

The works in *Songbird* have come about as a result of Michelle Cawthorn reflecting on her childhood experiences in the Shoalhaven, but they are not a direct transcription of this time. If they were, plants and fish might feature prominently, rather than birds, as these were the things that captivated the young Cawthorn when she spent time holidaying in Lake Conjola as a child, and later when her family moved to Nowra when Cawthorn was 10 years old. As an adult the artist finds herself living in the neighbouring suburb to where she entered the world, with her home and studio backing onto the Royal National Park. Here, birds provide the incessant soundtrack to life and work, and their constant calls have led to the realisation that wherever Cawthorn has found herself in life, birdsong has been the element connecting her to that place. In *Songbird*, the slowed-down call of the Eastern Whipbird emanates from the video work *Close to You*, filtering through the space and between the other works in the exhibition.

Who are these creatures that appear in *Songbird*? They are not straightforward representations, but strange hybrids. In one group of works, the top half of each creature is a digital collage of an artwork by The Sydney Bird Painter, an artist thought to have arrived on the First Fleet. These are combined with markings made by Cawthorn in her signature meditative ink-pen strokes. In another series, Cawthorn has created hand-cut collages taken from images of The Sydney Bird Painter's works, mixing and matching wings into creatures that on first glance have the delicate beauty of the original works but closer inspection are revealed to be unnatural amalgamations. In both series, Cawthorn's reimagined birds are unable to take flight. Though beautiful and fascinating, their limbs have been recomposed to keep them caught in these composition-cages, as objects of memory.

Identity is made up of many parts. Some parts are smoothly connected, while others sit uneasily alongside one another. Cawthorn's works are hybrids, comprised of two very different impressions: a colonial interpretation of native fauna in keeping with the visual language of that time, and a contemporary meditation on memory. They are not two seamlessly integrated halves, but elements of a complex, ongoing story of invasion, documentation, categorisation and settlement. As Cawthorn explores in the swirling, looping work *Interloper*, a sense of place, home and identity are often not straightforward. At what point does one start to feel at home in a holiday house? A new school? A new colony? And even if one begins to feel comfortable in new surroundings, how do the locals feel about that?

Memory can be elusive, like a bird. Cawthorn's works conjure up the fleeting glimpses and hidden rustlings that are the impressions a bird leaves on a small child exploring in bushland. Always just out of sight yet ever-present. While *Songbird* is Cawthorn's meditation on her personal memories, in a broader way, these works serve as a potent reminder of the way memory can reside in all the senses, and emerge in surprising ways, at unexpected times.

Chloé Wolfson