

# Inside SAM's Place: Flocked

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**Sera Waters**

*Inside SAM's Place: Flocked*

Biodiversity Level, SA Museum,

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[www.flockedsa.blogspot.com](http://www.flockedsa.blogspot.com)

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Birds speak to humanity in so many ways: the unsung heroics of gas-detecting canaries in kitchens and mines; long-distance messenger pigeons who always get through; predatory hawks hunting for the pleasure of princes; companionable budgies and parrots; chattering away in shared confinement; squawking seagulls daringly diving to eat our chips; the sad, sad chickens we roast on Sundays; lucky ducks waddling across the road in front of our cars; scary old man emus we run from as children; to the deceased dodos we lament over.

Spending several months of silent Thursday mornings with the bird collection in the South Australian Museum's Science Centre, Sera Waters unpicks and re-stitches the tales of our kinship with birds. Like previous artists, designers, makers, curators and writers who have participated in *Inside SAM's Place*, a long-standing collaboration between Craftsouth and the SA Museum, Waters brings fresh perspectives to public scientific collections.

Her resultant *flocked* installation sits disquietingly within the theatre of bird calls, foraging cockatoos, and a predatory wedge-tailed eagle consuming a small mammal on the Museum's Biodiversity level. Alongside her signature embroidery, taxidermy birds, eggs and nests from the collection, Waters incorporates narratives garnered from the community of bird encounters, contributed directly via a nest box installed in the museum foyer and a *flocked* blog. This weaving together of threads of knowing—the objective scientific with collective memory and myth—generates a powerful emotional impact.



*Flocked*, one of two sets of drawers installed in the Biodiversity Gallery, South Australian Museum.

Each labeled drawer—squeaking and squawking as it opens—reveals an intimate diorama or, perhaps more accurately, drawer-orama. The specimens are lovingly laid out upon patterned fabrics as if for funerary viewing, annotated by old school typewriter texts secured by silver sewing pins. Sepia classification tags are strung around tiny clawed feet—recording in scrawling ink factual notations such as *Species Name*, *Died in Captivity 3/8/36* or *Stomach Contents*....



From the drawer *Bird Talk: Carte Venti*, two sky polaroids & two chattering rainbow lorikeet.

These composed gutted remains of local birdlife evoke Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*—a spring with no bird songs, where the birds have all vanished as a result of humanity's attempt to control nature through pesticides. Just as that text articulated ecology as a subversive subject 50 years ago, Waters subverts the principles underlying the museological classification of the birds from a scientific taxonomy to cultural taxonomy. Rather than the relatively transparent hierarchical, linear and nested relationship between groups of birds which have biological traits in common, cultural taxonomies are an evolutionary domain in which memes and psychological traits jump freely between lineages and cultures—they are all shook up.

Waters' multifaceted work illustrates the inherent richness and complexity of this approach to classification, dividing her source material—the narratives and drawers, into 10 associative groups such as *Bird Battles*, *Bird Magic*, *Bird Bodies*, *Bird Symbols* and *Bird Tales*. Gazing into each drawer, listening to the narratives in my headphoned world, I am transported into another place—a place of tenderness, a place of childhood fascination, a place of connection with bird species, creating a sense of the interconnection of with all life on earth.

Like birds, we humans flock—subconsciously making consensus decisions and following a minority of individuals, or avoiding one designated as a predator. This complex set of foraging and flight behaviours is played out in three ways. In separation we avoid crowding, giving others personal body space in the bus queues. In alignment we steer towards the average—walking along the footpath in an orderly manner and tending to agree with the opinions of our peers. In cohesion we share holiday destinations and life goals of family, friends and financial security.

But not all is harmonious in birdland. Local bird species such as galahs, corellas, sulphur-crested cockatoos and silver gulls can cause extensive economic, social and environmental damage. Roaming flocks of up to ten thousand adult and juvenile birds strip crops, defoliate trees, and wreck wiring and buildings in localised areas. In Waters' *Bird Battles: Prone to Perniciousness*, flocked-up gangs of embroidered cockatoos descend in silhouette to feast on crops of golden-sequinned ripe wheat.

Life in the skies can be deadly as species battle to protect their young, their territory, and each other. In perhaps the most striking *Flocked* diorama, *Bird Bodies: Pigeon in two parts*, a lone pigeon bears witness to its deconstructed other/lover. A tangle of fragile body parts in lace and needlepoint-- intestines extruded as delicate netting enclosing pearls, bloodied red-sequined organs strewn from flattened body—a memory of what was a moment ago a living creature.

The dynamic *Bird Darkness: Eye of the emu* acknowledges the prominent place this bird retains in both Indigenous and Western lore. The *Yuwaalaraay* creation myth describes the sun being made by throwing an emu's egg into the sky; while there is widespread agreement that a giant emu lives in the dark dust lanes of the Milky Way. Presenting an emu (*Dromaius novaehollandia*) egg alongside a stitched and sequined prehistoric reptilian-like emu eye is a reminder that birds are essential to evolutionary taxonomic thinking, being one of the first modern groups to be tied to fossil dinosaur ancestors.

The drawers and soundscapes of *flocked* traverse the spectrum of human experience ---at one moment evoking the delightful tactile sensations and aesthetics of flocked wallpapers, and another the vulnerability and splendour of feathered creatures now long dead. I cried with Colin coming to terms with his father's death by having to kill a wounded chicken; I laughed with Viv being terrorised by a biting budgie in her childhood. I felt the magic of shapeshifting in *Bird Human Bird: Self as Plover*, as Waters transforms her printed linen self into an exotic sequin- and felt-plumed bird.

Sera Waters infuses our museum experience with broad information flows, vibrant tales and embroidered anecdotes--touching me in ways that factual information touch screens never could. By breathing new life into bird specimens that usually lie dormant in dark drawers, we revel in their masquerade, share the sensuality of shaking tail feathers, and appreciate the sounds and sanctuary of living flocked.