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Liam Creates Ding Duck

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Inscape
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"Another night from the gallery window I saw a brindled heaven, the moon just marked by a blue spot pushing its way through the darker cloud, underneath and on the skirts of the rack, bold long flakes whitened and swaled like feathers, below/ the garden with the heads of the trees and shrubs furry grey: I read a broad careless inscape flowing throughout"(Gerard Manly Hopkins - Feb 23, 1872)

What exactly does all this mean?
'A brindled heaven', 'the darker cloud', 'feathers', 'below/ the garden', and 'inscape flowing' – all of these words capture me.

Last year my friends lost their 13-month-old son – Liam. He was a very special 'little man'. For his first anniversary, I created a mobile. In creating this gift for his family, I discovered part of my 'inscape flowing'. We (the mobile and I) travelled an unexpected flight path.

Collecting interesting things and bringing them all together created the work. Like a garden that slowly grows, so did this artwork and my appreciation for all that it contained. It began in my mind. I planted the seed - a bird mobile. It grew and I watered it. It developed a life of its own becoming something far more beautiful then I expected it to be. Liam used to sit in their garden, talking to the birds. It could dance with the wind and pay tribute to Liam and his connection with birds.

Symbolically, birds have a variety of meanings. In Man and his Symbols, Jung notes that 'the bird is the most fitting symbol of transcendence.'[1] There are many different varieties of birds. Different climates, habitats and survival techniques all contribute to their variation. Likewise, birds have a variety of symbolic meanings. For the Jaru people of the East Kimberley, the Willy Wagtail is a sign of death. The phoenix rising out of the ashes is symbolic of rebirth. There are many stories world wide about birds. One of my favourites is 'How the birds got their colours', an Australian dreamtime story, as told by Mary Albert[2].. Richard Bach's story of 'Jonathon Livingston Seagull' is another example as is Tchaikovsky - Swan Lake. People have sung many songs about birds. Nat King Cole sang "Straighten up and fly right", also The Dubliners sang 'The Lark in the Morning'. These examples show that birds are significant in many cultures.

In my mind's eye, I visualised the bird mobile and set about exploring ways of physically creating that image. I flew high and for long periods of time collecting, gathering materials, images, pieces, stories, just like a Bower Bird collects

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[1] Jung (1964: 151).
[2] Lofts (1983)

objects for his bower. I borrowed many books: books on mobiles, children's storybooks and books on artists and symbols. I spent many beautiful hours creating in my head. I soared high with the birds and nested with my many interesting and eye catching, shiny objects. It was always going to be a bird mobile, just how I was going to pull it off was unclear. I made a decision and set about cutting the aluminium and sanding it smooth. It was a labour of love. On my daily walk I gathered sticks that I might use.

Talking to a good friend, I discovered the bead shop down the road and gathered a variety of beads I was drawn to. The mobile was still many pieces, not yet connected. Late one evening, feeling very nervous about its creation I started to connect all the pieces. Like a bird tirelessly building its nest, I set about the construction on my artwork. All the time I thought of Liam and his family- the conversations we had together, the conversations I had had with others, where I was the evening he died. In a sense I was travelling back over the countryside of those memories but this time with a view from above, with a sense of freedom and distance that viewing country from a great height can provide. Is this how a bird can see the world from high above?; part of the world yet free to move between the earth and the 'heavens'; carried by the thermals, looking, feeling and just knowing? Once thermals begin to die, so birds find another that takes them higher or lower, moving from place to place. Their feathers protect them from water, their wings tailored to suit their needs. Birds that soar at high altitude for long period have large expansive wings, shaped to enhance the glide and minimise their energy loss. Hummingbirds beat their wings so fast you can't see them.

Just after his 6-month anniversary, I remembered very clearly a conversation with Jo (Liam's mum) about birds and flying. We had talked about my dad and his love for flying. It gave him a sense of freedom. As he flew, I would navigate. We knew where we were, always watching the earth beneath us. I had been aware of the connection but now it I'm more conscious of it. I thought of my father and wondered about 'a brindled heaven'. Heaven, is that where Dad and Liam are? Birds are flying in the 'heavens above'. As symbols of transcendence, does a bird move and watch from many levels of consciousness?

The mobile is made of various bird-like shapes. A large number of birds spend most of their life flying. Some are spectacular in colour and some have only colour. Some are small, some large. Some are fast, some slow. There are birds of prey, scavenger birds, birds that dance and birds that run. Their songs are all different.

My mobile was coming together and I really liked it. I finished it late. It was cold outside. Hanging the birds in my little flat, I watched it. I realised it was moving gently on its own. I couldn't feel the breeze yet the birds were moving. I had keep on looking at one bird in particular and hung him in the central position. Why had I left him till last? Why was he central? It occurred to me he reminded

me of 'Ding Duck'[3] – a cartoon figure that my father loved. My father was there too. Ding Duck had many adventures learning to fly. By gaining some distance I saw Ding duck so clearly. As I viewed the mobile from a distance, I realised that in its creation, I had been part of many adventures. The journey had taken me over many landscapes: near the sea, along the mountain ranges, into the desert, into beautiful gardens and beyond. Where to next? We had stopped throughout our journey, interacted with others, gathered for our journey and continued on. We had seen many different birds on our way.

References

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Jung, Carl G. (1964). *Man and his Symbols*. New York, Double Day & Company.

Lofts, Pamela (1983) *How the birds got their colours* Sydney Ashton Scholastic

[3] Ding Duck was created by Gary Clarke (nd). of Swamp Productions