

A folio of the universe

Where lies the bridge between pure fate and thinking?

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

An exhibition of works by Melbourne artist Kristin Headlam, *The Universe Looks Down*, will be held in the Noel Shaw Gallery in the University of Melbourne's Baillieu Library from 23 August 2018 to 31 January 2019. The exhibition derives from the University Library's commissioning (in 2012, at the instigation of then university librarian Philip Kent) of a suite of 64 etchings in response to the long narrative poem of the same title by the eminent Australian poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe, which was published in 2005.¹

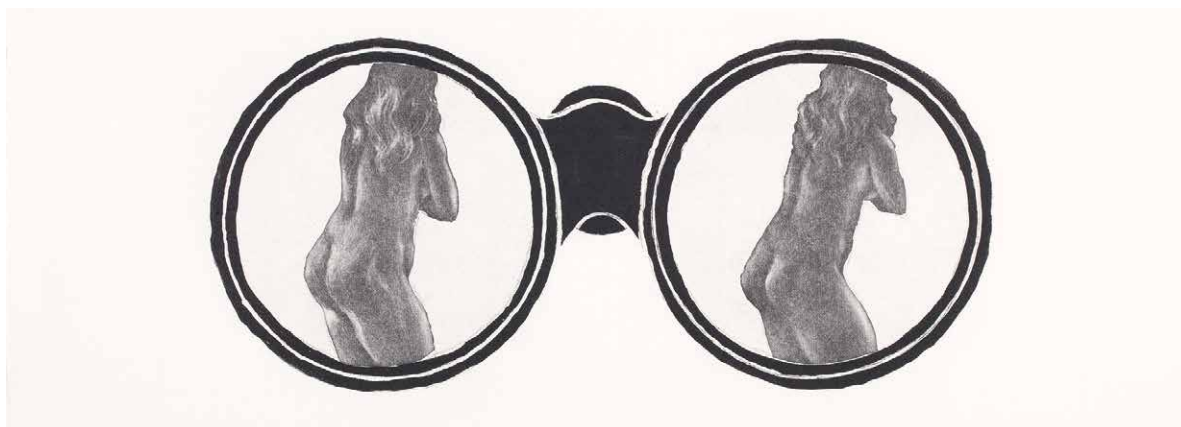
As part of this major commission, the University Library is also acquiring the artist's sketchbooks, preliminary drawings and watercolours, which demonstrate the conceptual development of the

etchings. These exploratory works, as well as a handsomely boxed set of the 64 etchings, will become part of the Rare Books Collection in the Baillieu Library. The limited edition of just 10 copies of each image has been printed by Canberra-based master-printer John Loane, with text printed by Andrew Gunnell.

Accompanying the exhibition will be a video interview with collaborators and life partners Chris Wallace-Crabbe and Kristin Headlam, produced by the university's Learning Environments team; an unfolding digitised record of Headlam's sketchbooks, documenting the evolution of her ideas and creative process via touchscreens; and a publication with a personal and reflective essay by scholar Lisa Gorton.

The exhibition *The Universe Looks Down* will be officially opened on 23 August 2018 by Jane Clark (senior curator at MONA—Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art). In parallel with this exhibition at the University of Melbourne, the etchings will be shown at the Charles Nodrum Gallery in Richmond. Following the exhibition in the Baillieu Library, *The Universe Looks Down* will be displayed at the Art Gallery of Ballarat, where Kristin Headlam is represented in the permanent collection.

Here Chris Wallace-Crabbe reflects on *The Universe Looks Down*, which he wrote over a period of 13 years, and on Headlam's artistic response to the poem.



Previous page: Kristin Headlam, *Kelvin the protestant*, 2017, etching and aquatint, 38.1 × 55.8 cm (sheet and plate), from series *The Universe Looks Down*. Commissioned 2012, acquired 2018, Rare Books Collection, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Below: Kristin Headlam, *Milena is a scribe*, 2017, etching and aquatint, 28.4 × 18.7 cm (plate), from series *The Universe Looks Down*. Commissioned 2012, acquired 2018, Rare Books Collection, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.



A long poem implies and calls for a temporal sequence of events, but what can pictures do? Whether ‘illustrations’, or something more substantial, more expressive, pictures are stationary in the flood of time. They can’t very well do that ‘one damn thing after another’. Well, only by implication, by their location in space, or on which page of a book’s progress they sit.

Pictures lack one important thing. What they miss out on is what we might call pictorial grammar. They can show us moment after moment, or else one vivid character after another, but they can’t handle cause and effect in the flow of continuous time.

Accordingly, we might ‘Put a collection of static shots together’ and suggest successive actions. On the other hand, we can tell a story, using the medium of language, and turn it into a book. And the book will have been ‘a rope of stories’, but maybe, some time later, the tale could generate a suite of prints.

Our story ravel in and
outside time
Following quest and conflict
in a way
That nicks around the pale
of history



Left: Kristin Headlam, *Moonrise*, 2017, etching and aquatint with some hand-colouring, 28.0 × 37.1 cm (sheet and plate), from series *The Universe Looks Down*. Commissioned 2012, acquired 2018, Rare Books Collection, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Below: Kristin Headlam, *Horn, the first hero*, 2017, aquatint, 37.5 × 27.3 cm (sheet), from series *The Universe Looks Down*. Commissioned 2012, acquired 2018, Rare Books Collection, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Those lines could sound dodgy or difficult enough in defining a large project, but what if it was going to be accompanied by visual components? By apparent illustrations, surely. Ah, there was the rub.

Accompany? That's a verb for you, but it might very well be needed where pictures accompany poems, or vice-versa. With *The Universe Looks Down* in its new collaboration, the etchings are not merely illustrations, yet they do spring from my poetic text in an almost parallel chain of inspiration. My long poem had been around for years, but it was only in recent times that Kristin Headlam decided to set up her visual dialogue with its implied narrative.

It was roughly eight years ago that she began to envision this.

As the oldsters used to say, this was no easy task. And it was something a good deal more than simple illustration. A partnership, rather—if we can call it such, given that I wrote the verse narrative so long ago and even far away.

Kristin Headlam defined my poem as 'a sort of mythic quest narrative', incorporating 'a female scribe called Milena, who can observe but not control the actions of other characters'. She also confessed to occasional irritation with the poem's zigzag lack of logical neatness.

Perhaps I can call on German philosophy at this point, turning its matter into my pentameters:

It is the opposite that's
good for us,
Said Schopenhauer, who
had not dreamed of me.

As for my own dreams, well the poem turned out to be full of them. *Where's home, Ulysses?* I sometimes asked myself. But that was exactly the kind of question that a longish poem might be able to demand of itself. Not just once, but frequently. Let me go back to its downright origins, then.



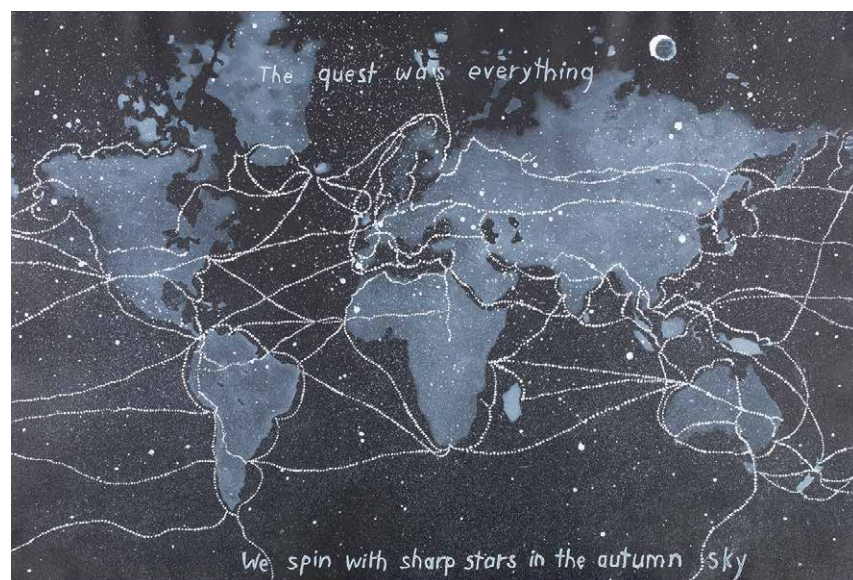
It was back in the 1960s and I, who had long wanted to spend some time in Europe, found myself instead in the United States for a year.

Such is life. I had become a visiting professor at Harvard, representing the subtle, sunburned paddocks of Australian Studies. And I had to be pretty nimble to cover what those new fields could mean for the Americans.

Although I taught a lot over there—supervised, lectured and so on—there was still time to spare: room to be creative in my own genre, poetry. And I felt like doing something hearty and extensive. Lyric poetry was all very well, but it was hors d'oeuvres rather than a roast. I was ready to eat a buffalo. Or at least to quarry history and myth.

To find what it might all be like if gold nuggets were hiding somewhere, waiting to be written, I had to sweep a lot of subjects—or topics—aside. After all, I was in danger of digesting the universe itself. Giving a good deal of thought to modern poems or plays that had been written on large antecedent subjects, I was downright discouraged. Too often the resonant theme that had charmed the poet at first was really a rusty mousetrap or a dead end. As such it would narrow an authorial range.

Below: Kristin Headlam, *The quest was everything*, 2017, etching and aquatint with some hand-colouring, 37.8 × 55.7 cm (sheet and plate), from series *The Universe Looks Down*. Commissioned 2012, acquired 2018, Rare Books Collection, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.



Yes, I wanted to write about something that had Tolkien's spaciousness, Eliot's speed and the supermarket's goodies. It had to include Australia, but also the world. It must not be cramped in historical time, nor reducible to modern politics. There had to be room in it for modern science and for inherited mythologies, as well. After thinking for a while, I cut out space travel, at least. Well, not quite.

And then there was magic. A serious writer doesn't want to lose that bag of tricks. Why be reductive when the world is wide open to you, past and present?

Above all there were my characters: diverse, lively and pan-historical, yet all on a quest that was the broad sum of their individual needs and desires. Among this array, 'Kelvin, Roger and Angelica / Know that they do not know what they should know.' Such ignorance is the fuel of narrative, of course, but it also left Kristin free to invent their appearance for herself, within easy limits of likelihood.

In the end—or from the beginning, rather—Kristin depicted the key linking figure of Milena as none other than herself. That seems fair enough, after all, specially in storytelling.

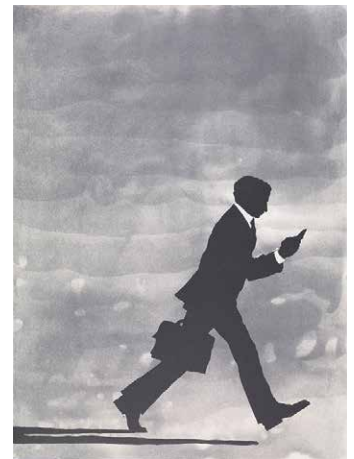
I had started by ruling out almost nothing, whether from East or West, Europe, Asia or the Pacific. Give it all global room to play itself out, I said to myself. And a virtual Noah's Arkful of characters, rushing all over our muddling, rich planet. Ah yes, characters are what narrative needs, a bustling *mélange* of them, all partly misunderstanding what they see.

All imaginations are conservative, my own included. Accordingly, I began to set up my opening protagonist, Horn, in a medieval world. You could say that he felt equidistant from knighthood, world exploration and the dark labs of early science. I didn't see all that clearly yet but, according to the invisible laws of narrative, began to create him and then see where his steed's hooves would lead me. It wouldn't be entirely outside history, nor beyond our planet, but the bounds were likely to be pretty wide and picturesque. As the opening declared, 'Our story ravel[s] in and outside time'. And, having said that, I was apparently going somewhere. The slow process was under way.

Storytelling is a strange business, even when carried out in verse. What was going to happen to Horn? And to the other, colourfully named characters I was going to invent? I would find out in due course.

Right: Kristin Headlam, *Roly*, 2017, aquatint, 37.5 × 27.4 cm (sheet), from series *The Universe Looks Down*. Commissioned 2012, acquired 2018, Rare Books Collection, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Below: Kristin Headlam, *Roger*, 2017, aquatint, 55.8 × 38.0 cm (sheet), from series *The Universe Looks Down*. Commissioned 2012, acquired 2018, Rare Books Collection, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.



Verse-forms are there to help us. It's possible that you could even say that of Pound's sprawling *Cantos*. And those are utterly unlike any visual image or set of images. But stanzas and rhymes can be comforting: they can add shape to comfort the reader, who is very likely to gain pleasure from repetition, rhyme and regularity. They link this long poem, too, with centuries of past narrative poems about protagonists exploring dangerous, exotic climes and getting into a heck of a lot of trouble along the way. That's heroism for you.



But this is where the fun begins, or rather the task. For the visual artist has to find images that spring, initially, from the text, and which go on to become a compound work of art, which has become *The Universe Looks Down* in the language of its images. So this was what Kristin Headlam set herself to do, in 2011: set herself, that is, to digest the long narrative, in its twists and turns, as well as absorbing the narrator's interjections.

Yes, Milena's recurrent voice had to be part of the game, but how could an illustrating artist spell out the fact that Milena was—recurrently—a controlling narrator, given to intervention? What about the dangerous fact that 'my saga was to be temporarily plural, ... also geographically'? The visual artist would have to devise her own strategies of response.

An implicit interaction that came to surprise the artist at her task was summed up by Kristin in these terms: 'As I drew and tried various female prototypes, they slowly became less and less like goddesses and fortune tellers, and more and more like—me!'

She must have been perplexed at times about the nature of her enterprise: whether it was best to represent main themes of the poem—its direction, if you like—or

else to seize on figures, moments and landscapes that were downright picturesque. Also there was the puzzle she admits when she writes about the final project, 'those drawings I'd done, with little thought how they'd translate to etching'.

Her treatment of its geography brings us back to the visual meanings of *The Universe Looks Down*. For all that persuasive Milena 'believes the universe to be absurd', some depictions of it and its inhabitants have to be persuasive, or the show won't go on. As I have already suggested, it was Kristin's task to read and digest the crammed narrative, then to compose an archipelago of her own images. Not that her metaphorical archipelago would be a direct map of the world, or universe—other than as a huge, articulated metaphor of it all.

One of her earlier and loveliest images was the landscape with a yellow rising moon, which now accompanies the explicit inquiry, 'Is this the very root of consciousness?' And, as inquiries go, this is a major topic indeed, one that treads both the religious landscape and our very being. Yes, the poetry does grapple with metaphysical questions, as well as zooming or treading around our planet. To which end, I should add that one of her earliest prints for the

project emerged as a dark world-map with cloudy continents, zigzagged across with ever so many white lines of exploration.

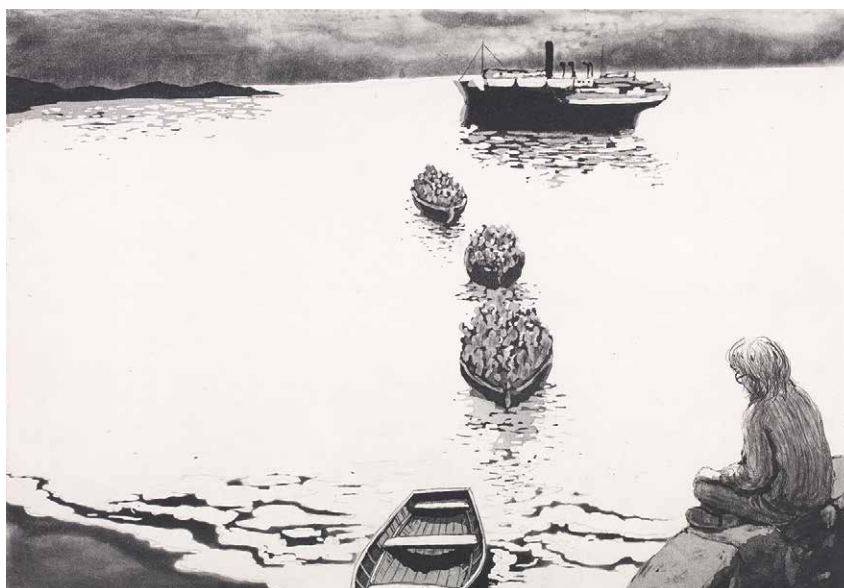
Actually, this map resembles Milena's textual mapping—in cantos full of language, as we are told in the epilogue, which dares to declare that:

Now she is finished. Her
sometime tabula rasa
Is blackened by the meaning
that she found
And turned, little by little,
into tellings.

Hers and the poet's, indeed. But Kristin's job-in-hand then would be the complex burden of a translator, not from language to language, but out of an abstract aural idiom into (let's not beat about the bush) *pictures*. Images that begin in ink and watercolour, and finally morph into etchings. All art is a series of slow, constructive processes.

Except when it has been rapid, of course. But that's what is called a moment of inspiration, and really good luck for somebody.

Of course the crossing of genres is part of the aesthetic charm of this work. After all, it was the *universe* we were depicting, that muddled assemblage of everything inside and outside a possible Creator's brainpan.



It somehow had to include both an alchemist and a biplane, *inter alia*. It needed to take place in many locations, across both hemispheres. It had room for magic as well as chemistry—and for a coffee-shop.

More than that, even a geodesic dome. As the poem asks: 'Is this the very root of consciousness?' Whatever the answer to that, a story needs vivid characters, humans who sound or look different from one another. To set the whole show going, I had needed to find and create Horn, 'the first hero'.

Well, as his name suggested, there would be an erotic encounter, early

on. It was only in passing, with an innkeeper's maid. Chaucer could have been looking over my shoulder.

When Kristin came to recreate him, she produced a strong, dark figure, riding along in darkness 'before cliffs the colour of malachite'. Whereas Angelica 'softly cast ashore', looked down on boatloads of soldiers coming from their ship at what might well have been Gallipoli.

Another figure visually became an empty pair of spectacles looking through eucalyptus leaves: symbol, rather than figure, shall we say? Moreover, at one point Roger was depicted as a lanky, traditional

Kristin Headlam, *Owl*, 2017, etching and aquatint, 37.2 × 27.0 cm (sheet and plate), from series *The Universe Looks Down*. Commissioned 2012, acquired 2018, Rare Books Collection, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

swagman. As both poet and printmaker had been depicting the universe, after all, just about anything was possible, even a bloody head. Or an owl, no doubt as wise as itself.

In one of Kristin's lovely moments of invention, the nude figure of a young woman can be seen through the twin lenses of protestant Kelvin's binoculars. At that moment, the girl is only what he sees. That's life, the artist playfully implied. On the other hand completely, the character of Roly can be seen in profile, striding along with a dark suit and a briefcase. As we all know too well, work is everywhere.

You will realise from these diverse details that the artist's invention did not merely illustrate the poem, but seized upon stanzas or moments and leapt inventively beyond them, taking a hint or glimmer and galloping with it. This was the other face of her wish to include the sheer outward plainness of everyday life.

I say the other face, but Kristin admits that she identified readily with Milena and, somewhere along the line, 'denied faces to all other characters', in an inky decision. As we might conclude, they are all mere action, to her, but our 'intercessor and scribe' Milena is the very core of consciousness. And a spirit of humanity or common sense, I might

add. Accordingly, she 'had grown sick to death of the game called war'. And this realisation is only one focus in the many-stranded drama of our final folio, our digressive long-term production. After all, as the poem says:

A storyteller grips the tiller
of fate
And memory is the active
root of power.

Of course hungry memory played a huge, painted part in *The Universe Looks Down*. As you might say, the past is a boundless muse.

It is reasonable to claim that for each of us the developing project roused a rambling imagination, and came to feed 'our hunger for reality'. Even in the long run of years the folio has continued to be fun—and fun is not to be neglected among the everyday virtues. It has modest affinities with Paradise.

Or else, as the poem has admitted:

Our story ravel in and
outside time
Following quest and conflict
in a way
That nicks around the pale
of history
Through the fantastical flora
we sometimes dream
Or well might dream.

Professor Chris Wallace-Crabbe AM, BA, MA, LLD (*Honoris causa*), is a poet, essayist, literary critic and teacher. His appointments at the University of Melbourne have included head of the Department of English (1974–76 and 1984–85) and reader in English from 1977; in 1987 he was appointed to a personal chair, and since 1998 has been professor emeritus in the School of Culture and Communication. He is the partner of artist Kristin Headlam.

The exhibition *The Universe Looks Down* will be on display in the Noel Shaw Gallery, first floor, Baillieu Library, from 23 August 2018 to 31 January 2019.

1 Chris Wallace-Crabbe, *The Universe Looks Down*, Blackheath, NSW: Brandt & Schlesinger, 2005.

