



Australien Future

tales of migration

deb mostert

Crossing the Line

The tenor of our times is transience. Throughout the globe, people fleeing their homelands (5.6 million from Syria alone) are driven by war, conflict, persecution, environmental degradation and poverty. It may be our most pressing international issue – yet the global movement of people is not a new human narrative.

Australien Future – Tales of Migration is the culmination of two years research extended in paint by artist Deb Mostert. In *Posthumus family departure 1956 – Bartailed Godwits* (2018), men in suits and women in headscarves and waisted dresses stand under the vaulted ceiling of an historic railway station. There are half remembered faces of family and friends at the wharf in *Family Wave Goodbye – Arctic Tern* (2017), and the ships that denoted travel in a previous era are depicted in *Final Farewells on Board – Godwits* (2017). These images reach back through Mostert's family tree and into that of countless others. She draws a parallel between human geographic instability and the fragile situation of migratory birds, who also rely on "the generosity and goodwill of the countries they pass and the ones they settle in".¹ She notes that birds may be the "quintessential migrants".² In *Australien Future* the migratory patterns – bird and human – are brought together visually, conceptually and imaginatively.

Mostert was born in 1967 in Brisbane. Her parents, travelling as young children with their parents, were part of an international migration push in the

1950's, encouraged to leave their native Netherlands for another place. Footage taken by her paternal grandfather en route to Australia records the departure, shipboard travel, and the bald realities of their arrival. The families' journey, its upheaval, and the meaning vested in the objects they carry, elicit empathy. Birds travelling alongside the ship are captured on silent film and one can almost hear their cries, plaintive, mournful and freewheeling. New work in neuroscience confirms what people have always felt, that "place, memory and emotion are inextricably linked".³ Yet as Mostert identifies, the connection to place intrinsic to humanity is not important to a bird. She says, "Birds don't identify as Russian or Australian. Where they were born makes them no less Siberian and where they live for most of the year makes them no more Australian."

As an artist, Deb Mostert is known for work that investigates the meaning of objects and collections, their ability to crystallize the attachment humans have to things. Natural history captures her; new research on global and environmental changes that impact bird populations has engaged her heart, pencil, brush and journal alike. Yet this work's genesis in her own family story lends it an immediacy, a compulsion visible to its audience, as is her ambivalence. She said, "I rediscovered some silent film footage my grandfather (Opa) took on the migrant ship that he and his family were travelling on from Holland to Australia in 1955. The traditional ship board entertainment, a 'Line Crossing' ceremony, involves tarring and feathering new arrivals to the ship, to test their fortitude. I watched in amazement as I realised the words 'Australien Future' had been daubed upon my young father's chest.

"You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were once sojourners..."

EXODUS 22:21

Along with a tipsy drawing of a kangaroo! The poignant Dutch spelling of Australian made some silent, sad connections about the change in attitudes to new arrivals. Attitudes to different migrating groups vary, and I wonder why some birds/people are more vulnerable than others?"⁴

These paintings of that journey, the ghostly depiction of Mostert's family and accompanying birds, are beautifully crafted, coloured with the blur of generational distance and time. They derive from family photographs, layered with stories handed down and remembered, necessarily suspect given the duplicity of memory. Mostert's aesthetic approach conjures this tension in her technique and palette. The spare restraint and muted colour of the paintings speak to the yellowing of old images, the erosion of memory. These paintings look back and forward simultaneously and in their, at times, blurry ghostliness, there is a sense that Mostert cannot allow their events to be seen too clearly. Her family and biography collude with government policy, secrets and nostalgia, in conflict with her concern for the ongoing health of bird populations and the current lack of reception for displaced peoples.

The original film footage was "shaky and thin" and the technique applied to the journey mirrors this instability. The beginning of the journey, its excitement

and adventure, is evoked in the glamour of the clothing of the era and detailed in the faces of her grandparents. In *Facing the Future – Bartailed Godwits* (2017), painted detail fades out into their bodies, echoing the unknowns that await. The migrating birds captured in this frame move past and fly on, into the unknowable, compelled by their biology and faith in safe passage. The later paintings, in shades of grey, such as *Two Migrant Kids Take a Drink, Melbourne – Greater Sand Plover* (2018), suggest the dawning realities of the decision to choose a different future, while images of children express energy and irrepressible optimism.

One of the most intimate scenes is *Hurry Up and Wait – Godwits* (2018). It is a portrait of a young girl, the artist's mother, who sits on the floor against the wall, reading, waiting and frowning. Her coats and luggage, passive beside her, become an island of resistance. Change brings anxiety, yet within her suitcase may be the touchstone of familiar objects.

The second component to this exhibition is paintings of objects that refer to traditional Dutch still lives (and Mostert's heritage) in their style and realist technique. They evoke the process of migration itself and, displaced onto a new continent, they gather a tenacious aura; reminders of another life, they are extra precious. Now family heirlooms,

they speak back to their time and place as carriers of memory, freeze-framed snapshots of the homeland. Lovingly and faithfully depicted are a wooden clock, some family silver, Oma's chair and Dutch spoons. The family Bible (Bijbel) acknowledges the faith which migrated with and remains important to Mostert's family. A copper vase, *Migration Object 9 – Copper Jug*, is filled, in this place, with Banksia leaves, a concession to the transfer of place, but acknowledging too the powerful new emotional investment in the Australian continent.

A sculptural installation titled *Trekvogels op Tassen* (Dutch for migratory birds and bags) creates a dramatic finale. Luggage appears like an island rising from the floor, a refuge for those in need, suitcases offering both potential and familiarity. Birds stand within the sanctuary yet, in ghostly white, memorialize those lost at sea, and the ongoing presence of their precarious narratives.

This exhibition is a poetic distillation of Mostert's personal family story which extends into universal stories of human transience. This work builds a seductive aesthetic around the pressing social and environmental issues of our times and cleaves to our deeply felt connections.

Louise Martin-Chew
Freelance writer and curator



Australien Future – Arctic Terns

2017
88 x 126 cm
oil on canvas

¹ Deb Mostert, Migration Research Artist Journal, 2016 – 2017 (unpublished).

² Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the artist are taken from conversations with the author 2016 – 17.

³ Kim Mahood, Position Doubtful, Scribe, 2016: 297.

⁴ Deb Mostert, Migration Research Artist Journal, 2016 – 2017 (unpublished).



Posthumus family departure 1956 – Bartailed Godwits
2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



Boarding the Sibajak – Bartailed Godwits
2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



Final Farewells on Board – Godwits

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



Family Wave Goodbye – Arctic Tern

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



Hurry Up and Wait – Godwits

2018
172 x 203 cm
oil on canvas



Last View Homeland – Godwits

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



Sibajak – Godwits

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas

At the Rail – Eastern Curlews

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas





Polio

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



Arab Trader – Supplies for the Journey

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



Still Life Tableau – Trekvogels op Tassen (Migratory Birds on Bags), detail

2018
dimensions variable
wire, styrene, epoxy, found objects, paint

Ancient Pathways

On 17th March 2007, A female bar-tailed godwit took off from a mud flat in New Zealand where she had spent the summer. She was carrying an unusual cargo. A tiny satellite transmitter fitted by researchers, so they could study her migration.

She gained altitude quickly, her flight was swift, purposeful, direct. She headed north-west, tracing a path over Papua New Guinea, and across the western Pacific all the way to the Yellow Sea in China. A journey of 10,300 km, powered entirely by her own exertion, guided by navigational skills exquisitely honed over generations.

Exhausted and hungry, she found what she was looking for – extensive mudflats at Yalu Jiang – and began probing for food into the soft mud with her long bill. She stayed for five weeks, refuelling. Then she became restless again. She took to the skies once more on 2nd May, flying across North Korea, then striking out across the northern Pacific, oblivious to the human significance of the political boundaries she had crossed.

A flight of 7,400 kilometres took her to Alaska, where she nested on the Arctic tundra, on the other side of the world from where her journey began. After breeding, our intrepid traveller moved to the big tidal flats just outside Anchorage and spent weeks feeding voraciously. Something big was in the air. She was about to reveal to the watching researchers how the return journey was

made. On 30th August she towered once more into the sky, and instead of retracing her previous flight back towards China, she struck out south, straight out into the Pacific Ocean. She flew continuously, day and night, for seven days and seven nights, crossing the most expansive waterbody on the planet.

A flight of 11,700 kilometres took her right back to the mudflat in New Zealand from which she had left all those months ago. She had flown nearly 30,000 km this year, and would perform similar feats year after year until her well-deserved “retirement” when she gave up the travelling and saw out the rest of her days in the Maketu Estuary.

The ancient pathways traced by migratory birds are shaped by thousands of years of intergenerational experience and tradition. Yet in the past few hundred years, these journeys have become exceedingly perilous, and many birds die along the way.

Bar-tailed godwits are now on the endangered list, along with a number of other Asian migratory shorebirds. We are beginning to understand why. More than two-thirds of the habitat used by the birds in the Yellow Sea has disappeared in the past 50 years, owing to coastal development and the damming of many large Asian rivers. Shorebirds present easy targets for hunters, who are themselves continuing ancient traditions in many cases, but now in much greater

numbers than before, and with dwindling numbers of quarry. The climate is changing rapidly in Arctic breeding grounds, and at the other end of the world, disturbance in the coastal retreats of the birds mean they are less able to refuel for the big journeys.

The mystery and magic of bird migration have fascinated people for generations. We wonder at the sheer physical endurance and the pinpoint navigational abilities of these diminutive travellers.

“Migratory birds are a potent symbol of the connections between far-flung places, of the arbitrariness of political boundaries, of the power of humans to disrupt nature. They are also a source of hope for the future, a world where migrants are understood, where nations work together, and a world where there is space for travellers.”

Professor Richard Fuller
School of Biological Sciences,
University of Queensland



Aden Flight – Whimbrels

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



***Taking the Wheel –
Lesser Sand Plover***

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



***Australien Future –
Common Greenshank***

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas

First Steps Australian Soil

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas





Two Migrant Kids Take a Drink, Melbourne – Greater Sand Plover

2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



First Home Gladstone

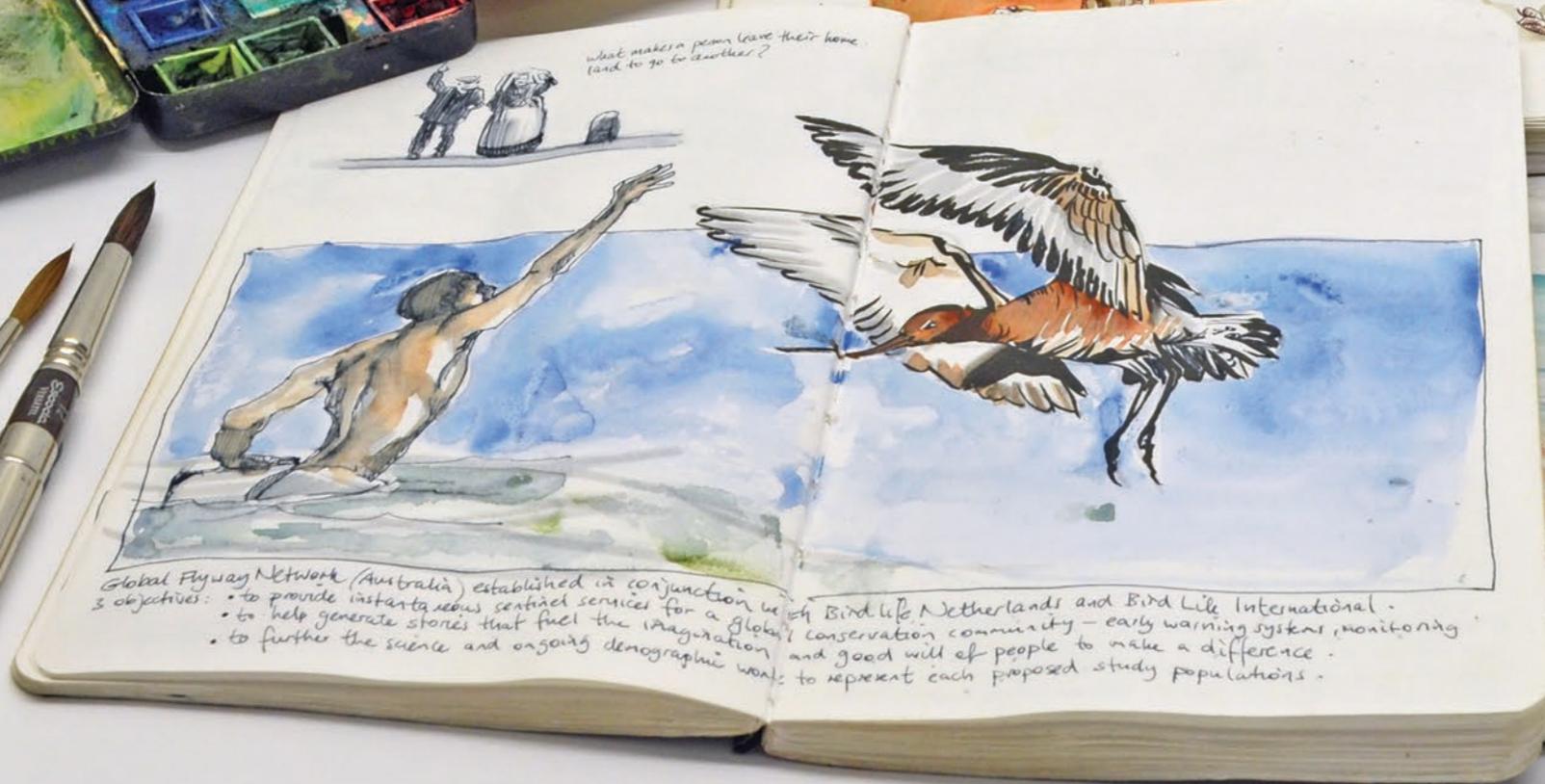
2018
81 x 96 cm
oil on canvas



Migration Objects
Rembrandt Delft Blue Plate, Wooden Carved
Clock, Koffee Grinder, Oma's Spoons,
Reading Glasses, Willow Pattern Child's Tea Set,
Family Bible, Laundry Caddy.
2018
watercolours on birch cradle



Migration Objects
Copper Jug, Delft Tile Migrating Duck, Migrant Ship Cutlery Butter
Knife, Delft Plate, Coffee Pot and Warmer, Delft Tile Ship's, Oma's Chair
2018
watercolours on birch cradle



Ecstatic artist – Blacktailed Godwit

Research at the Broome Bird Observatory, Roebuck Bay,
June 2017



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Credits

PHOTOGRAPHY

Carl Warner

DESIGN

Jo den Otter and Deb Mostert

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**Queensland
Government**

REDLAND ART GALLERY, CLEVELAND

7th December 2018 – 20th January 2019

Cnr Middle and Bloomfield Streets, Cleveland Q 4163

Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm

Sunday 9am – 2pm

Admission free

Phone: (07) 3829 8899 or email: gallery@redland.qld.gov.au

Website: artgallery.redland.qld.gov.au

Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland City Council, dedicated to the late Eddie Santagiuliana



GLADSTONE REGIONAL ART GALLERY & MUSEUM

13th April 2019 – 25th May 2019

Cnr Goondoon & Bramston Sts, Gladstone QLD 4680

Monday – Saturday 10am – 5pm

Open ANZAC Day: 10am – 5pm

Closed all other public holidays

Phone: (07) 4976 6766

Website: gragm.qld.gov.au

The Gallery & Museum is a community cultural initiative of the Gladstone Regional Council



MIGRATION MUSEUM

8th June 2019 – 28th July 2019

82 Kintore Avenue, Adelaide

Daily 10am – 5pm

Phone: (08) 8207 7580

Website: migration.history.sa.gov.au



*Come, come,
whoever you are*

Wanderer, worshipper,

*lover of leaving,
it doesn't matter*

Ours is not a caravan of despair.

*Come, even if you have
broken your vows a thousand times.*

*Come and come
yet again
come, come.*

RUMI