

How to conjure a bird

By Kar Mun Phoon



Image credit: Installation view displaying a selection of source material, studio inspiration and paper model for Raquel Ormella's videos: *List Keeper 2011* and *Feeders 2010*, Raquel Ormella, Avian Assembly, Singleton Art + Cultural Centre, May 17 - August 3 2025, Courtesy the artists. Photograph by Madeleine Kelly

Birdwatching has officially hit the mainstream, capturing the hearts and minds of people across the globe and creating its own economy of influencers, branded paraphernalia, and social media content. I've witnessed the activity slowly integrate into the lifestyles of many of my own family and friends, a pandemic-era pastime evolving into 'Twitchathons', serious citizen science events that transform novice birders into diehard amateur ornithologists armed with technical gear, hefty field guides and the mandatory GPS-tracking apps. As a bird-curious, myopic onlooker, I watched my loved ones chase down their 'lifers', a term used to describe a birder's first encounter with a species in the wild, as birdwatching erupted into a multi-billion-dollar global industry.¹ While a fascination with birds is nothing new, and indeed, humans have observed birds as indicators of weather, seasons, time, and the divine for time immemorial—why birds, and what does this growing interest in observing the avian population mean for us?

On the banks of the Coquun-Hunter River, on the unceded lands of the Wanaruah/Wonnarua people, the Singleton Arts + Cultural Centre appears as an unexpected parkland sanctuary off the New England Highway, in a region where coal mining is the dominant economic sector.² Singleton has been a site of coal mining activity since the 1850s³, nestled alongside World Heritage-listed National Parks. Its arts centre mirrors this stark contrast between natural and built environments: a newly-re-furbished, red, steel-clad, birdhouse structure emerging from pink, flowering gums swamped by noisy flocks of musk lorikeets.

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Crossing the threshold into the building's quiet, hermetic exhibition space, Fernando do Campo, Madeleine Kelly, and Raquel Ormella conjure birds of their own in *Avian Assembly*, a group exhibition that dissects their shared interest in birdwatching, migration histories (both avian and human), and the colonial framework for seeing birds. This is not the artists' first foray into examining the relationship between humans and birdlife, nor is it the first time that an obsession with birds has gained cultural popularity.

The outstretched wings of a paper-feathered black kite (Raquel Ormella, *TOBI-BLACK KITE*, 2010) and metamorphosing forms of scissors (Madeleine Kelly, *Liminal Birds*, 2024) at the entrance promise a portal into the surreal, abstract world of both real and imagined birds occupying the liminal recesses of the mind. Beneath the surface, there's an underlying current of deeper meaning. The creatures in this exhibition serve as vessels for understanding; you can project onto them as you like.



Image credit: Install detail 'Avian Assembly' at Singleton Arts & Cultural Centre, NSW, photographic credit Edwina Richards.

Raquel Ormella's cross-disciplinary approach elucidates the intersection between critical reflexivity, scientific curiosity and the joy of encounter in her birdwatching practice. She asks, what can a bird tell us about our connection to place? Through meticulous documentation and a dramaturgical homage to birding, Ormella breaks down her inquiries taxonomically—as any good birder might—questioning where we place birds within our hierarchies of value. In *340 and counting - 21 species: 3 parrots, 5 thornbills, some honeyeaters, wrens and flycatchers, 2021*, the act of documentation becomes an intimate ritual, echoing the systems of scientific fieldwork, while embedding personal reflections within a diaristic framework. The concept of identifying birds as markers of life is the scaffold of Ormella's investigation: animating birds as agents of soft activism. In this exhibition, Ormella doesn't shout her politics, but instead documents these interspecies encounters as subtle provocations that ask us to reconsider human/nature relations.

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Within her counts and categorisations, she weaves threads of philosophical inquiry, examining how perceptions of place can shape our framework for looking. Her zine, *City Without Crows*, 2017, which accompanied an eponymous performance lecture (2015-17), exemplifies this process. Ormella's attentiveness to the ecological nuance reflects on how geopolitical relationships and national borders affect endemic bird species.⁴ Conversely, Ormella also draws parallels between the management of introduced species in Australia and other countries, delving into socially and ecologically aware narratives, with onlooking birds as her companions.

The memory of birds takes on a different resonance in the works of Fernando do Campo. Interrogating anthropocentric narratives and colonial histories of species introduction, do Campo's work explores the past while offering a glimpse into possible futures. In *Pishing in the archive*, 2021, do Campo documents a humorous method of investigation via non-verbal communication with objects at the Green-wood Cemetery, Brooklyn. As the artist scours the sterile archival environment, researching the history of house sparrows in the Americas, he 'pishes': a noise birdwatchers make in the field to lure birds out of hiding. Pishing becomes a futile gesture, an interspecies call into the void. What answers does he hope to elicit? Accentuated by this absence of identification, or, in the case of Kounellis would have used Coal River coal, 2018, the erasure of archival texts, do Campo reclaims and reappropriates hegemonic material, examining how colonial legacy is remembered.



Image credit: Fernando do Campo, *Pishing in the archives* (detail), 2021. Single channel video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Sally Dan-Vuthbert, Sydney.

As Donna Haraway writes in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, "Relationship [of cohabitation] is multiform, at stake, unfinished, consequential."⁵ do Campo's works entangle cross-species relationships with cultural myth, positioning history as a collective memory. Through this inventive approach, do Campo dangles between memory and reality, asking what the future holds in reference to its past. In do Campo's attempts to recall anthropocentric histories, new realms of possibility for cross-species listening are uncovered.

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Through her archaeology of knowledge and artefacts, Madeleine Kelly applies the “language” of myth to hybridised figures. Just as the ancients looked to birds as omens and divine messengers, Kelly’s romance with the mythic and allegorical results in colourfield alchemy brimming with layered symbolism, depicting the transcendence of life and ephemera through mythmaking. Myths are systems of transformations: communicative structures bridging human culture and symbolic thinking, providing, as Claude Lévi-Strauss writes, “a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction.”⁶ In Kelly’s hands, myth becomes a way of thinking through climate and ecological crises.



Image credit: Madeleine Kelly, Canberra birds: Cute craft for the painting archive, 2018 (detail), encaustic on cardboard, 19 parts.

In *Canberra Birds: Cute craft for the painting archive*, 2018-19, she explores the seamless continuity between nature and culture by hybridising bird forms with packaging, often Tetra Paks®, painted in encaustic wax. Referencing the spectra and patterning of familiar urban birds, the forms resemble fossilised creatures, mouths agape, entombed in the plastic-lined structure of the packaging. As symbols of nature clash with cultural debris, the series suggests a co-evolution of life forces. And art imitates life; while modern birds increasingly consume plastic, these forms represent a visual allegory for ecological entanglement: a canary in the coal mine of our times.

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As Avian Assembly draws to a close, I can't help but reflect on the temporality of our experiences, and perhaps birdwatching does this too. A quiet, interspecies dialogue that influences life and its environment. As species edge toward extinction and rare birds become rarer still, we face an urgent responsibility to care for the natural world. The fragility of the creature and the ecosystems they participate in mirror our own. As avid Australian birdwatcher and nature enthusiast Bastian Fox Phelan writes in *Animal Rescue*, "With care comes connection, and if there's connection between humans and animals, perhaps there's still hope."⁷ And perhaps, as we conjure a bird in our mind, those celestial beings that oscillate between land and sky, we can recognise, for a moment, the fundamental beauty of life.

References

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Avian Assembly was coordinated by Madeleine Kelly and ran from 17 May – 3 August, 2025 at the Singleton Art + Cultural Centre.