



HOPE IS THE THING

Erica Wagner

Artist Statement

Hope is the Thing is a series of collage images I created to accompany Johanna Bell's poem, riffing on Emily Dickinson's 'Hope is the Thing With Feathers'. Our picture-book collaboration asks the question, if hope is the thing with feathers, what does that look like in our Australia, today?

My collage material comes from piles of life drawings, landscape sketches, still life compositions – abandoned or discarded – as well as plain painted backgrounds, monoprints, and fragments of text from books and journals. I paint the backgrounds loosely, using colours that evoke places I love: the wide-open skies of central and northern Australia, misty mountain forests, wild burnt coastlines, tender sunrises, dramatic storms and sunsets. Onto these colour fields, I place torn and cut shapes, looking for angles and contrasts of light and dark, thick and thin, rough and smooth, curves and straight lines.

I draw birds in action and trace their shapes onto the back of the old artworks, so it's a surprise when I turn the cut shape over. I tear a painting I remember doing on a riverbank in the Kimberley, a leaf print from my garden. I cut out shapes with nail scissors and scalpels. I search through piles of paper that have come from all over the place, from long ago paintings and sketchbooks, for just the right scrap of rough moody colour, the right bright red. Searching and finding, tearing, cutting and placing slow my heartbeat, take away anxiety, give me a focus. This process refreshes me. I slow down, observe and listen. When my hands are making, my thoughts drift in a less neurotic, more open and curious way.

When I draw with charcoal I think of burnt sticks, stripping things back to the essence. When I paint and scrape back the painting, the painting scrapes me back. When I work in layers, I think of the layers that make up me – the generations before and the ones that will come after. I talk to myself: What if I place that small eagle high in the sky? How does she connect to the grass owl nesting below? What happens if I put a bird head there? I wait for a feeling, an emotion to guide me. In this quiet realm, an image realises itself. A lyrebird strides, a pelican twists, a kookaburra laughs, a girl with a bird's head and wings watches her art take off.

Making pictures from my own discarded art supports my belief that nature rights itself, even as it destroys. It is possible to repurpose, reuse, and make something new. I believe there is a fire in the centre of the earth, just like the fire inside us, that urges us to live, to create, to remake. I believe that life is cyclical, that there is beauty to be found in every day, that it is possible to make a life that sings.

Thanks to Johanna Bell for the words used as titles for the artwork
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