INTRODUCTION

I am standing on Angel Island, a tiny scrap of land on the western rim of the Australian continent. Engraved on large rocks above me, life-size images of a now-extinct animal appear to float in the dry winter air. The thylacine was a striped, dog-like marsupial with a coughing bark and a backward-facing pouch. The species disappeared from the mainland of Australia more than 3000 years ago.¹ A remnant population that survived on the island of Tasmania, adjacent to the southern coast of the continent, were more or less exterminated by 1936. The Yaburara people who incised these engravings were also described as “extinct” in a survey of Aboriginal groups in 1974. This is a place of profound absences.

On a peninsula called Murujuga not far from Angel Island it is possible to spend hours roaming engraving sites looking for thylacine images. Many engravings face east and the morning sun bleaches out the shallow etchings. Sometimes the uneven surface of a rock tricks the mind into imagining shapes, or weathering and chipping seems to suggest the body of an animal or a human figure that is not even there. As the day moves on and the temperature gets hotter, images seem to appear and disappear. They give the engravings an elusive quality and the landscape an uncanny atmosphere. Most engraving sites are located along dozens of creek beds that furrow the small stony hills. In the cyclone season they are filled with deep pools, cascades and tall reeds. In dry periods the streams are reduced to muddy pools around which countless animal prints, trails and droppings are visible on the ground. A euro hops silently over a pile of rocks that clink occasionally where they are unstable and circling osprey testify to the fertility of this place where the Yaburara people once gathered to eat shellfish and turtle, to sing songs and tell stories.

¹ When using the term ‘species’ I am always aware that it encompasses individual animals. In the context of extinction, the use of this collective noun is significant. The word ‘extinction’ originally referred to a human family or race that had come to an end having no living representative or “without progressive succession”. Eventually the word was applied to species of animal or plant. The first example of this use given by the Oxford English Dictionary is a quotation from A. R. Wallace’s Island Life: “the most effective agent in the extinction of species is the pressure of other species”.

After hours of searching I find an undocumented engraving of a thylacine climbing the rocks. He is standing with his hind legs in a small saucer-shaped depression while leaning his front paws against a crack in the rock. His sexual organs are included in the picture and, typical of a thylacine, they protrude to the rear. A long straight tail is etched as if it were an extension of the animal’s back, precisely as it appears in some early twentieth century films and photographs of thylacines in zoos. On the highest and largest rocks in the landscape one of a pair of engraved thylacines has a human-like hand on his front leg, with five fingers fully extended, and his tail is turned up. Reports of thylacines in similar positions in the wild suggest both these animals are in a state of arousal or excitement. To the right of this image there is a tiny human figure of the type that often signifies an Aboriginal ancestral being. In terms of their vitality, size and antiquity the engravings are awe-inspiring.

Why do humans draw pictures of nonhuman animals in the way that they do? How did these images impact on the lives of the particular species they depict? These questions motivated the research for this book. For instance, although relatively little is known about the meaning of individual Aboriginal rock engravings, it seems that, as a whole, they carry multiple cultural references for Australia’s Aboriginal people.² They may commemorate an event such as a successful hunt or catch, or be visual aids to assist in the recognition of species. Other images were designed to perpetuate and nourish the environment. Archaeologists believe that the existence or function of some figures in rock engravings was to conserve particular species, while other images may have been designed to ensure the fertility of country and of all living creatures. These special engravings were probably associated with thalu or ‘increase’ sites, totemic centres where ceremonies and songs were performed to maintain and regulate the environment.³

Anthropologist Paul Tacon points out that art objects not only reflect the aesthetic preferences of the people who produce them “but also express aspects of economics, philosophy, social relations, cosmology, and world-view”.⁴ This statement holds true for European

³ Berndt et al., Aboriginal Australian Art, 28–50; Vinnicombe, Dampier Archaeological Project, 6.
⁴ Tacon, “Art and the Essence of Being,” 246. In Marvelous Possessions, 4, Stephen Greenblatt proposes that "representational strategies are ideologically