

vogueSTYLE

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Into the wild

INSPIRED and enamoured by the natural world, Australian artist Joshua Yorklvin PROVOKES an emotive response to his beautiful, intricate works. By Jane Albert. Styled by Philippa Brophy. Photographed by Hugh Stewart.



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Joshua Yeldham is waiting for me in his front garden with a beaming smile, a mug of freshly brewed coffee in his hand. The scent of baked chicken pie draws us inside, into a house that is bursting with colour and light and life. The house is built in a U-shape, a verdant tropical garden at its centre. Concealed under the giant elephant-ear palms and ferns is a wooden bench that doubles as a bath, in which the Yeldham clan nightly bathes under the stars, come winter or summer. This tropical wonderland provides a fertile backdrop for Yeldham's studio, appropriately housed within the family house, and it is here that the inner workings of this magician's mind come alive on the canvas.

Wife Jo breezes through with a warm welcome, daughter Indigo, 10, following closely behind her. There's just enough time for a quick snuggle with Dad before she too disappears. Son Jude, five, is curled up on the couch devouring watermelon. With his deep brown eyes and thoughtful gaze, he bears a striking resemblance to both parents.

It is a scene of domestic bliss, creativity, and abundant happiness. But it wasn't always like this. Yeldham's own childhood was a bewildering place in which he often felt lost and uncertain. His parents worked tirelessly to provide a privileged upbringing for their children, and Yeldham attended an exclusive private school in Sydney's eastern suburbs. But a severe and undiagnosed learning difficulty resulted in his early school years being dominated by bullying and an overwhelming sense of failure.

In hindsight, this tough beginning was a trigger for Yeldham's creativity. Desperately seeking approval from his peers, he used the one thing he was confident in, his art. Caricatures and doodles quickly emerged – those depicting his teachers as werewolves inspired particular wrath – but reality tended to crash in through this fleeting comfort. “I was a very insecure, very shy kid and I had two sisters who were excelling beautifully in school. My whole first decade and a half I never passed anything,” Yeldham says today. “Therefore failing was really the only language I knew.”

While all this was happening his parents Tony and Di were building an extraordinarily successful business ▶





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Twin Bay, Kaituma
Chase National Park



importing fabrics and textiles from Paris, Milan and New York, paving the way for what would later become a multi-million-dollar industry for Australia. Tony founded the Squair Shop in Double Bay when he was just 19 and by the time daughters Ali, Rebecca and later Josh came along both parents were regularly travelling for work.

"When I was seven or eight our whole world was around the shop, to the extent that I would be helping Dad with boxes of shoes while he dressed Rod Stewart or Elton John. He became the shop of Sydney for quite some time. It was an amazing world of beauty, textiles and fabric," says Yeldham, noting that his father still owns the shop today.

Driven entrepreneurs, Tony and Di encouraged the children to make and sell things themselves – be it stacks of watermelon at the local beach or a lemonade stall outside the family property in Evesham on the Hawkesbury River. Tony's determination to succeed and provide for his family meant the business demanded a lot of his time and there were often extended absences. But what Yeldham couldn't have predicted was the way in which this dedication, solid work ethic and an innate understanding of your clients would become a key part of his own make-up, and that of his sisters. Today his art is exhibited widely in Sydney, Melbourne (where he's represented by Scott Livesey Galleries), Singapore and Hong Kong (represented by Car Street Gallery), and regularly selected for the Wynne, Sulman and Archibald Prize competitions at the Art Gallery of New South Wales; while his paintings sell for up to \$60,000 a piece. But more of that later.

Back at school, it seemed as though things couldn't get much worse. School days were now a relentless nightmare, as he'd begun bonding during the break-up of his parents' marriage. When Di decided to move to Europe with her new partner, Ross, and offered to take her son with her, he leapt at the chance, moving to Switzerland, where he attended a school in the Swiss Alps. Here, the focus was as much on understanding your peers and surviving the outdoors as it was surviving the classroom. And so began a whole new

world for Yeldham. "It was the most amazing moment because I just shed my skin and became a new Josh. I'd never known what it was to push through; I'd always given up on everything. And I found that I could try again," he says.

Yeldham was transformed from the kid who threw up his hands helplessly whenever his father asked the inevitable "what/why/when?" and became the kid who would spend four days climbing treacherous mountains, feet soaking in sodden boots, with extra rocks weighing down his rucksack to make the challenge that bit harder.

Here is a man who not only has the ability to turn adverse situations into opportunities, but seems to welcome hardship to make his creative fire.

THE RIVER, WITH ITS HISTORY AND BEAUTY, FEEDS YELDHAM'S CREATIVE SOUL

After all, it was only through getting dangerously lost while climbing alone for six weeks in Venezuela, and later being rescued by a local climber called Chucho that the kernel of an idea for a film began to emerge. At 23, Yeldham defied the odds and the naysayers, personally raising the funds and borrowing equipment so he

could write, produce and direct his first film *Fracture*. Not only was it a creative success for the then-five arts and film student, it went on to win the Emmy for best student short film and was nominated for an Oscar. Heady stuff.

The next significant downfall came about following 18 months spent hibernating in an old abandoned bus in the New South Wales desert, during which he poured every fibre of his being into his follow-up film, only to have it rejected outright. Yet again this setback – which completely devastated him at the time – would have a golden lining. He turned to the desert itself, surrendering himself to the landscape and allowing himself total freedom to respond on canvas. His sister Ali, owner of Sydney's Art House Gallery, liked what she saw and offered to exhibit his work. So began a new direction for Yeldham, who is known today as one of Australia's most startlingly inventive figurative and landscape artists.

Yeldham spent the next decade painting in the Stuart Step Desert, his now-wife Jo occasionally accompanying him. It was when the couple discovered that ■

Yeldham was infertile and they would be forced to undergo IVF to conceive a child that the next chapter began. "We went on a big journey of fertility and one of the big parts of our path was to move down here to Parramatta [in Sydney's north], because we craved fertility, and we felt the water was fertile," Yeldham says. They were successful in their first round of IVF, resulting in the birth of Indigo. "Because the desert had been such a big part of my storytelling I felt I needed something that equalled the desert, and that was the river, and I started learning philosophies such as burning off and bushfire and death and that from disaster grows new life."

But the fertility gods weren't done with him yet, and the couple underwent five tortuous rounds of IVF, during which Yeldham was driven to spend weeks up river, alone and painting. It was through this anguish that Yeldham's owl series emerged, with their eerie faces and probing eyes. "I started making offerings because I felt the owls were stealing our embryos in my dreaming. So I started to pay to them and after two years Joey got pregnant and Jude was born. So I started to make thank-you owls. And with that was learning to paint on the river."

The Hawkesbury River, with its savage history and uncompromising beauty, continues to feed Yeldham's creative soul. The small tinny he used to burn off upriver has been replaced by a 40-some fishing trawler, its purchase in Melbourne and subsequent treacherous and occasionally life-threatening journey through Bass Strait and up into Sydney Harbour providing its own provocation of life's big questions. Yeldham now feels he is heading in a new direction both creatively and personally, and he hopes it will allow him to provide for his family all that he craved as a child.

His new series *Surrender The* has taken him into previously uncharted territory. With his hauntingly beautiful and surprising landscape paintings and photographs, Yeldham is pioneering a new medium of "carve photography": he uses a Dremel tool and belt sander to carve intricate, decorative patterns into photographs printed on handmade French paper.

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His success today has exceeded his wildest expectations – a show at ArtHouse Gallery late last year sold out before it had even been hung, while Hong Kong's Car Street Gallery will host an exhibition of his work this coming May, and the Manly Art Gallery & Museum will hold a survey of the past 20 years of his work in September. He is quick to acknowledge his

parents' role in fostering his pioneering spirit and that of his sisters – his other sister Rebecca is a producer of films including *The Kiv Runner*, *The Mincepie Diaries* and Joel Edgerton's directorial debut *Wentworth*. But you get the feeling he hopes his own adventures will enable a quieter, more grounded life.

"My dad worked so hard and I only saw him when I walked to the shop after school. He was so exhausted he'd fall asleep early, and he did that for a lot of my childhood. He still loves me ... but I had the realisation that I wanted to smell my kids' hair and roll around with them in nature and I just hoped I could create a career that would permit that."

If Yeldham's 43 years are anything to go by, it's clear you can never predict the future. But it would certainly seem he's on the right path.



Yeldham in his studio in Parramatta, NSW



Working with wood in his Parramatta studio



Joey plays with Lego



The children with their father