local

newspapers to find her subjects, and the body of work that this image is from, was no exception. The outcomes of Thomson's work are collaborative portraits and as Thomson says, **"My interest is that they want to be photographed. . . I want them to be fully aware of the situation and let them perform for the camera."** The subjects are the women who responded to Thomson's 'Models Wanted' classified adverts and are not 'posed' by Thomson, these amateur models are encouraged to be who they are, and to present themselves as they want others to see them, in their environment.



# Emma Thomson.

Thomson hadn't worked with regional communities prior to coming to Dubbo and admits that she didn't know much about these areas having previously immersed herself in city and suburban environments. This residency gave Thomson the opportunity to examine **aspects of life** in rural New South Wales.

In this image, Rachel sits bareback on her horse, strong and perhaps also with a sense of defiance. She is casually dressed and appears comfortable in these surroundings. This is perhaps also demonstrated in the words of the tattoo which reads: "I ain't afraid to love a man, I ain't afraid to shoot him either". This is an agricultural or pastoral location, with a sparsely treed hill in the distance, a setting in which the **horse and gun are accepted**. They are part of the Australian rural context where young women also hunt feral animals, and it tells a story that is different to that of the historical images of the male pioneers, bushrangers and explorers. In the rural context, hunting is a shared culture, a reality that may be different to that which we are used to seeing.

In this image, nothing is completely in the frame. We are taken beyond what is captured by the lens but also brought in very close to the content of this image. There is a directness that we can't avoid. The attention, here and for the series, is on the female hunter in a rural context. It is a focus that challenges the stereotypical image of the recreational hunter and what we see in hunting magazines. But it is also about our historical

reliance on hunting, on land management practices, and the culling of feral animals as part of contemporary conservation and the balance of natural fauna and introduced species. It is about **our co-existence with animals and the rural landscape**.

But just the idea of this body of work, even before it was exhibited, was to provoke strong emotive responses from various members of the public. During her residency, as people and organisations became aware of what Thomson was working on, 4,000 people signed a petition denouncing the project. One voice mail message that Thomson received was so aggressive that the artist was compelled to report it to the police. There is no denying of course that the shooting of animals is a **sensitive topic**.

This image also references a tradition of portrait painting we might see in the grand houses of the aristocracy. **The landowner posing proudly in their landscape**. It is a presentation of the self, and how they want to be seen. Thomson plays the same game, handing much of the context of the work back to the subject. This is how the subjects wanted us to see them.

The residency was funded by Copyright Agency Limited and administered by Museums & Galleries New South Wales.

# Gail Naden.



*Totem* 2009

Digital Colour Print



*Protected Species* 2009

Digital Colour Print

**Gail Naden**, a descendent of the Wiradjuri/Weilwam and Gamilaraay groups, is based in Gilgandra, Western NSW. Naden is a painter, graphic designer and illustrator who has worked in the graphic arts/ printing industry for over twenty years and as a practicing artist for thirty five. She was a finalist in the Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Prize 2005 and 2006.

Naden's totem is the emu, exemplified in these two works. The emu is a species that is native to Australia and can be found throughout most of the Australian mainland. The emu is a figure that appears in many **Aboriginal Dreaming** stories. According to legend, the emu were creator spirits that used to fly and look over the land. These important animal totems were often represented as symbols on trees throughout Wiradjuri and Gamilaraay country as an acknowledgement of the continuous cycle of nature.

# Gail Naden.

***Totem***, acquired in 2009, is a digital collage that incorporates three elements. The emu, an emu egg, and the bark of a tree. There are obvious explorations in scale here and this, along with the multiple textures of these chosen elements, become unified by the monochromatic colour. The image of the emu and the egg become a reference to the lifecycle of the emu, an animal revered by the Aboriginal people, but also to existence in general.

Here, with the speckled surface of the egg, the emu is also presented as if a constellational figure afloat in the cosmos. It is journeying through the spirit world. But the bark of the tree, with its strong textured surface, brings us back to terra firma, it places our feet on this ground. But if we were to look up into the night sky, from the Southern Cross to the pointers, we would see the 'emu in the sky'. Between the Southern Cross and the Pointers is a nebula called the Coal Sack. It has a dark, cave like appearance which is identified by some Aboriginal groups as being the **lair of evil beings**. The Coal Sack resembles the shape of an emu's head and this nebula is often linked to the emu with many groups referring to it as just that, 'the emu'. The emu is the protector in the night skies. Instead of being traced out by stars as we might expect, the body follows the shape of the dark dust lanes of the Milky Way to the east of the pointers. The emu's position in the night sky is used as an indicator of when the emu's are nesting (on the eastern horizon after sunset), and as Gugurmin makes its way higher into the sky, when it is a good time to collect the emu eggs (when directly overhead). With this work, we are projected out to the cosmos, and the cosmos is brought back to us. It is the spiritual world, and it is the physical world. It is the past, the present

and the future. We are taken on a journey through the life cycle, a life cycle that includes perhaps where we come from, and to where we return.

***Protected Species***, acquired in 2009, also references the importance of the emu as an aboriginal totem. There are notions of the sacred in this image as we understand the importance of the emu to Aboriginal culture, but there is also the concept of the preserved or archived into a western museum context. This is a photo of emu feathers laid out on a sheet of Tyvek, a product used to protect museum items while in storage. The feathers are photographed close up, and the image is inviting us to take a step nearer and to inspect the detail of these feathers, drawing us into the importance of the emu as an Aboriginal totem. The feather is an important object in indigenous groups around the world, it is used as an item of trade and status. Woven into garments and attached to objects, feathers are used to show the significance of the wearer. Like many indigenous items, they are both object and sacred symbol, imbued with a ceremonial importance.

The Tyvek places these feathers firmly into a museum archival setting. As an item, they become a museum specimen within the catalogue of the natural sciences. They become a collected **object of natural and cultural importance**, researched and preserved to be then presented to the public for reasons of education and enjoyment. The emu feathers carry indigenous cultural significance but at the same time the Tyvek references the museum as a repository of the natural world and of cultural memory.

# Joseph McGlennon



*Agnus Dei* 2012

*Agnus Dei* is a visual narrative full of metaphorical and **symbolic language** that mimics the visual traditions not only of the colonialist era botanical illustrations such as the likes of Joseph Banks, but also of Renaissance art which is rich in philosophical and religious symbolism. This is a staged appearance that on the surface suggests the exotic, but also infers elements of the surreal. At the same time it confirms the delicate nature in which the pioneering explorers and naturalists documented their findings.

**Joseph McGlennon** holds a BA in Fine Art and a Post Graduate Degree in Education, both from The Adelaide University of South Australia. After a successful career in Branding and Advertising, which took him to London,

Southeast Asia, Amsterdam and Australia, McGlennon turned his creative talents to a photography based art practice. The information presented in his images are a construction of anything from 10 to 120 layers of photographs manipulated in a digital program, adding and subtracting until he is satisfied. Despite the use of modern technology, it is an art practice that finds a deliberate influence from 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century explorer's drawings and engravings, with outcomes that appear as if scientific observation. But, rather than presenting as exotic specimen or as historical curiosity, the hyper-real effects that McGlennon achieves, pushes the viewer firmly into contact with the subject matter.

# Joseph McGlennon

**Agnus Dei**, is Latin for 'Lamb of God. This is a title given to Jesus that appears in the New Testaments Gospel of John (John 1:29). John the Baptist sees Jesus and exclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, this reference to Jesus, being the 'Lamb of God' was brought into the Latin mass.

The fawn, shot by bow and arrow, stands amid connotations of innocence and renewal, albeit compromised and at risk. The 'hunted' deer is symbolic of the Christian figure of Saint Sebastian, killed during the Roman Emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians. It is simultaneously a vision **of hunting, and of sacrifice**. The fawn demonstrates innocence but also conviction as it holds its stance, defiant and strong even through it is suffering. Historically, the deer has been used as a symbolic archetype in many myths and legends. In the Christian vision, the fawn is a symbol of piety and devotion, and of God taking care of his children. In tarot, the fawn represents the sun, it is a representation of creative energies, of growth and empowerment. McGlennon places this symbolic figure, shot with arrows, front and centre. The fawn is looking into the light, it is reflected in its eyes. Is it the light that is giving the fawn its strength, despite what has happened to it? And where is the light coming from? Between its front legs, the fawn looks as if it is protecting a crucifix, it too, as are the arrows, is reflected in the light. These are important objects in this narrative, so they are brought to our attention.

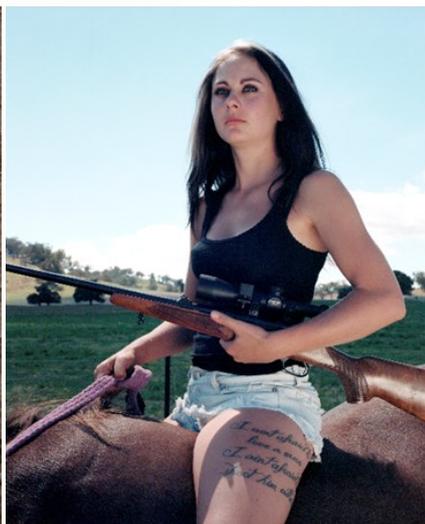
In the same symbolic quality of the fawn, McGlennon uses the flowers in bloom, the nest with eggs and the peaches at the fawn's feet to add to the narrative. These

objects are used as abstract symbols to represent human thoughts and emotions. Objects are the oldest form of visual communication and are used as symbols to create a visual narrative, these were particularly important in times when most of the population was illiterate. Importantly, the meanings given to objects change. They differ depending upon period, **country and culture**, as well as how the artist might use them.

Staying with western cultural and Christian sensibilities, here the white flowers speak of purity and innocence, honesty and perfection. The egg is a symbol of fertility and renewal, of resurrection and eternal life. A rotting or half eaten peach is used to symbolise an immoral woman who has tarnished her reputation, but here we see fresh peaches which represent virtue and honour. These things included here are fresh and hold valuable potential for the future, they are something to take us forward into hope and purity as the **cycle of life** continues. But these objects are on the ground, so while they offer a promise for life, they are also at risk as they are in a vulnerable position in the landscape. In the background, a river flows through a barren landscape with a dark and ominous sky above it. A tree devoid of leaves is placed on the right, to the rear of the fawn. Is this all then in the past? Are the darkness's of the past now left behind as the fawn looks to the light?

Nothing has any inherent meaning, but as social creatures we create meaning in order to communicate. Symbols are the oldest form of visual communication and artists consider carefully what they include in their work and the messages that they bring. Objects then become **complex symbols**, important reference points or markers in the narratives that we create.

WE



Top left: **Totem**. Gail Naden. 2009

Digital Colour Print.

Top middle: **Rachel**. Emma Thomson. 2013

Lambda Photographic Print.

Top right: **Agnus Dei**. Joseph McGlennon. 2012

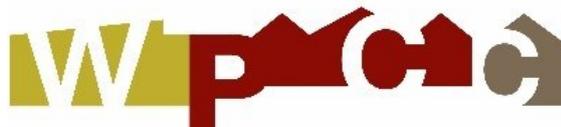
Giclee digital print on archival fine art paper.

Middle: **Performance for 25 Passing Vehicles**. John Reid. 1989. Gelatin Silver Print.

Bottom left: **The Firefighter**. George Lambert. 1898

RURAL CENTRE

WESTERN PLAINS CULTURAL CENTRE



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