

Birds & Language





# Birds & Language

Curated by Madeleine Kelly

Glenn Barkley

Barbara Campbell

Fernando do Campo

Eugene Carchesio

Ashley Eriksmoen

Emily Floyd

Liam Garstang

Danie Mellor

NOT

Bilinyarra Nabegeyo

Djawida Nadjongorle

Raquel Ormella

Debra Porch

Marie Celine Porkalari

Joan Ross

Laurens Tan

Hollis Taylor

John Tonkin

Jenny Watson

Louise Weaver

John Wolseley

WOLLONGONG ART GALLERY

## Foreword

The nature of language, its origins and its integral role as a rich vehicle to communicate ideas is fundamental to our shared humanity. But are humans unique in this respect, or is language ubiquitous within the diverse tapestry of life and how much does human language development owe to or share with these other language forms?

Within human language words are in and of themselves inert, they are merely symbols to which we attach meaning. There is no objective truth or reality in words. How language is used, and knowledge is applied is a construct of our social behaviour very much dependent on the respective culture and its conventions and beliefs.

So, what do we know about other possible language modalities and forms and how do we approach and respond to them?

It is an intriguing proposition and one creatively explored in curator Madeleine Kelly's exhibition *Birds & Language* at Wollongong Art Gallery. The exhibition includes the work of twenty-one Australian artists working across diverse practices

who interrogate the meaning of language and re-imagine our relationship with non-human life. The exhibition also incorporates works from WAG's art collection including Aboriginal artworks from Western Arnhem Land and the Tiwi islands.

The use of signs, symbolism and visual language is fundamental to the way that artists communicate. *Birds & Language* is a unique opportunity to view other perspectives and understanding on the intricacies of language and communication and the role artists can play in decoding often complex ideas and make them accessible to others through their work.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the dedication and vision of guest curator Madeleine Kelly and we would also like to take this opportunity to thank the participating artists for sharing their visions with us. We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

John Monteleone  
Gallery Program Director



Danie Mellor, *Marri diramu: balam dugurrrba*, 2016, mixed media on Saunders Waterford paper with wash, glitter and Swarovski crystal, 147 x 97 cm.





## Birds & Language

The biological origin of language might remain a mystery to linguists, but it is in biology that language begins. From the structured code of DNA to the signals that pass through plant and fungi mycorrhizal networks, in nature as in culture, an exchange occurs and meaning is made. We, each of us, possess the innate ability to understand the signals our being provides the vessel for — and the ability to attune ourselves to those we don't.

Perhaps this is why we humans have borrowed birds for so many of our own symbolic quests and known their meanings as our own. The human desire to read the language of birds, to know birds as their own language might have grown out of our linguistic similarities: birdsong and human voices move through air and over land; they mediate and are mediated by sky, earth and all between. In Australia, it is the chestnut-crowned babbler dropping clues to the origin of human phoneme switching, and our eucalypts have shaped the call of the honeyeater in the same way Country has shaped human-given place names, like the waves that surge through the Dharawal language's onomatopoeic Woll-long-gong. Likewise, it can be no accident that the English gull derives from the Latin gula, meaning throat. Like a gullible human, a gull will swallow anything.

While birdsong and human language both use

sound sequences, it might well be the divergence in our exchanges that intrigue us more: birds seem so effortlessly capable of communicating through non-verbal means, putting vocalisation and movement to exquisite use. Unlike humans, many birds can sing in two voices at once, using their unique bipartite organ, the syrinx, which allows them to unite or separate two harmonically unrelated sounds. Perhaps it is the possibility that this combinatorial instinct offers, a weaving of sound, or even the visual flapping of a wing — wings must have two sides to fly — that makes me wonder. We know that bird dancing and acoustic rhythms form optical and auditory signals, some might say a syntax of sorts. What parallels do harmonic sounds and the display or movement of bird feather and underwing patterns have with written script?

In the human world, binary logic is stored in diverse mediums, such as the Inca quipu, the loom, and the computer. A weaver can translate complex meaning through code, the warp and the weft of textile that provides a structure to interlace temporal and spatial dimensions. Like the weaverbird that weaves the chambers of its intricate nest — needlework, rugs and fabrics line our rooms, line our memories. And like the complexity of the bowerbird's courtship dance, we design our own theatre sets and plan our moves.

We create taxonomies that order the world using language to slice and dice. We mediate binaries, connecting similarities and differences, so they become related, less taxing on the 'other'. We draw the language of one medium into another, to speak of one or both, like graphic sound.

If the birds at the centre of this show were to see it, they (and bats, and insects) would see well into the spectrum of ultraviolet light imperceivable to our human eyes. There is a world we cannot see, and perhaps a language imperceivable to us, where more striking parallels between human and bird language might exist, and to which these artists open our eyes and ears.

**John Wolseley's** work is site-specific. His process is immersive, embedded in bush camps and in the presence of birds as collaborators. He wrote in his journal about these drawings of birds in landscape: 'I spent the day high on a red quartzite ridge where I found spindly skeletons of grevilleas and wattles burnt by bush fire. The Minni Ritchi Wattle had the most beautiful lizard scaly bark, and in a kind of stumbling dance I moved my paper on drawing boards across and within them. The burnt carbon marks they made looked almost like the notations of a musical score, and had an uncanny

synaesthesia with the song of Singing Honeyeaters which flickered through those trees. Later when I had drawn the minutiae of leaves and feathers within my rubbed charcoal marks, I started to draw a "sonogram" or graphic representation of a Singing Honeyeater's sweet scratchy voice. Sonograms are made by passing the sound of the bird-song through a computer program. And they are a graph of the two most important variables of sound; harmonic frequency and the passage of time. They are able to depict the timbre of a bird's song in a more visual way than traditional musical notations.<sup>1</sup>

Chance is a collaborator in the surrealist method that **Eugene Carchesio** employs. Scouring through bird books, he waits until a bird 'takes his eye, the colours change and sometimes the form alters'.<sup>2</sup> Like an evolution of sorts, each bird in this series confronts its geometric abstraction. Their interrelated shapes suggest a common formal ancestry (homology). By playing with their morphology, Carchesio flags a kind of biosemiosis, where sign and life converge.

<sup>1</sup> John Wolseley, pers. comm. (email), 23 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Carchesio, pers. comm. (email), 19 May 2021.

John Wolseley, *The Slender-leaf mallee, Desert banksia, Scrub casuarina, the Willaroo and the last of the Regent honeyeaters* (detail), 2004, two coloured etching with watercolour, 60 x 131cm. Courtesy of the artist and RoslynOxley9 Gallery Sydney, Photography by Terence Bogue.



Top: Eugene Carchesio, *The Ventriloquist* (vol.2), Installation view, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 2019.

Below: Eugene Carchesio, *The Ventriloquist* (vol.1) (details from series), Milani Gallery, Brisbane, 2017.







Marie Celine Porkalari, *Bird*, Circa 1985, natural pigments on carved ironwood, 126.0 x 13.0 cm. Gift of Mrs Alison Fine, 1991.

The geometric character of **Marie Celine Porkalari's** (1926–1993) pelican carving is a result of it being chiselled from dense ironwood. Birds feature throughout the creation story of the Tiwi people and are referred to as Tokwampuwu: mortal beings who acted as witnesses, messengers, mourners, informers, and law makers. The wings are adorned with linear, geometric Tiwi designs using natural earth pigments. Pedro Woneamirri tells the ancestral story of this white bird: 'Tjurukukini the owl acted as a messenger for the lovers Waiyai and Tappera, guiding them to one another through the bush....Purrukuparli knew something was wrong, and as he started walking down the beach he saw a big white bird, Tokwampini, a pelican, who told him his wife had committed adultery with her brother-in-law Tappera.'<sup>3</sup>

**Emily Floyd's** graphic language explores the aesthetic legacy of the philosophical circle known as the Budapest School. In the series of prints entitled 'Anti-totalitarian Vectors', she considers 'the "thingness" of language and its role as a creator of worlds'.<sup>4</sup> Positioned nearby, a single carved wooden black 'Owl of Minerva', the wise and philosophical owl, contemplates the luminous prints. Composed of fragmented iconic and symbolic signs, their abstractions vector to an interrogation of the power-knowledge that determines language itself.

In bark paintings from West Arnhem Land, linear patterns depict the anatomy of birds as well as supernatural energy and interdependent knowledge systems of the landscape. **Djawida Nadjongorle** (1943–2008) painted the principal ancestral being Nawura, who 'taught men how to catch freshwater fish'. In this brolga painting, the cross-hatched rarrk patterns imbue the brolga's torso with supernatural power and identify his clan, the Djalama. Like the x-ray style also seen in mimi spirits and other paintings from the region<sup>5</sup>, the brolga's internal organs are clearly visible.

X-ray imagery also illustrates the anatomy of animals for hunting purposes. **Bilinyarra Nabegeyo** (c. 1920 – early 1990s), also from the Djalama clan, uses bold dashed line in interchanging ochre and white to convey the central nervous system of an emu.

'Birds remind us that the veneer between the world we inhabit – constructed, explained, rational – and the world they inhabit – wild, uninhibited, magical – is thin', says **Glenn Barkley**.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the surfaces of his ceramic vessels are liminal; their textures appear topographic, populated with all kinds of beings. Small openings pinpricked into their surfaces form a terra-matrix of letters and ideas, like text quoted from Judith Wright's poem about black cockatoos, 'Before the First Far Flash'. Other haphazard imagery recalls early forms of language such as pictographs, ideographs, and hieroglyphs, some as if from an old world, where tokens functioned as word signs.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, Judith. Kitty Kantilla. NGV, 2007 p.71. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Floyd, pers. comm. (email), 5 August 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Caruana, Wally. Aboriginal Art. 2nd, new ed. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Glenn Barkley, pers. comm. (email), 21 May 2021.



Emily Floyd, *Owl of Minerva*, 2019, synthetic polymer paint, wood, 30 x 20 x 40 cm. Photography by Dane Lovett®. Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery.



Glenn Barkley, *beforethefirstfarflash*, 2021, earthenware, 59 x 33 x 37 cm. Photography by Simon Hewson.



Djawida Nadjongorle, *Brolga*, 1990, natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, 97.0 x 50.0 x 7.2 (s). Gift of Ashen House Pty Ltd, 1990.



Bilinyarra Nabegeyo, *Emu*, natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, 95.5 x 49.8 x 11.5 cm (s). Gift of Mrs Alison Fine, 1991.



For the past ten years, **Fernando do Campo's** has systematically researched the history of birds as companion species, his colourful language enlivening our sensitivity to the full spectrum of this history. In his 'twitching' inspired 'Daily Birds List' series, 'word-pictures' and names are combined in vibrating colours and patterns, transforming objective notation into a constellation of effects. Words travel along differently shaped trajectories, like Mel Bochner's paper portraits.

**Barbara Campbell's** 'Bird voices' crystalises her passion for print, text, libraries and bird sounds. Phonetic and hyphenated words are printed rhythmically across bright yellow pages, drawing us

into their exploration of sound to map a semiotic space. As yellow diffuses to white across each page, this work also nods to the soft palettes of bird plumage. Like the combinatorial power of playing cards, the fuzziness of these word-sounds creates a network of associative configurations.

The auditory patterns and dynamics of birds are found in zoömusicologist **Hollis Taylor's** environmentally complex soundworks. In some works, anthrophonies (such as human language, footsteps, or musical instruments), biophonies (such as birdsongs, stridulating insects, or croaking frogs), and/or geophonies (the non-creature sounds of wind

or water) combine to produce soundscapes that draw attention to the acoustic intrusion of human activity in the birds' acoustic medium, the soundtope. Soundtopes are crucial to bird communication, where intra- and inter-specific interactions with birds and the shape of the land suggest complex interdependencies. Avian population is a kind of bioindicator of environmental change. Taylor's works make us think of the importance of conserving soundscapes.

**John Tonkin** is interested in 'how birds mark out and sense three-dimensional space through their calls. While human utterances mostly work at short

range, animals such as whales, elephants and birds create sounds that carry over long distances. These calls can serve to mark out territory or to find a mate but also as a more social "I'm over here".<sup>7</sup> Tonkin has recorded bird calls at dusk using ambisonics, a technique for capturing three-dimensional sound fields for virtual reality experiences. His diagrammatic landscape represents the soundtope as a kind of 'unfolding spatiotemporal synaesthesia ... situating the participant within the sensory world of birds' virtually at [johnt.org/projects/soundfields/](http://johnt.org/projects/soundfields/)

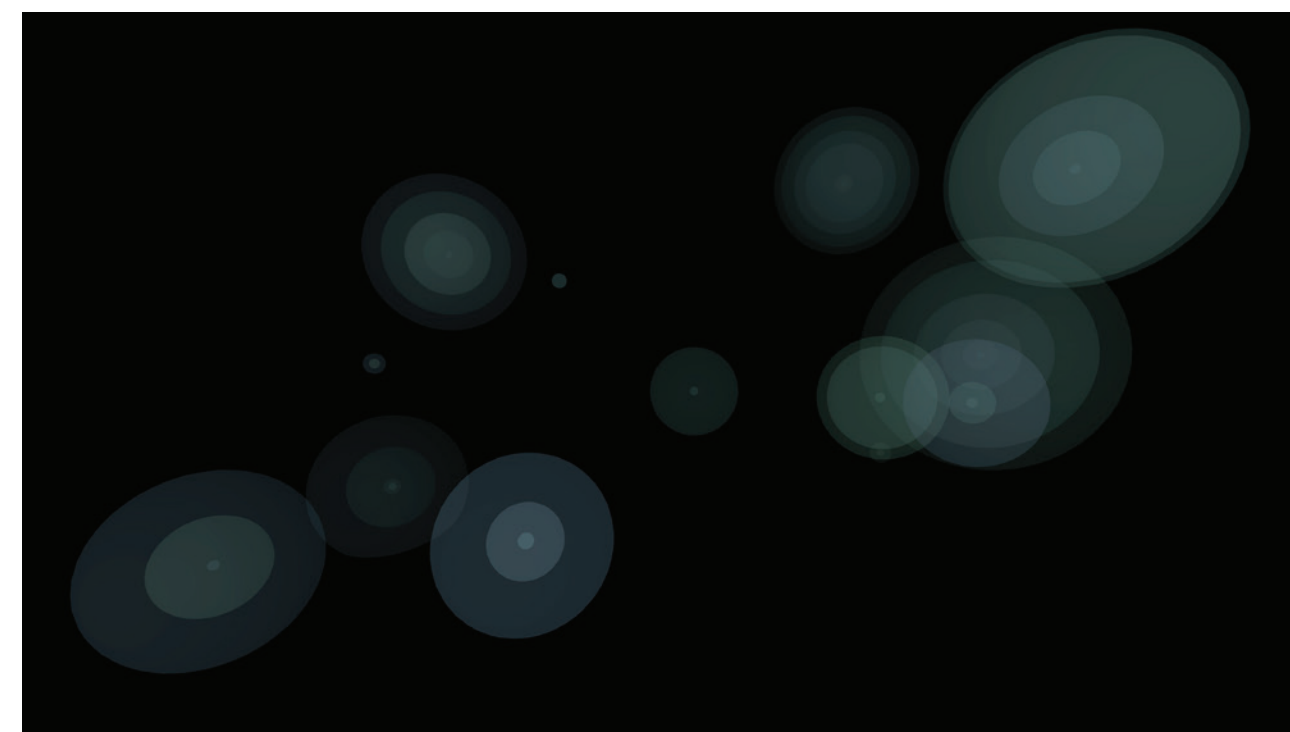
<sup>7</sup> John Tonkin, pers. comm. (email), 1 June 2021.



Left:  
Fernando do Campo,  
*365 Daily Bird Lists (3rd January 2019 - 2nd January 2020)*,  
2019 - ongoing, synthetic polymer  
paint, pencil and glitter on board,  
installation shot.  
Photography by Zan Wimberley.

Opposite top:  
Barbara Campbell,  
*Bird Voices*, 2019, letterpress  
limited edition artist book, 3/3,  
21.5 x 16 x 1 cm, 36 pages,  
linen, board, brass, paper  
Photography by Sarah Lorien.

Opposite bottom:  
John Tonkin, *soundfield#1,  
with the falling of the light*, 2021,  
VR headset and headphones,  
custom webXR software,  
ambisonic field recordings.





Jenny Watson, *Young Magpie*, 2020, acrylic on French satin; acrylic on panel 150 x 150cm; oval panel 36 x 51cm. Photograph Bernie Fischer.



Louise Weaver, *Golden Snipe*, 2010, hand-crocheted lamb's wool over taxidermied Australian Snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*), Australian red cedar (*Toonaciliata*) cotton perlé cotton thread, felt, gold leaf. Photography by Mark Ashkanasy. Les Renfrew bequest 2010, Newcastle Region Art Gallery.

**Jenny Watson's** work 'Young Magpie' reflects on two moments in time. A baby magpie's beak gapes upward to be fed, while the text panel reflects 'I stared down into a vodka and tonic in a crystal cut tumbler. I saw big chunks of ice and tiny bubbles exploding over a tantalisingly green slice of lime'. Together, the transforming ice and the figuration of a baby bird somehow tap into emotion and primary needs, paralleling timely empathy between humans and animals.

Making art often entails a love of signs. Since 1990, **Louise Weaver** has transformed her love of birds into signs of love, tenderly crocheting their surfaces in vital colours. In 'Golden Snipe', intricately woven golden thread forms a texture that connects and links nature and culture. The act of encasing a taxidermied bird might be considered a kind of bandage, a proposition to repair human damage to the fragile natural world. Gold, when meticulously applied to the snipe, doubles its meaning. A snipe is a wading bird characterised by a very long bill that senses food through the mud in a sewing-machine action. When embodied by the warmth of gold, its transforming surface is a natural correlative for Weaver's own engrossment in the valuable act of repair.

Where Weaver has crocheted golden thread to dress her taxidermied bird, **Debra Porch** has added a red line of thread from a needle pinned gently underneath 'Billy', the parakeet. The thread seems to unravel, a stitching backward of sorts. Lines, like language, can connect to degrees: a red line is blood, a scribble, entanglement, that matrix of possibility, but in this work could nod to fragile everyday encounters with pomegranates, or even the alpine thrift flowers at the base of Mt Ararat she admired.<sup>8</sup> The doll needlepoint suggests the infliction of a wound – a tear that creates trauma – but also a point that binds together strands of childhood, of memory and love.

<sup>8</sup> José Da Silva, pers. comm. (email), 23 June 2021.



Right: Debra Porch, 'Billy' from *An archive of ordinary space*, 2017, taxidermy parakeet; dowel; doll needle and polyester thread, dimensions variable. Photography by Jeremy Weihrauch.



**Raquel Ormella**, a devoted 'twitcher' who has recorded 375 birds on her bird list, has chosen an idiom close to the hearts of many women: the story quilt. This kind of quilting was a key part of female labour, used to transmit certain connections and memories. But Ormella's quilt also has a political connotation. The numbered birds are entangled with the field guides she engages with to compile her list. For Ormella, 'the bird list marks moments in time, a stepping away from human time'.<sup>9</sup> Each bird sighting is echoed through time by another and connected by the quilt. The quilted birds and sewn fabric occur synchronically and thus enter a form of ethical time, led by a spiritual connection to birds, and an ironic opening and closing of a bird guide and its taxonomy.

**Joan Ross's** beheaded birds ironise the colonial practice of ordering and classifying nature. By digitally cutting and editing natural history illustrations of birds made during European settlement in Australia, she reimagines wounds inflicted by the colonial settler mentality. Taxonomy cuts and slices the world, and by extension could be considered a form of taxidermy, a use of language that slaughters. But Ross's signature high-vis palette and the upright bird protest death, asserting the New Holland sparrowhawk's liveliness.

Taxidermy embodies western ideas of cultural liveliness and a longing to preserve nature. In **Liam Garstang's** 'Affirmation #4', a taxidermied crow inspects a mirror, conjuring the question of whether crows could ever be taught to recognise themselves. The mirror provides a metathesis of visibility that affects our reading of its nature as representation, as well as Garstang's memory of his early life in rural New South Wales.

The title of **Danie Mellor's** work, 'Marri diramu: balam dugurrba', describes a fig tree that marked a birthing site for generations of First Nations people. Rich thick lines of blue wax crayon trace the fig's aerial roots, branches and foliage, suggesting entanglements between people and nature, and denoting the European willow patterning found on bone china. Intensely coloured yellow-tailed black cockatoos, king parrots and female bowerbirds puncture the otherwise restricted palette. Their twinkling appearance restores the field of colour to the interrupting 'violence' of blue and white, against the dominant western imaginary that the pattern connotes.

<sup>9</sup> Raquel Ormella, pers. comm. (phone), 23 June 2021.



Left:  
Joan Ross, *Fool's Paradise*, 2018, hand-painted digital collage, 113 x 80 cm, edition of 8 + 2AP.

Opposite top:  
Raquel Ormella, *Sketch for a bird quilt*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 29 x 15cm. Courtesy of the artists and Milani Gallery.

Opposite bottom:  
Liam Garstang, *Affirmation #4*, 2018, Taxidermy, copper and acrylic mirror. Courtesy of the artist and Dominik Mersch Gallery.





Like the male bowerbird that collects found items to embellish its nest, **Ashley Eriksmoen** arranges discarded furniture into formations that suggest thickets of plant growth or nests. Just as a bowerbird can only display objects found in its territory, she works with a limited supply of personally found timber. By assembling furniture into poetic displays of 'upcycling', she creates compositions that question resource consumption and displaced habitats.

In **NOT's** 'Song Dynasty', lead crystal yellow-breasted buntings (*Emberiza aureola*) float above their shadowy counterparts, signifying play between body and spirit while always refocusing us to their glass surface. Each bird is positioned as if frozen in sleep, but the invocation of ice is softened by the warmth of their puffed-up chests. The fragility of glass points to a precarious state. As NOT points out, 'for the price of HK\$80, a bunting can end up on the table of an aspiring denizen of Guangdong as songbird soup'.<sup>10</sup>

The ubiquitous toy chicken has featured in **Laurens Tan's** work since 2014. He uses chickens, the most domestic of birds, as a symbol for humanity itself, forced into formations, appearing free but 'steeply reduced in choice'.<sup>11</sup> Tan's continuous wallpaper pattern consists

of birds that metamorphose and mutate through reverberation. Locked into a repetitive pattern, the population swells to a critical point. Humanity is also on the brink of ecological catastrophe; 'we are designers of our fate' but unlike the motifs locked into their wallpaper pattern, our actions can help open things up or close them down.

Because language is contextual, the definition of language in this exhibition has been kept open; the artists explore birds through a poesis of signs, symbols, and sounds. As such, it is an exhibition of interpretation and translation, with works that propose that while human and bird languages are distinct, they are braided, a sharing of the same sensory life. It is an exhibition about sharing a world with birds through a language that connects, interprets, and translates. If we were to regard birds as our informers and law makers, as Tiwi artists have always done, these artists' approaches are crucial to forming a contract with nature to preserve their threatened and endangered worlds.

<sup>10</sup> NOT, pers. Comm. (email), 9 April 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Laurens Tan, pers. comm. (phone), 25 June 2021.



Left:  
Ashleigh Eriksmoen, *Modernism gone to seed*,  
2015, timber, acrylic and milk paint.  
Photography by Martin Ollman.

Opposite top:  
NOT, *Song Dynasty*, 2018, lead crystal glass,  
31 x 68 x 68cm.  
Photography by Traianos Pakiufakis.

Opposite bottom:  
Laurens Tan, *Chicken in a Basket*, 2021, printed wallpaper  
with logo centre image, repeated manipulated 3D image  
of Toy Chicken. Courtesy of the artist and Art Atrium.







Cover image: Madeleine Kelly, *Calls in the matter field*, 2021, oil on board, 32 x 61 cm.

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**SYDNEY**

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