



# NO FEAR OF FALLING

**FELICITY TOWNSEND  
FLOATING GOOSE**

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## **No Fear of Falling**

## **Essay by Adele Sliuzas**

Watching a flock of sparrows dance in the evening sky, the world seems momentarily suspended allowing this group of tiny beings to present a stunning display. It's breathtaking. There is something so magical about birds; their feathered bodies, hollow bones, and of course, their ability to release from the constraints of gravity. Felicity Townsend's exhibition, *No Fear of Falling*, presents an abundant circle of bold sculptural works. Drawing inspiration from the birdlife of her childhood home in Papua New Guinea, Townsend has drawn on personal memories to create a space that is about wonderment and joy.

The relationship between humans and birds is deeply rooted and biological. According to acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton, the human ear is particularly sensitive to hearing the frequencies of bird sound. *'The most sensitive frequencies are at the resonant frequencies of the auditory canal. In other words, the ear has shaped itself to naturally amplify certain bandwidth. And that corresponds to sounds in that bandwidth that were most important to our evolving ancestors to hear, in order to survive. And it doesn't match the human voice. It matches birdsong.'*<sup>1</sup> He believes that the human ear developed in this way, as the presence of birds indicated that there was an abundant landscape. Being attuned to these sounds meant that people could navigate through environments, following even distant sounds.

It makes sense then, that as humans we continue to share our spaces with birds. For Townsend, the emotional landscape of her childhood is filled with parrots, sunbirds, eagles. The immersive quality of the exhibition allows the viewer to step into this space, which feels fresh and free and ripe with birdsong. Reading Townsend's journal entries from around the age of 14 it is easy to see that the image of the birds are so strongly linked with her sense of self and belonging in this particular time and place. *'I will remember this morning,'* she writes, *'The warm sunshine and the song of the kabubu. The kuku calling in Dacky's valley and the kookaburras hidden on the other side of the river. The gabale and kela flying over in the sunlight. Sitting underneath the udili on a log, hidden from the kisi's view, with the grass all cut around. An a:ilila flying low in the distance.'* These lists are mnemonic. The birds aren't the whole memory, but if she can just hold on to the sense of the birds, then the feeling of this place will remain. The sculptures don't just reflect or reconnect with ideas from the past, they become a stand in for that memory- a touchstone.

There is a likeness between the sculptural works on the gallery walls and these journal entries, which list one + another + another + another in a way that acts just like a fold. Lists, like folds, are non-hierarchical. The sculptures are simultaneously many things; intricately hand folded paper, time-spent-with, memories, the physical being of the birds and also the idea of a bird and what it represents, a moment in time, a wider ecology, the concept of a relationship with nature. Townsend asks us to look upon these sculptures and see them as objects of memory and subjectivity (yours, as well as hers) and affect. They are not 'like a bird' but are becoming-bird, and becoming-memory. The audience is also given an opportunity to fold their own subjectivity into this scene: through your relationship with the artworks you too begin the process of becoming-bird, maybe even becoming-Townsend, folding your own subjectivity into the artist's complex and magical connection to a moment in time & place.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Hempton and Nika Knight 'Gordon Hempton: Learning to Listen' in *Geurnica Magazine* online September 15, 2015 <https://www.guernicamag.com/learning-to-listen/>

As Townsend folds herself into the paper of the sculpture, she creates these pieces that are embodied- a human memory of a non-human relationship. The relation between the outside and the inside of the fold seems complex, but it is actually quite simple- the outside *is* the inside and the inside *is* the outside, and what is in can come out and vice versa. Within Western Culture we have developed this idea that humans are separate from nature in a way that can be dangerous to our understanding of self, and disastrous to our environment. What Townsend highlights is the folding of the cultural & the human, into the ecology of a place. We can think about these folds as the texture or fabric of our world, our material selves but also memory and time are part of this texture. *'The world is superabundant, like a lake teeming with fish, with smaller fish between these fish, and so on ad infinitum. There is no boundary between the organic and the inorganic here; each is folded into the other in a continuous 'texturology'.*<sup>2</sup>

In this body of work Townsend blends the figurative with the abstracted, delivering sculptural works that reference painting. The repetitive motif of the fold holds within it the gestural relationship to Townsend's body. Each fold is scored and pressed, using the weight of the artists body to manipulate flat paper into 3D space. The undulating surface of the works manipulate the direction of the eye, giving movement. Her decision to use bold colours and more defined application of colour make this project distinct from previous work.

Through the title, *'No Fear of Falling'*, Townsend touches on a narrative that flows through her sculptural practice; the feeling of flying, of being in the air. Townsend spoke to me about her crystalline memories of flying into the village where she lived in a remote area of Papua New Guinea. The joy of flying, but also the normalcy & necessity felt so contrasted with my own sense of anxiety at the thought of a six seater plane. While her previous exhibitions have looked at cloud forms, this body of work interrogates notions of flight from a different angle. Each of the sculptural forms that occupy the gallery represent a body that flies. Townsend captures a sense of childhood magic, entertaining the idea that we could experience the sensation of flight. The centre of the gallery is occupied by a safety net, haloed in a translucent rainbow of refracted light, similar to what Townsend remembers seeing on the tops of clouds as her plane soared above. The net offers us safety, if only we can tap into the energy of the flock and take off.

The beautiful thing about this exhibition is the generosity that Townsend offers the viewer, giving the opportunity to see and experience the joy and wonderment of her childhood, and the relationship that she had with nature. The incredible materiality of these hand painted and hand folded works offer this portal of delight. Like Townsend's 14 year old self, we too can delight in the world around us.

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<sup>2</sup> Simon O'Sullivan, "Definition: 'Fold'" excerpt from Adrian Parr, ed. *The Deleuze Dictionary Revised Edition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. <https://www.simonosullivan.net/articles/deleuze-dictionary.pdf>

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Felicity Townsend

I wake up early to go outside, to savour the last remaining mornings before the chaos of transition begins. The mist is clearing, the udilis outside my window turning from dark silhouettes to vibrant green. I go out the back way, pausing on the dusty old steps to remember Rascal, his pawprints, his sleeping place, his eating place, Rascal, Rascal, Rascal... sometimes I am grateful that particular goodbye happened without warning, because I could not have borne the heaviness of waiting for it to approach.

I keep walking towards the river, under the tallest udili where Nathan and his friends built the old treehouse, past the frangipanis and hibiscus bushes we planted many years ago. It's a slippery red-orange path beneath the huge dark kololo mango at the top of the hill, and I make my way carefully down to the bamboos and the gawa saba. The canoes are lying peacefully in the water. I sit on a log underneath the old trees, where kisis and cockies feed, where cuckoos and bee-eaters and dollarbirds and flycatchers and drongos and kabubu and doves and kingfishers sit and sunbirds nest. Where the staff families made sago last year, and the bar-shouldered doves came to scratch in the leavings. Where the soft bird-smell reminds me of Lory and Peanut and the days long past. I am near the bamboo that used to be an island, where the honeyeaters hide and the bee-eaters perch – and I watch the river.

Flowing past, blurring the reflections of the familiar trees on the other side. A kuku calling in the distance, back past Dacky's house. Kabubus gurgling in chorus from across the river; thicket-fantail ringing out from deep in the bush. The squeaky-wheel bird wheedling on, close but far, ever unattainable. An a:ilila flies low to the staff point. Her white wings almost clip the surface of the water. Kisis call high in the nubudus above me, but I am hidden from their sight under the shady leaves.

A fish jumps in the middle of the river. I only see ripples. Then suddenly, movement – close to the water's edge on the other side of the river, moving amongst the scrub and reeds. A grey and reddish bird with long yellow legs flies out. It seems young – inexperienced. I think it is a goshawk. Sunbirds call and I scan the tops of the coconut palm, watching the leaves waving in the sun. The blossom glows pink-yellow, but there is no sign of the darting golden siwisiwi. A kela flies strongly over, rich red and blue vivid in the morning sky. Later a gabale glides across from the same place in the northwest, his orange beak gleaming like a headlight. The udili blocks my view before I see his scarlet flanks and underwings.

I hear a startled call nearby, loud and echoing... a segedaba? But I can't see one in the trees over the river. Perhaps it was one of the chickens scratching around me, hopping on the old beached canoes – I thought one was a snake earlier from the noise it made, its feet slithering through the grass. Then suddenly a male hornbill launches itself from the trees over the river, calling, and flies towards me, crossing the river. He is heavy, yet graceful, and the air seems to hold his body up, hanging there as time pauses for one perfect second. His black feathered wings swing slowly, cutting the wind with a rushing sound. His golden orange mane glows in the sunlight, bright against the clouds... it seems like a dream. He curves towards Dacky's house and disappears from view.

I see the grey bird once more... I see its beak and it *is* a hawk, but church is starting soon and I have to get ready. I climb up the steep slope to Aunty Wendy's point, walking the familiar path past the frangipani and the three jasmines. I turn the corner at the radio room, passing between the red and pink jungle geraniums and the allamanda where we used to play gubali. Turn, go past the little mango and the rain gauge, underneath the two udilis, up the steps – Aba's steps – and into the house.

We are leaving soon.