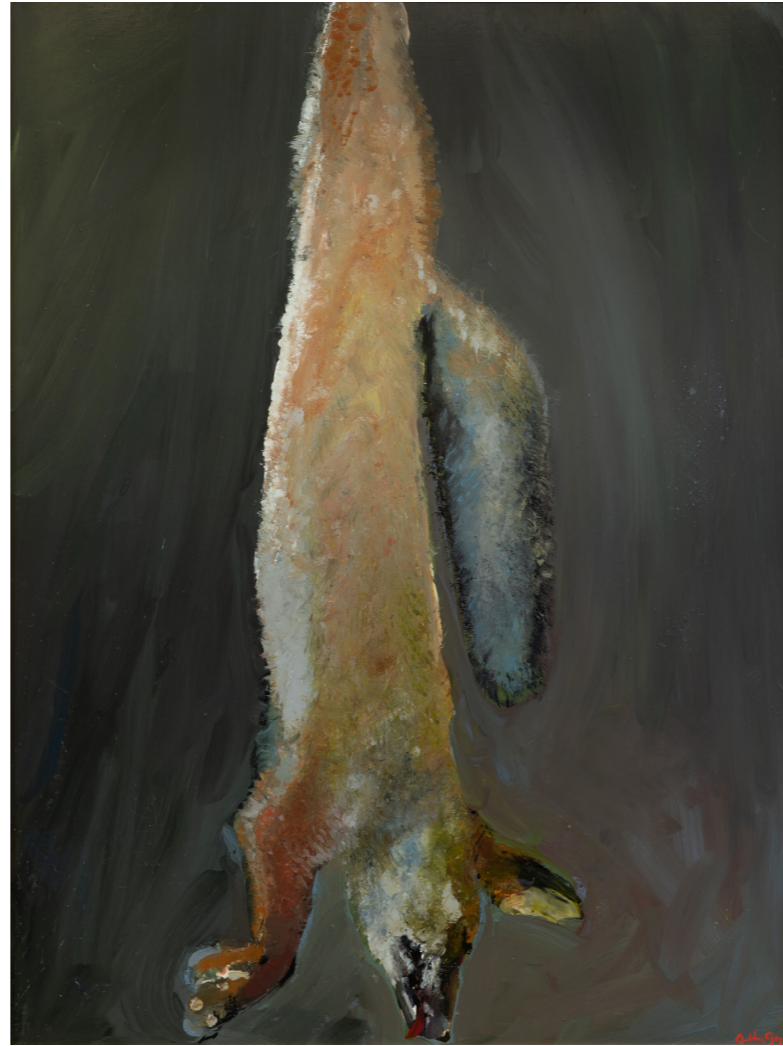




Kate Ellis, *Untitled (Poodle/Human)*, 2018, beeswax, damar resin, silk thread, velvet cushion, birch wood, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Fox*, 1990, oil on board, 122 x 92 x 6cm. Collection of Western Plains Cultural Centre. Gift of Arthur & Yvonne Boyd 1996.

Front Cover: Judith Nangala Crispin, *There's a Door inside a Nebula - Where the Dead go through. Marvin and Dorothy, still spinning, find one another on the other side of the stars*, 2025, Luma-chrome glass print, cliché-verre, chemigram. Cat-killed New York chipmunk and grey squirrel on fibre paper. Re-exposed with san, ochre, wax, house paint, Vegemite and sand. First exposure 13 hours under perspex in New York. Second exposure, 36 hours in a Braidwoodgreenhouse. Unique archived pigment print on Bayta II handmade paper, annotated in gold and silver leaf, on aluminium composite substrate. 75 x 66cm. Collection of the artist.

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THE DEATH OF THE ANIMAL



15 November 2025 - 1 February 2026

Death is a constant presence in the natural world, **yet humanity's response to it has never been so.**

Throughout art history, the animal carcass has been used as a symbol to provoke emotional and moral responses to death, acting as a silent gauge, tracing humanity's changing relationship with nature, mortality and morality. Once capable of awakening reverence or sorrow, the image of the dead animal has shifted from a symbol to a spectacle that has grown cold in the modern eye. *Carcass: The Death of the Animal* traces not only how a carcass is shown through art, but how humanity's reaction to this visual symbol of death and mortality has changed, contemplating how a **contemporary audience looks but no longer feels when confronting death.**

Beginning with the moral theatre of religious and spiritually inspired art, the exhibition transports the viewer into a world where the carcass was transformed into allegory of divine triumph, virtue, and the taming of primal impulses and instincts. Within these works, artists utilised the symbol of the carcass to evoke a sense of awe and moral affirmation within the viewer, rather than pity or tragedy at the loss of life. In William Strutt's *'David's First Victory'* the bodies of the slain bear and lion take up the majority of the canvas. The figures occupy the entire width of the image, with their killer standing above them. This triangular composition demonstrates a hierarchical relationship between humans and the natural world, that places divinity and humanity above, and as such superior to, animal life. When viewed alongside *'Study of a dead lion (Study for 'David's first Victory')* and *'Study of Dead Lion'* the animals' slightly scrunched facial muscles suggest a lingering ferocity, even in death. These were mighty creatures to be feared and representative of primal, animal instinct and by being killed, impulse and instinct are shown as being ruled over by human and divine morality. This is furthered by the work of Judith Nangala Crispin, whilst, created in a contemporary context, utilised religious geometry in their composition. Both the circle and a pointed segmental arch bring to mind the iconographic panels found in Christian churches and Buddhist temples which inspire awe not pity, positioning the death within these works as transcendent and reverent rather than tragic.

In contrast to this moral grandeur, the rise of Romanticism in the late 18th century conveyed death as a moment where beauty and violence collided. Using the imagery and motif of the hunt, these artists redefined the symbol of the carcass, moving it away from divine or moral victory to something more human, more mortal. It became an artistic subject that stirred awe, empathy and melancholy in the viewer. Neville Cayley's *'Shot Duck'* is an example of how artists turn death into beauty. The iridescence of the blue on the inside of the wings, the soft texture of the duck's feathers and the tenderness with which the duck's limp form falls through the sky turns the dead form into something hauntingly beautiful. Drawn in by allure, rather than a gruesome approach to death, the viewer is meant to feel conflicted between awe and enchantment, and shock and sorrow. It challenges the viewer and reveals an uncomfortable truth, in that one's emotional response to death is often shaped by beauty and desirability. We often grieve the loss of something pleasant or feel awe and empathy for that which is beautiful, such as the *'Shot Duck'*, but overlook the death of anything which repels us. Emphasising this within humanity's often conflicted relationship with nature, these works also reveal a human desire to possess and preserve that which has been conquered, similar to a hunter mounting their prey as a trophy.

Moving into the Twentieth century, the quiet reverence artists afforded to the carcass disappeared. Instead, it became a shocking and confronting symbol of environmental fragility and human disregard. Rather than create a sorrowful image by highlighting beauty within death, these artists leant into harshness and raw brutality to create a sense of confrontation. This can be seen in Albert Tucker's *'Study of a Desiccated Horse'*, where the painful, exposed bleach bones become an unsettling image for the viewer, guilt for the unnecessarily savage condition of the animal. Representing the calcified scars of human interference upon the Earth, the carcass is no longer represented as a whole animal, but rather as skeletal structure or gnarled and hacked lumps of flesh, such as in David Moore's *'Drought Cairo Station, Western New South Wales'*. These images of death provoke an instant sense of shock within the viewer, when recognised as a carcass, creating an unsettling awareness of death that demands attention but also creates unease, as if forcing the viewer to come to terms with their own role in the animal's decay, our possible dehumanisation and detachment to its demise.

Whilst humanity has a role to play in death, in particular the death of animals, contemporary audiences have become apathetic to its presence. Death has now become conceptualised, commodified, and desensitised, to the point where life is easily objectified if it is not human. Guy Maestri's *'Miracle Mike'* and Michiko Kon's *'Boot of Shrimps'* are examples of artworks where death is present and is a key feature of the work, yet are strangely unacknowledged by both the artist and the viewer. Despite being built by the carcasses of shrimps, Kon's work doesn't engage the viewer with a sense of sorrow or horror at that loss, instead the lighting of the photograph brings focus onto the structure, texture and construction of the boot. Similarly, Maestri's work, a headless chicken, doesn't engage with the death of this animal, but instead on its position in pop culture as a symbol of absurdity and spectacle. The lack of emotional connection between these works and the viewer, is meant to provoke questioning; Why is it we are now numb to death? When did suffering become content? Where has our empathy and compassion for animals gone? A contemporary audience sees death and simply looks without feeling.

Overall, *Carcass: The Death of the Animal*, is not simply an exhibition of dead animals meant to shock and horrify audiences. Instead, it's a journey and discussion through the history of how humans interact with death, particularly that of the natural world. From reverence and respect, to shock and sorrow, to horror and unease, and now to numbness, the use of a carcass in art transforms alongside humanity's relationship to animals, showcasing how **a carcass is a symbol greater than the death it visualises.**

Natasha Lunniss



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Joseph McGlennon, *Agnus Dei*, 2012, Giclee digital print on archival Hahnemuhle Fine Art Paper, 100 x 100cm. Collection of the Western Plains Cultural Centre. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Kimberly Holden, 2016.