I can find no rest. My head is filled with horrible images. I can’t say I actually see them, it’s more that I feel them. It seems that my mouth is full of birds which I crunch between my teeth. Their feathers, their blood and broken bones are choking me. I carry on my work as a secretary.

—Caryl Churchill and David Lan, “A Mouthful of Birds”

Mission moves through a black tunnel, which opens onto a series of dioramas: The last deer lemur falls to a hunter’s arrow. Passenger pigeons rain from the trees to salvos of gunfire and plump down on the plates of fat bankers and politicians with their gold watch chains and gold fillings. The humans belch out the last passenger pigeons. The last Tasmanian wolf limps through a blue twilight, one leg shattered by a hunter’s bullet.

—William Burroughs, Ghost of Chance

Alcyone... found herself flying, beating the air with wings newly-formed. Changed into a sorrowing bird, she skimmed the surface of the waves. As she flew, a plaintive sound, like the lament of someone stricken with grief, came harshly from the slender beak that was her mouth.

—Ovid, Metamorphoses

Near Ship Cove, Cook’s men blasted 30 birds out of their trees in one day, including 12 kererū, four South Island Kokako, two red-coloured parakeets, four saddlebacks and one falcon. Virtually all are today close to extinction or extremely rare.

—Geoff Park, Nga Uruora

Some art produced over the last decade or so looks almost tailor-made for audiences attentive to meditations and disquisitions on the conflicted relations between humans and animals. Such art seems eagerly to anticipate response from readers of the Society and Animals journal for instance, or books like Steve Baker’s The Postmodern Animal (2000). There is also much extraordinary work today that resists our
theorizations as powerfully as it calls them forth; work that seems so deeply the product of a vision in which the fates of humanity and animality coincide, that we are confronted not with a program but nothing less than a new creaturely imaginary. The art of New Zealand painter Bill Hammond falls into this latter category.

We can enter Bill Hammond’s world via the space between his thumb and forefinger. This space, when not occupied by the painter’s brush or pen, offers a passage through from one side of the hand to the other, perhaps from the open and more public exterior of the hand to a cupped and partially hidden interior. Thumbs and forefingers can also form convenient viewfinders. As with all such narrow openings, Hammond’s ready viewfinder, serving as loupe or improvised spyglass, facilitates a cropping out of the immediate environment and a peering through into another world entirely. Legend has it that when once asked by a tradesman where he got his ideas from for his paintings, Hammond replied that he painted everything carried on the air that passed between his finger and thumb as he walked along. No doubt the answer gave that tradesman pause for thought. Think of a teeming host of unseen beings filling the air like winged dust mites and animalcules, funneled through a space about two inches square. Perhaps Hammond had been plucking the ectoplasmic strings and streaks of light that have been streaming around the harbor and hills of Lyttelton ever since Peter Jackson gave them a filmic body in his 1996 horror movie The Frighteners, set in this same port town. What Hammond actually intended is hard to say, but what an apt alibi for a painter of aerial visions that contract and expand between the miniaturizations of petite decorative friezes and the epic scale of panoramic prospects. Hammond’s cryptic analogy is also a way of affirming an implicit assumption of his art: that the fantastic is always close at hand, and that whimsical metaphors are endemic.

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1 Bill Hammond lives and works in the port town of Lyttelton, in New Zealand’s South Island. The art writer Gwyneth Porter has suggested that Hammond’s location in Lyttelton, living, and until recently, painting, in his large old house on the hill set among the trees, parallels the example of W. B. Yeats, “a fellow archaic with a strong belief in the invisible world around him.” Porter comments: “It is easy to imagine that Hammond’s present output might belong to….a Yeatsian tradition without even taking into account that Yeats, like Hammond, chose to live in a small, castle-like house away from the city and its dialogue. Surely the inexplicable, timeless worlds that Hammond now paints must be easier to see when one looks out, as Lyttelton does, from the dark side of the rim of a vast, ancient and apparently extinct volcano, upon the vast, ancient Banks Peninsula landscape” (Kraus et al. 1999, 20).