



see creatures of darkness. That's the whole point of being nocturnal: darkness is the ultimate hiding place; a refuge from the ravages of illuminated sight; from the sun that bakes the desert dry. The night is cool, the night is hidden, the night is dark. Movement is uncertain, exploratory, guided by stars or moon, guided by sound, guided by scent.

Australia was full of darkness. While cities of light were furred by weasel-kine, our great peripatetics bore possum cloaks interwoven with unfinished histories. The animals of this hot dry dark land were carried through songlines, their furred texture part of the culture itself: the song of the land. But then the animals were stopped, trapped, killed, shipped to London, forced in dying breaths to give welcome to the rat, the fox, the rabbit. The repetitive sounds of deepest night grew still, as we documented the demise of life hidden in darkness.

Not all of them, of course, and those that survived are still out there, free of the false context offered by museum drawers under fluorescent lights. Eventually we gave up dragging them screaming into the light, and now we mostly sit, content to ignore. But ignorance is only scale; or ignorance is context. The mighty macropod, the great-foot – clearly seen by light of day, glimpsed from cars carried by roads slicing the golden brown vastness – is granted residence in our collective imaginings. Most others – the small, the fleeting, the graceful – remain bound in darkness. What place has the ningai? The tuan? The gliders that grew wings through arms that they could fly?

Their context remains the comprehensive uniformity of darkness. The intricacies of entwined trees, opportunistic holes in broken limbs, and burrows, are all hidden. These are not paintings of animals. There is no attempt at familiarisation; you get to know only the inviolable separation. They're leaping at you, out of the night, or they've spent their curiosity, receding once more. They've accumulated names over the years, but the specific is hard to discern, with chopped-off tails, and ears receding once again into the keenness of night. The label lies off to one side. Try to ignore it. It could be bandicoot, or potoroo, but its burrow is a bare arm's width, a refuge against you and the light.

These paintings are not intended to illuminate the animals. That texture is not fur. That layering and scouring, concealing and revealing, is not flesh. The complex surface of woven layers is as much an invitation to imagine that that separates us from them, as it is an invitation to imagine a whole.

These are paintings of our tenuous relationships with these creatures of darkness. These are paintings of a world that always will be refused to us: we're the wrong size, the wrong scale; we live in the wrong time. All we can ever do is imagine. Perhaps that's why these always have been creatures of a dreamtime, creatures totemic: there's simply too much space between our realities and theirs, too much vast, old country. These are not paintings of animals. These are icons of a spiritual tradition we now call Australia.

As we move ever away, one northern city of light turned to darkness for half an hour – a beautiful act of intention; an attempt to move back – but these creatures of darkness will stay, for a while, hidden, concealed, living

Mark Padgham

# new work by anna ephraim