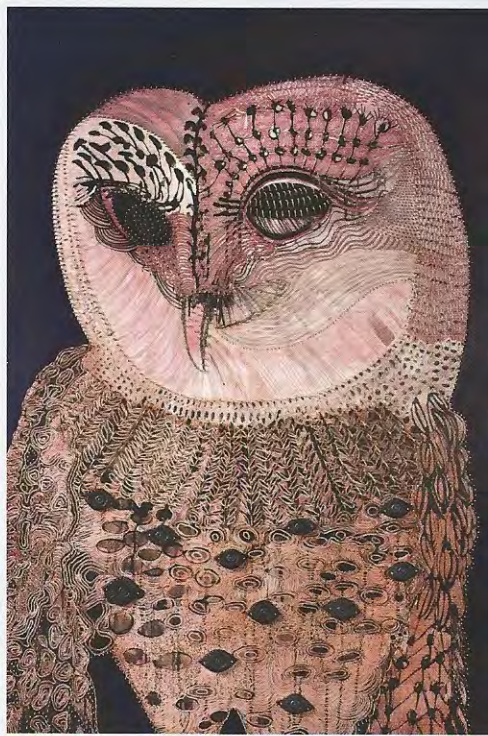


THE GETTING OF WISDOM

Joshua Yeldham's art takes us on an intimate journey through the powerful forces of nature.

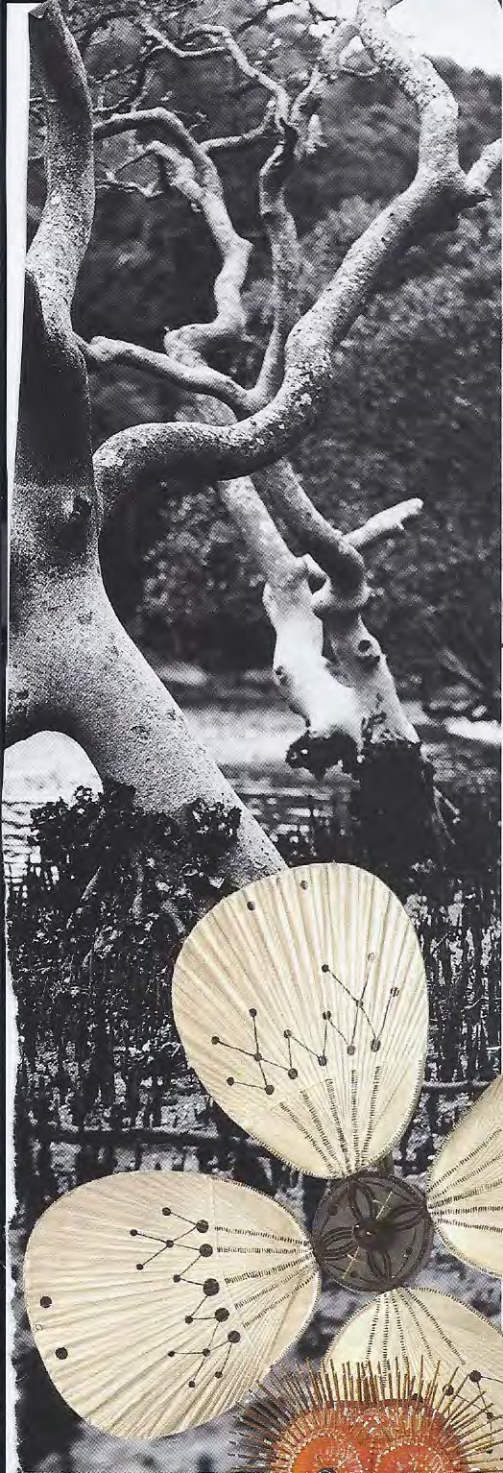
PHOTOGRAPHER: CHRIS COURT TEXT: KIRSTY DE CARIS

YELDHAM AT WORK ON MORNING BAY - LOVERS ROCK, A CARVED BOARD WITH OIL PAINT AND CANE WORK, AT HIS PITTSWATER STUDIO IN SYDNEY. "SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A LABOURER," HE SAYS OF THE WAY HE WORKS. "I LABOUR THROUGH [THE ARTWORKS] AND ALLOW THEM TO GUIDE ME PLACES."



THIS PAGE, LEFT: YELDHAM AT WORK ON LOVE OWL – MORNING BAY, CARVED PAPER WITH PIGMENT AND INK. ABOVE: PRAYER FOR PROTECTION – HAWKESBURY RIVER. RIGHT: THE MANGROVES AT PITTWATER, WHERE YELDHAM LIVES AND WORKS, AND WHICH FEATURE IN SOME OF HIS PAINTINGS. BELOW: BARRENJOEY – PITTWATER WAS MADE ON CARVED, HANDMADE PAPER WITH INDIGO INK. BELOW RIGHT: YELDHAM COLLECTS OBJECTS FROM THE HAWKESBURY RIVER AND ITS SURROUNDS FOR INSPIRATION AND USE IN HIS ARTWORKS. OPPOSITE: YELDHAM AND HIS WIFE, JO, IN THEIR OPEN-HULLED BOAT ON PITTWATER. OPPOSITE, BELOW: WOOD OWL #6 FOLLOWS THE ARTIST'S FREQUENT DEPICTION OF OWLS AS FERTILITY SYMBOLS, SEEN IN HIS EARLIER WORK.





THERE IS A full house at the Sydney gallery when filmmaker-turned-artist Joshua Yeldham talks a group from the Art Gallery Society of NSW through his creative process. The Australian painter and sculptor, 40, is showing 57 pieces of his mixed media work at Arthouse Gallery in Rushcutters Bay, which is under the directorship of his sister Ali; after the first few days of the show, only a handful of works remain unsold.

The show, *River Song*, is the culmination of two years' toil. Yeldham describes the series as his "victory" works – a triumph over the long and painful battle that Yeldham and his wife, Jo, endured in trying to have a family. They now have two children: Indigo, seven, and Jude, two.

Much of Yeldham's earlier work centred on his search for fertility. "As a man, I found that quite isolating. I didn't know how to grasp the concept that we weren't able to have children in a natural way," he says. Throughout a gruelling experience with IVF, he found himself drawn to the symbolism of the owl – a constant, silent presence when he camped alone along the Hawkesbury River.

Yeldham imagined the owl as a symbolic threat, yet also as the spiritual guardian that allowed him to finally have a family, and as such deserving of tribute. He explains his artistic focus on owls as his way of creating his own mythology, born of the earth and land, during a difficult period.

His latest works carry many thematic echoes of earlier pieces, but there is a marked departure from their raw, troubled nature. Owls, the taro plant and blue gum trees feature heavily, as they have for some years, and there is a reappearance of a turn-of-the-century woman, Eliza, whose story Yeldham encountered while living in an abandoned bus at a Queensland cattle station during his early years as a painter. "For 10 years, I made offerings to her," he says, a reference to his artworks. "She lived on a dingo fence and was left to die alone."

These motifs of sadness are still to be found in his work, but an undertone of triumph is present. His current work features landscapes of the Hawkesbury region and his home in Sydney's Pittwater, where he is increasingly based ("I wanted to be more hands-on with family," he says). Each work is painted, carved and sanded, some with intricate cane work that depicts the oyster beds in the area near his home. Some pieces include functioning, handmade musical instruments. The moving parts of the pieces and their three-dimensional elements throw ever-changing shadows, dependent on the movement of light. The essentially Australian flavour and use of deep, endless blues are two of Yeldham's most distinctive hallmarks.

This may change in the first half of this year, when he departs for China. He is set to spend a month on the Dragon (Yulong) River, among the remarkable Guilin limestone mountains – described by him as "monastic". And he's taking his family with him. "We go everywhere together. We can't miss out on these adventures. I like us to be a gypsy caravan," he says.

He'll take with him paper that he is now milling in his Pittwater studio, using cotton and plants from the Hawkesbury region. His carving technique means pieces of the medium fall about like snow when he's working. "It's magical," he says.

The works made in China, combined with the Hawkesbury pieces, will form Yeldham's first solo international show, *Two Rivers*, in Hong Kong this September at The Space gallery. "A lot of Australian artists send their work [to China]," he says, "but I really want to integrate." He sees his work as a hybrid of the Eastern disciplines, African art and an Australian creative sensibility. This stint in China is an extension of this intention, and signifies a spreading of his creative wings. "The fertility work has now been achieved," Yeldham says. "I think there will be a migration into new work for me now." KIRSTY DE GARIS

Joshua Yeldham is represented by Arthouse Gallery, NSW, (02) 9332 1019; www.arthousegallery.com.au.

