

## Catherine Clover

*The Ambassadors* (2019)

Ferntree Gully Library

Vinyl lettering on glass (internal eastern wall of the library)

Two vinyl banners (external southern wall of the library)

As part of Immerse 2019

Known as Bulen-Bulen to the Wurundjeri people, the local Aboriginal people of this area, the Ancestors granted Superb Lyrebirds the power to speak to all the birds and are known, not as mimics or deceivers, but as *ambassadors*.

Each window of the eastern wall of the library has the voice of a Superb Lyrebird transcribed using the phonetic words naturalists identify in bird field guides. All the songs are from a single bird, the Superb Lyrebird. Each song has a separate window. The bird sings a short amount of its own song, followed by brief snatches of a kookaburra, a boo book, a currawong and so on, then returns its own song again. Examples of how the Superb Lyrebirds mix their mimicry with their own song can be seen on the two vinyl banners installed on the south facing external wall of the library. Each banner represents one lyrebird singing in the early dawn of a cold winter's morning in Sherbrooke Forest. Each bird's song is very similar, but not quite the same.

On the windows the songs are separated so it's easier for a human reader to see the characteristics of each voice. The texts are scores or prompts for the reader to read (sing) aloud and they also function as a primer, a starting point for learning a language. Like us, Superb Lyrebirds learn their songs from a young age and continue learning throughout their lives. Younger lyrebirds can mimic 6 or 7 birds, while mature birds can mimic 13 or 14. Younger birds tend to be fast and less accurate, but with experience they learn to slow down and achieve greater fluency. Older birds are masters of their mimicry and use pace and timing effortlessly as they imitate numerous birds. Both male and female lyrebirds sing.

This installation has seven songs, suggesting a younger lyrebird that is still learning its repertoire. At the performance, four voices sing. Roseanne Bartley, Merryn Byrne, Kiri Wickes and Melanie Richard study the scores to learn the lyrebird's skill. They use the scores to sound the songs and understand how the lyrebird mimics. The performers attempt to mimic the lyrebird's mimicry and in so doing they try to emulate the diplomatic expertise of the lyrebird.

While birdsong can be similar in different places around the world, it can also be highly localised and indicate a particular place at a particular time. Birdsong is a good indicator of the environmental health of a place. The birds that these lyrebirds mimic are local to Sherbrooke Forest – Eastern Whipbird, Yellow-Tailed Black Cockatoo, Red Wattlebird, Laughing Kookaburra, Southern Boobook, Common Blackbird, Pied Currawong. Sonically, the lyrebirds can be understood as not only ambassadorial in their role in the forest but also as archivists documenting the forest's contemporary soundscape.