



# W.T. Cooper

## *Brought to Life*

28 OCTOBER 2017 To 4 FEBRUARY 2018

ARTSPACE MACKAY, MACKAY REGIONAL COUNCIL









Above: **William T. COOPER** *Wompoo Fruit-dove, calling posture, underwing, alert posture on nest, preening* (detail). 2005-09. Watercolour and pencil. Collection of Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Image courtesy of William T. Cooper.

Cover image: **William T. COOPER** *Superb Fruit Dove*. 2005- 2009. Watercolour. 67 x 51cm. Collection of Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Image courtesy of William T. Cooper.

Inside cover: **William T. Cooper** in his studio painting an Oriental Pied Hornbill in 2008. Image courtesy of William T. Cooper.

# William T. Cooper

## *Brought to life*

*When an individual [bird] is seen gliding through the woods and close to the observer, it passes like a thought, and on trying to see it again, the eye searches in vain; the bird is gone.* John James Audubon, 1840.

A steady rise in environmental consciousness has fostered a growing desire to connect with the natural world and along with this has come a resurgence of interest in the birdlife that lives around us. An enduring source of mystery, the magic of birds continues to create awe in the viewer.

Audubon's intuitive description of a pigeon in flight clearly defines the ephemeral nature of all birds. Hovering somewhere between the earth and sky, the city and the rainforest, overabundance and paucity of numbers, birds are a part of our world, but never really within our reach. Their feathers, flight and song have inspired artists for centuries, none more so than William T Cooper, an artist whose depiction of the complex interplay between avian life and the environment vividly displays both curiosity and wonder.

An illustrator of several significant publications, including *A Portfolio of Australian Birds*, *Parrots of the World*, *Birds of Paradise* and *Pigeons and Doves of Australia*, Cooper lived for many years in the Atherton tablelands in tropical north Queensland. The artist spent many hours in the field observing birds in the wild before capturing them in lively sketches brought to life in his studio. The real genius of Cooper's work is in how he not only depicts the birds in their habitat for scale and relevance, but also how he presents them as one would most often

encounter them. From the raucous Cockatoos, large and noisy in the landscape to the timid Brown Quail, well camouflaged in dry grass and leaf litter, Cooper's passion for his subject is evident in each painting. Cooper's birds are not only technically superb, with every feather delineated, they readily reveal birds as living, dynamic creatures whose intrinsic beauty and vitality are worthy of our study and preservation.

Birds are synonymous with flight and as such are a potent symbol and embodiment of many of humanity's hopes and dreams. They hint at both the human and the divine spirit through their soaring freedom of movement and their linking of earth and sky. We can trace bird imagery from the cave paintings of the Palaeolithic era to the present day and across all world cultures. While artists have historically created images of birds for the purposes of scientific inquiry, taxonomy or spiritual symbolism, rarely are birds painted with the skill and integrity afforded to them by Cooper.

The Passenger pigeon referred to in Audubon's quote were once the most populous bird in North America, they migrated in flocks of billions. Sadly, in just 50 or 60 years, they were gone — habitats were destroyed, hunters were voracious, the Passenger pigeon was extinct. Pigeons are seemingly expendable birds; the pigeon is considered to be a pest, a 'rat of the sky'. Cooper represents them differently with regal poses, lively gatherings, and in calm repose. In his watercolour painting *Feral pigeons*, 2014, he shows the iridescent colours of the throat and breast feathers in contrast to the light and dark greys of the head, body and wings. The proud look of the strutting pigeon can be attributed to Cooper's concise portrayal of this common bird, his treatment of its plumage laid against the rusty iron and worn paint work is just magical.

Cooper's oil painting *Rainbows on the Moor*, 2012, which appears on the front cover of his biography by Penny Olsen, *William T Cooper: An eye for nature*, depicts these brilliantly coloured birds in their natural habitat. Cooper is a genius at outlining their shapes and movement. The red, orange, greens and soft blue of their plumage creating a frisson of excitement as ominous dark clouds form in the background. His attention to sunlight and shade is as skilful as his rendering of the birds and foliage themselves. Perched on the flower spike of a grass tree, their life and vitality reverberates across the surface of the painting, it is almost as if the lorikeets are energised by the approaching storm.

*Three species of rosella*, 1970, shows an extraordinary diversity of colour combinations, not what we expect when we think of a rosella. From pale lemon yellow to burnt orange and deep midnight blue, the birds illustrate Cooper's skill not only with watercolours and composition, but his ability to observe and create an uncanny presence in a painting. Similarly, we can see in his work *Superb fruit dove*, 2014 not only the distinctive colouring of the birds but also the plump, purplish fruit of the rainforest that nourishes the pair of doves. This for me is the real genius of Cooper's work. They are carefully posed, allowing us to observe and understand the anatomy of the bird, they are in scale with the landscape and yet they are painterly and tenderly drawn.

Legendary wildlife filmmaker Sir David Attenborough viewed William T Cooper as "Australia's greatest living scientific painter of birds," adding, "he is possibly the best in the world." The self-taught artist was the subject of Attenborough's 1993 TV documentary *Portrait Painter to the Birds* and the two men became good friends. In 2014 Sara Scragg made a documentary titled *Birdman: The Art of William T Cooper*, which we

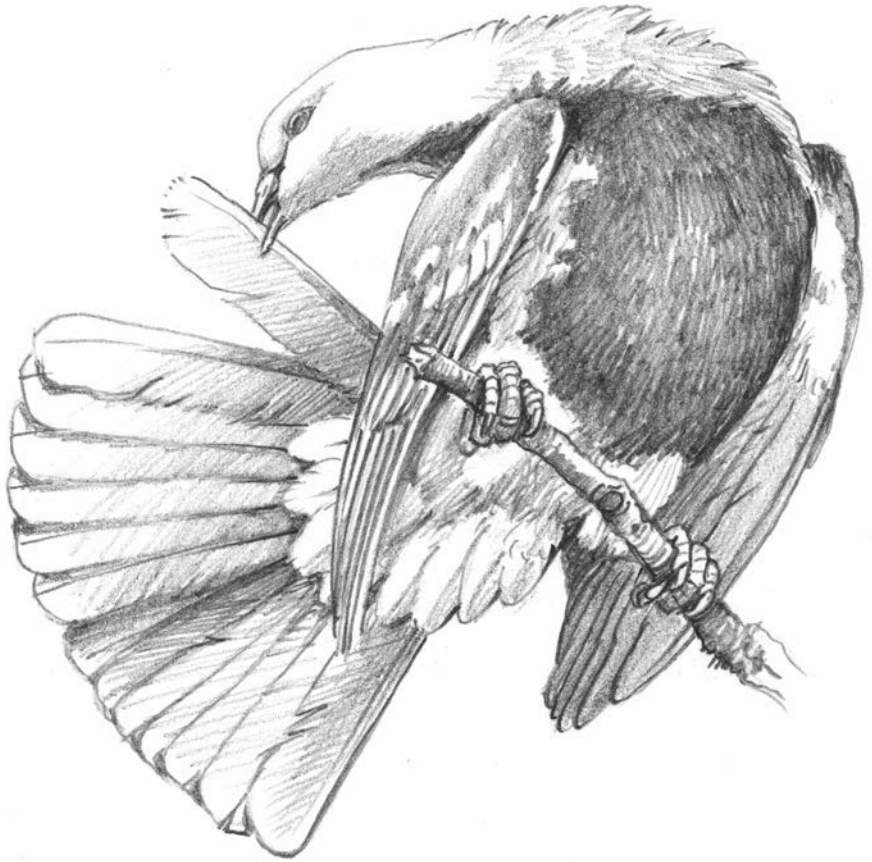
have screening that follows the artist's development from a landscape painter to a world-renowned painter of birds. Cooper had his final exhibition at Morpeth Gallery in 2014 where all works sold out in less than an hour, a major achievement that very few artists ever experience.

In 1992 the Academy of Natural Sciences Philadelphia USA presented Cooper with their gold medal for distinction in natural history art- the first and only Australian recipient in its 190-year history. In 1994, Cooper was awarded the Order of Australia (AO) in recognition of his contribution to art and natural history. Cooper was an artist who deftly crossed the boundary between science and art, 'digging it out of stale museum cases', he reinvigorated the art of scientific illustration. Cooper proved that these two fields of study are not at odds with each other but rather symbiotic; in his work each supports the other.

JULIE SKATE

Director, Artspace Mackay  
Mackay Regional Council





**William T. COOPER** *Wompoo Fruit-dove, calling posture, underwing, alert posture on nest, preening (detail)*. 2005-09. Watercolour and pencil. Collection of Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Image courtesy of William T. Cooper.

Image overleaf: **William T. COOPER** *Sharing the seep*. 2012. Acrylic on board. Private collection. Image courtesy William T. Cooper.







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2012

# William T. Cooper *Brought to Life*

**William T. COOPER 1934 - 2015**, born Newcastle NSW

*Fruits of the tropical rainforest* 2004.  
Watercolour. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Red-legged pademelon* 2005-09.  
Watercolour. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Musky-rat kangaroo* undated.  
Watercolour. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Collector's edition cover design* 2005-09. Watercolour. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Australian bush-turkey* undated.  
Watercolour. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Green ringtail possum (head and torso)* 2004. Watercolour. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Rose crowned pigeon calling, uppertail; rose crowned pigeon - western race* 2005-09. Watercolour and pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Crimson rosella* 2005-09. Watercolour. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Wompoo fruit-dove calling posture, underwing, alert posture on nest, preening* 2005-09. Watercolour and pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Common Bronzewing pigeon bowing, stretching tail and wing, preening* 2005-09. Watercolour and pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Common Bronzewing pigeon upper underwing and upper tail pattern* 2005-09. Watercolour. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Male crested Bronzewing pigeon pre-combat, underwing, bowing display* 2005-09. Watercolour and pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Sketch of basket and tracksuit pants* undated. Pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Sketch of Wendy at work* undated. Pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Sketch of woman dressing* undated. Pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Sketch of lion cub head* undated. Ink and pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Sketch of boat, boat house and lantana* undated. Pencil sketch. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, 2012.

*Bar-shouldered dove* 2009. Watercolour and gouache over pencil. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, June 2015.

*Superb fruit-dove* 2005-09. Watercolour and gouache over pencil. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, June 2015.

*Rose-crowned fruit-dove* 2005-09. Watercolour and gouache over pencil. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, June 2015.

*Banded fruit-dove* 2005-09. Watercolour and gouache over pencil. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, June 2015.

*Wompoo fruit-dove* 2008. Watercolour and gouache over pencil. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, June 2015.

*Orange-bellied fruit-dove* 2005-09. Watercolour and gouache over pencil. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, June 2015.

*Topknot pigeon* 2005. Watercolour and gouache over pencil. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, June 2015.

*New Zealand pigeon* 2005-09. Watercolour and gouache over pencil. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Purchased, June 2015.

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*Bourke's parrot; elegant parrot; blue-winged parrot* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Turquoise parrot; turquoise parrot; scarlett-chested parrot* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Orange-bellied parrot; rock parrot* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.



*Cloncurry parrot; Mallee ringneck parrot; Port Lincoln parrot* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Galah* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Australian king parrot* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Palm cockatoo* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Sulphur-crested cockatoo, blue-eyed cockatoo* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Cockatiel* 1970 Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia

*Crimson rosella; crimson rosella; eastern rosella* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia

*Major Mitchell's cockatoo; citron-crested cockatoo, lesser sulphur-crested cockatoo* 1970 Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia

*Yellow-faced Amazon* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Imperial amazon* 1971. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*St. Lucia amazon* 1972. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Yellow-tailed cockatoo, and the white-tailed cockatoo, Eastern Australia* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Ambonia king parrot; green-winged king parrot; green-winged king parrot* 1971. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Dusky lory* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Three species of rosella* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Three species of parrot* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

*Australian king parrot* 1970. Watercolour. Pictures Collection, National Library of Australia.

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Rainbows on the moor 2012. Oil on canvas. 71 x 88 cm. Private collection.

Sharing the seep 2012. Acrylic on board. 85 x 60 cm. Private collection.



Installation photograph of *William T. Cooper: Brought to life* at Artspace Mackay, Mackay Regional Council 2017.

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