

A bird in the hand

The process by which Michelle Cawthorn creates her drawings is slow and deliberate. It is a quiet, thoughtful, even meditative process that creates space for reverie. A space where memories are drawn out, examined, and handled with care. Memories are able to play out unimpeded in this space due to Cawthorn's careful treatment of them.

Our memories are coloured by the preoccupations of our current selves. Every time you take out that old love letter, childhood clothing or ancient photo album, it is affected by the atmosphere, by your breath, by the oils on your hands: each time you revisit it, it gets that bit yellower, more fragile and worn. Memories – like their physical representations – are not immutable. They are invariably informed, altered or reconstructed by new knowledge, desires, nostalgia and the inevitable distortions of self-image. Our subsequent experiences, and particularly our state of mind when we draw up a memory, are liable to stick with it for later reference. Memories are ongoing collages of old and new.

Birds, which recur throughout Cawthorn's work, are apt symbols for memory. They are fleeting, momentary. If you've ever tried to identify a bird using a field guide, you'll have experienced the amazing impossibility of their staying still. You just need to catch the shape of the beak, that splash of colour on the head or chest, the angle of the wings when they take off, the pattern on their underside as they soar past you. Like pinning down a memory that fades and warps each time you recall it, identifying a bird in the wild is difficult, but this elusiveness is part of its appeal. There is joy in seeing the bird move nimbly in its natural environment. In remembering a panorama of sights and smells and feelings rather than a single defining moment.

Cawthorn's drawings, collages and assemblages are combinations of vintage elements with forms that the artist has created anew. Over time Cawthorn has developed a language of materials, symbols, marks and images, and new works are informed by what came before. A kernel of an idea is brought up from the memory bank, and provides a fulcrum around which a new work is built. Hatched lines like quilting or embroidery recur throughout Cawthorn's recent work; bird heads and wings have woven in and out over years; shapes from past drawings are translated into plywood and constructed as assemblages. At times, completely new, outside ideas are brought into the cycle, preventing a constant turning over of the past. Collage opens up new possibilities, like going back to a friend or a sibling to corroborate a memory – they fill in the blanks with something you'd never have thought of, and their memories become part of the fabric of your own.

So how can we experience memories in their natural state, allowing them to ebb and flow with minimum interference? Cawthorn's deliberate, repetitive, intuitive process lends itself to the quietude of mind that allows memories to unfurl without interruption. Her works are full of suggestive allusions – locks of hair, round shapes like eyes, wisps of ribbon – and they leave ample space for reflection and projection.

Rebecca Gallo, September 2015