



# Gang-gang



with  
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## Flights of fancy and a history

**T**here's so much ugly reality reported elsewhere in this noble newspaper that we often try, in our small corner of it, to give you some respite from it all. So here today is a surreal painting that depicts a floating pear.

And just in case (although we find it unimaginable in so sensitive a readership) anyone is weary of this column's wildlife photographs of *real* birds, in Graeme Townsend's surreal painting we see riding on the pear an imagined fowl of many colours.

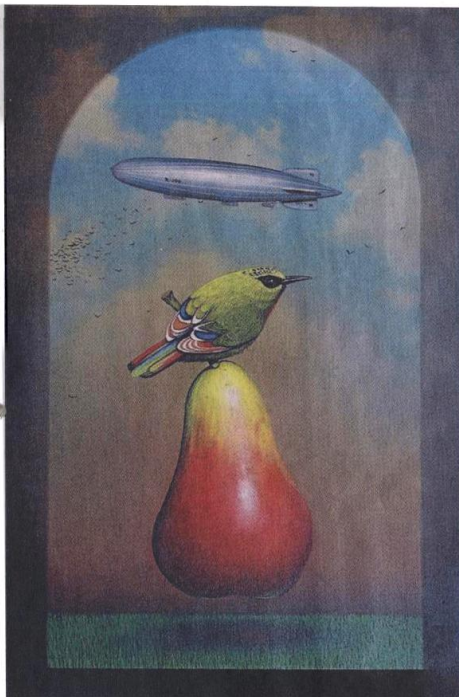
Townsend's painting *The Story of Flight* adorns an exhibition of his work that opens on Thursday at the Beaver Galleries in Deakin. He spoke to us about the painting from his home, a bird-rich farm somewhere in the wilds of South Australia.

He explains that he is as well a wildlife photographer, enthusiastic about birds, and that one of his themes is the way in which mankind and animals (especially birds) relate to one another. In this painting he was thinking about the effortless ease with which birds fly to and fro and the ways in which our attempts at imitations of them, in flying, are such clunkingly, desperately hard work.

"Think of the earliest hot air balloons, at the airships, how primitive they were, and then look at how in inventing them we were trying to imitate those little birds we see alight on our verandas and decks and then fly off again."

And so in *The Story Of Flight* we see a cumbersome airship, a Zeppelin of the Great War, juxtaposed with birds. The Zeppelin, although thought quasi-miraculous at the time when the Germans invented and deployed it, was a slow, lumbering and clumsy brute of a thing. And so in this painting the flock of birds high in the sky with the Zeppelin is, wheeling and zooming effortlessly and elegantly, giving a contrast of what birds do with ease and aplomb with what we find terribly hard work.

And, though the birds have been airborne for millions of years we have only just begun (in the great scheme of things) to get aloft. Yes, one of species' first



Graeme Townsend's *The Story of Flight*, above, and mechanically bewildered Dr Betty Phillips in a Glenn Innes garage in 1963, top right.

mawkish attempt at powered flight, was so recent an invention that some of us have spoken with oldies (alas now gone to their Great Rewards) who actually *saw* Zeppelins. It turned out in our conversation that the artist's family and this columnist's both have Zeppelin stories to tell.

Townsend relates how as a child his wife's grandmother was taken to see, in Germany, one of these marvels and in later life reminisced about it. The Zeppelin in this painting is the one that

floats through his family's folklore. And I confided in the artist, shewing my age, that as a child in rural England my own mother was taken out into the garden one moonlit night to be shewn, unforgettably, a ghastly Zeppelin drifting across Norfolk skies.

Townsend says that on his farm he looks up into the sky and sees vapour trails of great airliners and thinks of how our experiences of flying, requiring us to be enclosed "in an aluminium tube", compare poorly with what birds manage



with such flair. He loves to have fun with painting, to make his works "theatrical".

"I love surrealism and so in the painting both the Zeppelin and the pear are floating."

His exhibition opens on Thursday and details and surreal images are at <http://www.beavergalleries.com.au>

**And now, still reluctant to return to the awful realities of our own times,** we seek sanctuary in the delightful 1960s by turning to the ancient history (ancient by Canberra standards) of the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

That institution is marking its 45th birthday, for it was officially opened, in 1970, by prime minister John Gorton.

And yet the institution, conceived in the 1940s, is older and more bewhiskered than 45. Some of the 45th birthday displays at the gardens are going to be exhibitions of photographs that cultivate (and we used that word advisedly) a pictorial history of the gardens.

Long, long before its official opening the gardens (it is, remember, a collection of our own continent's flora) was called the Canberra Botanic Gardens and was busily engaged in the business of wild field collecting of native plants and plant material.

There were intrepid safaris to far-flung places, and there are some photographs of gardens' staff collecting and camping. In the one we've chosen for today the gardens' botanist, Dr Betty Phillips, botanically astute but perhaps mechanically bewildered, is marooned in a garage in Glenn Innes. She is looking (is there despair in her expression?) at the strewn innards of the gardens' VW Kombi, her safari vehicle. Let us hope there is at hand a mechanic who, while he can't tell a Banksia from a chrysanthemum, knows as much about VW Kombis as Dr Phillips knows about the Proteaceae.

We don't know what became of that 1963 safari but overall the indefatigable Dr Phillips, appointed botanist at the Canberra Botanic Gardens in June 1960, collected for the gardens an astounding 25,398 items. A map of Australia shows, with red dots, the places all across our wide brown land, where Dr Phillips' learned and tireless peregrinations took her. Born in Melbourne in 1917, she retired in 1973.

Details of the gardens' 45th Anniversary celebrations, including this Sunday's Community Day, are at the gardens' website <http://www.anbg.gov.au/gardens/index.html>