

Art

'I almost cracked': 16-month artistic performance of mass extinction comes to a close



'It's one of the most gratifying things I've ever done in my art career – in my life.': Lucienne Rickard's Extinction Studies project finished at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery on Sunday. Photograph: Fraser Johnston

Since 2019, Lucienne Rickard has been drawing detailed sketches of lost species in a Hobart gallery. On Sunday she erased the final one

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The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart is filled with people waiting for the swift parrot to disappear.

The Hobart artist Lucienne Rickard has spent five weeks drawing a large-scale pencil sketch of the critically endangered bird. Picking up her eraser, she tells her audience, "If we don't do something soon, this is what will happen."

The erasure, which took place on Sunday as part of Mona Foma, marked the culmination of Rickard's Extinction Studies. The artist had spent 16 months in TMAG, meticulously drawing an archive of lost species: deer and crayfish, mice and turtles, bats and bilbies (a small, burrowing, long-eared marsupial). When they were done, she would rub them out.

The lifelike parrot is perched above the ground on its paper canvas: the last animal to go.

Below it lies the remains of all former black-and-white drawings: shavings from 25 erasers, which had removed 187 graphite pencils' worth of art. In a few minutes, this bird will become part of the waste.



‘It’s like witnessing a funeral’: the swift parrot was the final of 38 artworks Lucienne Rickard created and then destroyed. Photograph: Jesse Hunniford

Rickard starts with the swift parrot’s feathery tail, wiping it clean from the page with deliberate strokes. The creature begins to vanish. From the silence, someone whispers: “It’s like witnessing a funeral.”

“We have this idea that extinction is an old problem. In fact, the opposite is true,” Rickard tells the Guardian. Throughout the project she has created and destroyed a total of 38 works of art, all depicting flora and fauna from the [IUCN Red List of Threatened Species](#), among them the Yunnan lake newt, the corquin robber frog and the big-eared hopping mouse.

Rickard’s drawings are realistic, detailed, archival – exactly the style a visitor might expect to find in a museum. Keeping her art accessible became a “hook” to draw people into her world.

Using the same piece of paper for months at a time, Rickard drew creatures that no longer thrive, the shadow of a former species under each new sketch. Eight of these species were Australian. “We’re repeating the same mistakes over and over again, and not learning,” she says.

The idea for the project – which was commissioned by Hobart’s Detached Cultural Organisation – evolved from Rickard’s interest in nature documentaries. She began to educate herself about conservation, shocked by “how desperate it really is”.

“I thought, ‘if I don’t know about this, there are a whole bunch of other people out there who probably don’t know as well’.”

Most resonant for her was the birth and death of Rickard’s Xerces blue butterfly. She’d viewed a wing under a museum microscope and found its detail “mind-blowing ... like an endless forest or landscape”, she tells the Guardian.

Informed by science, Rickard drew wings with an estimated 113,000 scales – a three-month process she describes as “torturous”, and which she documented in a series of posts [on Instagram](#). “I’m investing so much in this one drawing, this one species, because I’m getting frustrated,” she wrote in one. “There is infinite exquisite detail all around us, but we’ve become used to seeing

ourselves as removed from the natural world ... I want to shake people. I want to yell, 'Look!' But I'm drawing every last scale instead."

People following her progress pleaded with her to cancel the butterfly's erasure; to make an exception for the butterfly living on the page. Her parents applied similar pressure, lamenting their daughter's efforts with the wings.

"There was a heightened atmosphere in the room when I erased it, and I almost cracked," Rickard remembers. It was the "sting" of this erasure that gave it power.



'I want to shake people. I want to yell, "Look!" But I'm drawing every last scale instead.' Photograph: Detached Cultural Org

Rickard began the project at TMAG in September 2019, and continued as bushfires ravaged the country, impacting more than 100 threatened Australian species and killing or displacing almost 3 billion animals. She says museum visitors would come to her in tears, crying for the loss of wildlife as she continued to confront it on her page.

Just a few months later, Covid-19 lockdowns seemed to return relative peace to the natural world: marine wildlife flourished in quieter waters and blue skies were seen above cities normally clouded with pollution. Rickard remembers this moment as an opportunity: "A good time to have a think about our relationship to the environment, and try to live different lives." It didn't take: the pandemic was threatening our own species, and our values shifted accordingly.

Rickard believes a larger problem is the environmental impact of "colonialism and capitalism" – particularly in Australia, which has the world's highest rate of mammalian extinction. In the past two centuries, more than 100 local species have been lost.

"Australia sells itself to the rest of the world based on tourism, and our incredible wild spaces and wildlife. Why aren't we looking after our natural heritage?"



Lucienne Rickard went through 25 erasers and 187 pencils during the project. Photograph: Fraser Johnston

Rickard endured difficult conversations through her [social media page](#) and physical presence in TMAG. It's the first time she has worked in a public space, crossing from page to performance and venturing into the political. "It's one of the most gratifying things I've ever done in my art career – in my life – because it's an issue relevant to everyone," Rickard says. "We need to get the message across that we have a whole bunch of species on the edge. And if we don't do something, we will lose them."

Despite the nature of her work, Rickard doesn't intend to leave viewers in distress. Instead, she advises us to ask ourselves: "How can I take really good care of all the animals and plants around me?"

The question is not without hope. In the week of Rickard's final erasure, the City of Hobart announced a program encouraging "[citizen scientists](#)" to log backyard sightings of the critically endangered eastern barred bandicoot. The short-tailed rain crayfish, previously declared extinct, was [rediscovered on the island's west coast](#). And on Maria Island, researchers hope to foster an "[insurance population](#)" of the threatened brush-tailed rock wallaby.

When Rickard erases her swift parrot, she allows remnants of the sketch to remain on her page. It's a moving call-to-action for a species "we can still do something about".

"We need to look at these critically endangered species and admit that we're not looking after them. The swift parrot is a really iconic Tasmanian species. Hopefully, we keep that little guy around for a bit longer."