

An artist's prayer to nature

Dylan Rainforth June 16, 2010

ON FIRST finding Joshua Yeldham up a ladder dusting the paintings in his new exhibition, *River Music*, there's nothing to suggest the intensity of the conversation we will have over the next hour.

At Scott Livesey Galleries in Armadale he is wearing loose jeans, boat shoes, a generic zip-neck jumper. Not the garb of a mystic. But appearances can be deceptive. Yeldham, 39, is an artist who talks in terms of devotional offerings, prayers for safe passage, Eastern meditative practices and sacred rhythms. Most acutely, he talks about invocations for fertility.

"They're devotional works. This show is celebrating the success of my wife and I working with IVF to have a child, my little boy, Jude. "My past shows were all prayers for fertility, they were all praying to my environment on the Hawkesbury River [near Sydney, where Yeldham makes most of his work outdoors] and praying, as a man, to try and cope with the challenges we were facing with fertility. "Based on desperation I started to pray through my work for fertile elements such as pods and lilies and mangroves."

And everywhere there are owls. The birds - liminal figures in Western myth, signs of both ill-omen and wisdom - preside as totem spirits over his carved, mixed-media paintings.

More below

Skip to [top](#) | [bottom](#)

"The owls started to come into play because they're up in the trees where I camp on the river, on the Hawkesbury, and I started to feel they had the power to either, at night, swoop down and take our embryo from us when we failed or, if I gave them offerings maybe they might let one embryo through and that occurred with Jude." Before Jude was born the couple had tried unsuccessfully for two years before discovering Yeldham carried an abnormal gene. The couple's first attempt at IVF gave them daughter Indigo, now six, but things were not so easy until Jude's birth two years ago.

Yeldham describes the works as constantly shifting perspectives between portraiture, landscape and aerial topography. Caning threads the boards, its crafted repetition deeply meditative for Yeldham. "It is the old knowledge," he says. "You let go of all the weight your brain is challenging you with. Repetition allows you to fly and to hover over landscape. Sometimes I feel like a bird flying over these things." In a new development, the birds break free from the canvas, appearing as sculptural, fan-like "prayer wheels", while those left behind on the walls have integrated themselves with strange, custom-made musical instruments. These are tactile paintings that can be tuned to their owners' rhythms, Yeldham says.

"This show is really celebrating the importance of rhythm, repetition and music - melody - so I've built my own instruments, which are based on the thumb piano. But it's almost like a boat sailing up the river and, again, it's symbolic of fertility."

The artist makes working en plein air an extreme sport. Working along the Hawkesbury and in the nearby Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, with its secretive creeks and owl-haunted mangroves, he uses a solar-powered Dremel hand drill, carving into boards laid flat on beaches or in the woods. "I've only got a speedboat, so I take my swag, but basically it's a very harsh environment where I'm at. It can challenge you on so many fronts to stay there for any period of time."

More below

Skip to [top](#) | [bottom](#)

Harsh environments aren't new to Yeldham. He grew up in a well-connected Sydney family, albeit one blighted by tragedy - his mother's sister, Margaret Wales-King, and her husband, Paul King, were murdered by their son, Matthew Wales, in 2002 in what became known as "the Society Murders". At 13, Yeldham moved with his mother to Europe where he enrolled at an Outward Bound school in Switzerland. Pursuing mountaineering with zeal, he would sneak out of the school at night to undertake dangerous climbs.

Five years later a solo expedition to Venezuela led to a life-changing experience. Lost in misty jungles, he was saved by a reluctant hermit called Jesus. Yeldham lived in the hermit's cave for three weeks, an initiation that later formed the basis for his Emmy-winning documentary *Frailejon* (1995). It was the last film Yeldham would make. Returning to Australia he went alone into the desert for 40 days - the biblical imagery seems entirely fitting - to work on an Australian Film Commission-supported script. It got canned. "I was so upset. I said, 'Filming is too hard, I'm going to paint.' The minute I had my first show, 15 years ago, it felt right, it felt natural. I could breathe again."

River Music is at Scott Livesey Galleries in Armadale until July 3.

Most Viewed

- [Winslet thrilled by Pearce's speech](#)
- [BBC sorry over director's language](#)
- [At Home With Julia sex scene critics should get a life](#)
- [A comic bus tour of the brain](#)
- [A whole new ball game](#)

[Home](#) » [Entertainment](#) » [Art and Design](#) »

[Movies](#)

[Latest Film Releases](#)

[Music](#)

[TV & Radio](#)

[MasterChef](#)

[Art & Design](#)

[Stage](#)

[Restaurants & Bars](#)

[Books](#)

[The Age Home](#)
[Back to the Top](#)
[Terms & Conditions](#)
© 2011 The Age Home

[ALL SITES](#) [THE AGE](#)