

## **JOSH ROBBINS** **ONCE I WAS A BIRD** 11-29 March 2010

Glinting eyes peer out intently from behind outrageous plumage. In a full display of brilliant colour, feathers, beaks and wings all bustle and preen against fields of open sky. Part bird, part flora, and perhaps part Victorian upholstery, this nefarious collection of birds stand before us, each wearing their graphic attire like the mantle of a fierce tribal warrior. Long bulbous talons grip onto gnarled branches dripping with latent fruit and exotic flowers.

This showy spectacle, brought to life by Melbourne artist Josh Robbins, calls on us to contemplate a world far wilder, freer and more capricious than any normal urban existence. These are not your common garden variety of sparrow or pigeon, but rather the result of a special sort of imaginary natural selection. Full of daring individuality, they are transformational shape-shifters, each fashioned according to the artist's own desire for beauty and aesthetic pleasure.

Working with an intentionally loose compositional strategy, Robbins uses a method of blind contour drawings to establish each characters anamorphic, spacious body. This device allows his practice to remain open to the spontaneous possibilities of contortion and slippage, to discover new and unpredictable forms. Fact is filtered through imagination; painstakingly photo-real renderings of feathery down are placed beside an unexpected swatch of Japanese pattern. Soft, drooping wattles and combs multiply with the profundity of wood fungi. Sharp acid yellows sit beside fleshy pinks. Dripping paint seeps into the liberal swoop of another solid colour. Truth and fantasy collide. In all, the resulting cacophony of forms offers an intensely visual depiction of nature in the act of morphing into a new species.

Across all bird life it is the male that must do the showing off, to display the brightest colours, sing the most beautiful song, perform the most impressive dance, puffing and expanding himself into some strange, bold and hopefully appealing shape. This form of courtship, this rare act of bodily transformation, is unique to birds.

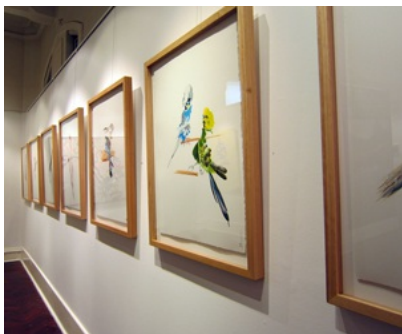
Robbins desire to depict his own breeds of distorted, extravagant, otherworldly creatures parallels the similarly inventive efforts of early botanical illustrators such as the 19th century English artists John Gould and Richard Sharpe. Their intricate, yet somewhat rigid images of birds of paradise were painted from taxidermied specimens, packed and shipped from the Asia-Pacific. Uncertain of the living birds natural movements and forms of display, the artists did their best to conceive of each species unique posture, working only from ornithological field notes and observations.

Unlike those unfortunate birds - captured, stripped and stuffed by keen explorers - Robbins' defiant creatures find refuge within the canvas frames. They are not restricted by notions of definitive truth or scientific accuracy. Safe within the beautiful folly of their creators artistic whim, they are free to continue their turbulent dance toward evolutionary self realisation. For these splendid, strutting rebels, their only task is to incite happiness.

Phe Luxford 2014



Exhibition installation views

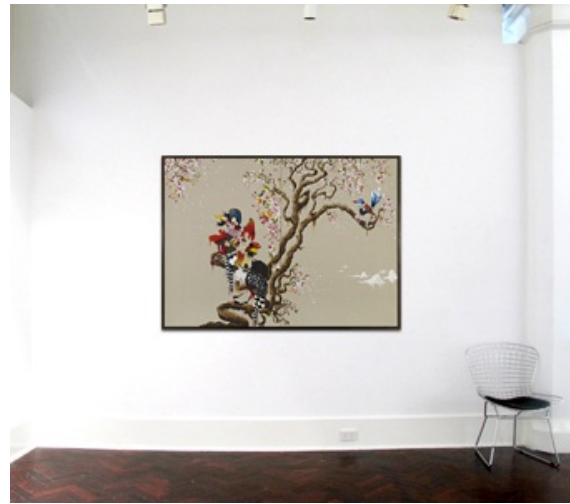


Exhibition installation views





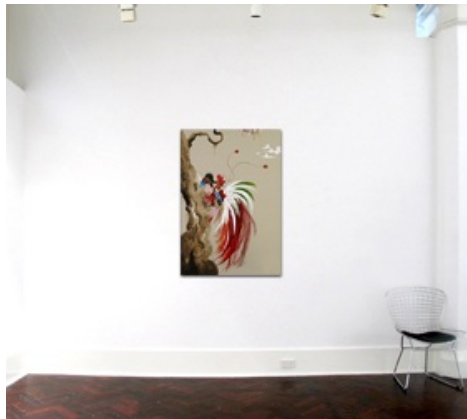
*Spring time with the Barbets*  
oil, charcoal, and floor stain on linen (FRAMED)  
130 x 180cm



*artwork in situ on 3.7m wall*



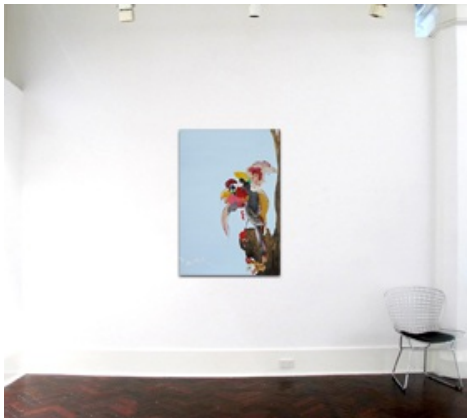
*Mother of Paradise*  
oil, charcoal, and floor stain on linen  
130 x 90cm



*artwork in situ on 3.7m wall*



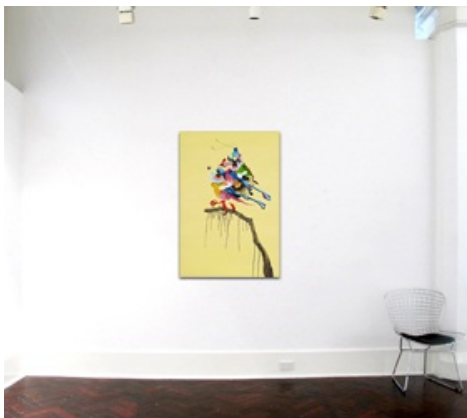
*One to three Trogons*  
oil, charcoal, and floor stain on linen  
130 x 90cm



*artwork in situ on 3.7m wall*



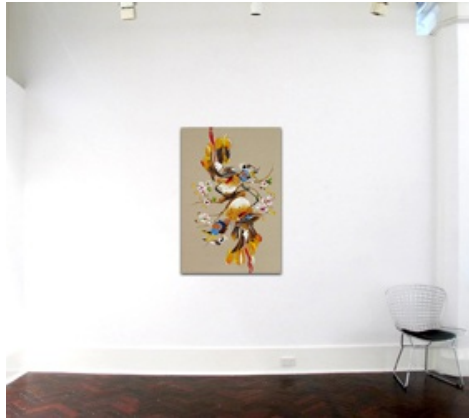
*Untitled Tits*  
oil, charcoal, and floor stain on linen  
130 x 90cm



*artwork in situ on 3.7m wall*



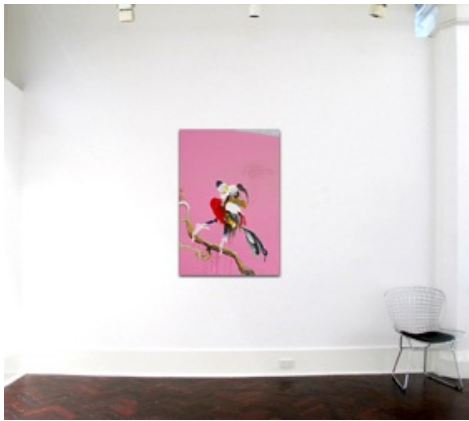
*Two Times One Blue Throat*  
oil, charcoal, and floor stain on linen  
130 x 90cm



*artwork in situ on 3.7m wall*



*I Was a Barbet*  
oil, charcoal, and floor stain on linen  
130 x 90cm



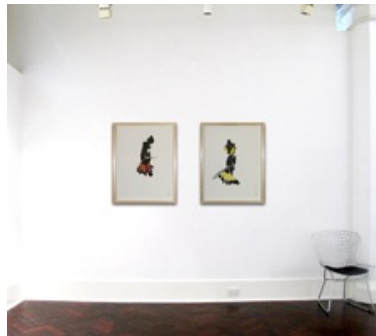
*artwork in situ on 3.7m wall*



*Red Tailed Black Cockatoo*  
oil on paper  
76 x 56cm (paper)  
90 x 70cm (framed)



*Yellow Tailed Black Cockatoo*  
oil on paper  
76 x 56cm (paper)  
90 x 70cm (framed)



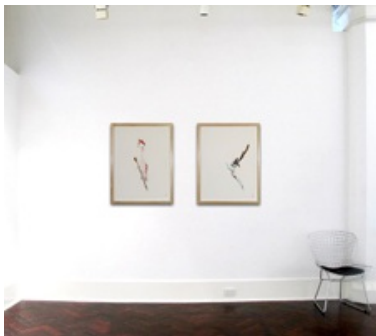
*artworks in situ on 3.7m wall*



*Major Mitchell*  
oil on paper  
76 x 56cm (paper)  
90 x 70cm (framed)



*Mallee Emu Wren*  
oil on paper  
76 x 56cm (paper)  
90 x 70cm (framed)



*artworks in situ on 3.7m wall*