

Ted Barraclough, *Regent Honeyeater*, 2016, Acrylic on Camphor Laurel, 12 x 15 x 6 cm. Image courtesy Doggett Street Studio and artHIVES



Ted Barraclough grew up on a farm in rural Queensland during the Pacific War years. Birds were frequent visitors to the property, and this began his lifelong connection to Native Australian birdlife. During the lean war period, he used his uncle's blacksmithing tools to whittle and carve toys for the family.

Now 81, Barraclough has a staggeringly prolific practice that combines his skills as a citizen ornithologist and carver. He has been carving Native Australian birds for nearly two decades, and works out of his makeshift studio in his garage on the Sunshine Coast.

Birdman is curated by Bronwyn Johnson and Louise Klerks.

Ted Barraclough is currently represented by Doggett Street Studio.

Graphic design by Jessica Pitcher

¹ Ford, HA and Ingwersen, D, 'Australian endangered species: Regent Honeyeater', *The Conversation* [website], (2012) <<https://theconversation.com/australian-endangered-species-regent-honeyeater-11294>> accessed 19 Feb. 2017

² 'Regent Honeyeater', *Birdlife Australia*, [website], (2015) <<http://birdlife.org.au/projects/woodland-birds-for-biodiversity/regent-honeyeater-wl>> accessed 19 Feb. 2017

³ Gramenz, E, 'Critically endangered seift parrot breeding ground in Tasmania illegally logged for firewood', *ABC News* [website], (2016) <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-29/swift-parrot-habitat-illegally-logged-for-firewood/7672504>>, accessed 19 Feb. 2017

⁴ 'Swift Parrot – Profile', *NSW Office of Environment and Heritage*, [website], (2016) <<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspeciesapp/profile.aspx?id=10455>> accessed 21 Feb. 2017

⁵ Kaplan, G, *Bird Minds: cognition and behaviour of Native Australian Birds* (Clayton South, VIC: CSIRO Publishing, 2015), p. 21

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 15-16

Ted Barraclough doesn't just carve birds. He researches them, watches them and lives in close proximity with them. During a phone interview, he remarks with pleasure about the birds in his garden that he can see from where he's sitting.

"Would you believe there's been six birds in the birdbath since I've been talking to you?"

Barraclough is 81, and has been fascinated by birds since he was a boy – even now the excitement comes through in his voice as he talks about the birds in his yard, or the ones he's carving. Around 40 birds visit his idyllic house each day. While we're speaking, it's a group of honeyeaters.

"If you were looking for a bird to model anything, you'd pick a honeyeater!" He says.

There are fifty-six honeyeaters in *Birdman*. Of special interest is the Regent Honeyeater. A spectacular black, white and gold songbird found around the south-east coast of Australia. It has been an iconic bird throughout the woodlands of Victoria, New South Wales, and previously, South Australia, and all the way up to north of Brisbane. They are now extinct in South Australia and western Victoria.¹ They are found in patches scattered through eastern Victoria, New South Wales, and south-east Queensland. There are estimates that fewer than 500 survive.

Their biggest threat is land clearing. Residential, agricultural and industrial development are the biggest driving forces of the decimation of their habitat.² They rely on a variety of different trees throughout the year to survive, and they're disappearing at a rate that could lead to their extinction.

So too with the Swift Parrot, which is represented in *Birdman*, along with seven other types of parrots. The Swift Parrot is said to be more endangered than the White Rhinoceros.³ They're a migratory bird that breeds in Tasmania, and then spreads out across Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland during autumn and winter. There are now fewer than 2000 of them left, and they are one step away from extinction. Their main threat is their loss of habitat through land clearing, especially through logging in Tasmania where they breed.⁴

Birdman is an impressive exhibition in its scale. In reality though, what is presented here is the minutest snapshot of avian history on this continent.

Research over the past decade and a half has shifted ornithologists and palaeontologists views of where birds came from. Originally the narrative was that they came from the northern hemisphere, and migrated south.⁵

It is now thought that birdlife started here. When modern day Australia, New Zealand and Antarctica were still connected as a part of the giant continent Gondwana. We are the epicentre of the evolution of birdlife.

Fossilised avian footprints have been found in Dinosaur Cove on the southern coast of Victoria. The footprints were dated at 105 million years old. The oldest songbird fossil was found in Australia, and was dated at 54 million years old. These predate songbird fossils found in the northern hemisphere by some 25 million years.⁶ Many of the world's birds have Australian ancestors.

Lyrebirds, bowerbirds, treecreepers and honeyeaters that are found on the east coast of Australia are living descendants of evolutionary lineages that date back tens of millions of years. With a history this long, which goes much further back than human history on this continent, it is unsurprising that Ted still sounds in awe of birds when he sees them.

Ted's practice is demonstrative of the sort of fervent research, intervention and care we need to give the avifauna of this country. He sources recycled wood or Australian timbers, and through a slow and patient process begins to carve out his works. Turning the carvings in his hands, he comes to understand the unique features of each bird, the textures of the wings. The birds are the centre of his art and he is trying to represent them 'as they are', painting their forms, and letting his work be guided by the birds. He is self-deprecating of his practice – he says that so far he hasn't been able to perfectly represent a bird, but he's on a mission to do so.

It is striking just how much Ted has dedicated of his later years to understanding birds, and it is this sort of relationship to the environment we need now, to come to terms with the changes we are wreaking upon it. An endless fascination for birds is what drives Ted to make art, and it's a model we should follow.

Essay by **Andy Butler**