

The totemic bird appears in windows, it takes on a disguise in each pane, adapting to its background in order to exist. The bird thrives in almost all elements, the sea, the sky and the earth. It has conquered this matter during its wandering evolution from the Jurassic period to now, as it flies alongside the industrial aircraft, feeds alongside the trawling net, is caught in one million megapixels in the lens of the camera. Ruby Wilkinson explores the sky as a realm of creation, freedom and communication through the ever-changing figure of the bird.

Wilkinson's birds appear as shadows, cartoonish outlines and geometric angularities, or dissolve into flurried, thick brushstrokes, shapeshifting, as if caught in a mysterious cycle. Like musical notes, they teeter between harshness and softness, appearing in ones, twos and threes. These earth-bound birds soften the infinite vastness of the landscapes set behind them, with their arced wings and downy round bellies, tethering the sky and the earth together. Wilkinson describes her understanding of the sky and atmosphere as *the holder and beholder of all life*, omniscient in its total envelopment of the earth and its inhabitants. The figure of the bird acts as the skeleton key, a *passe partout* that allows us to unlock the weightless joy of being airborne.

*Bucca*, a dolphin, is outlined in soft, blurred brushstrokes over an oceanic plain, neon flecks seeping out of the watery haze. In the 1960s, where science and magic seemed to overlap, NASA co-funded an experiment in interspecies communication. Margaret Howe-Lovatt and Peter the dolphin were built an amphibious Dolphinarium home where they would live side by side for six days a week. The experiment was ultimately deemed a failure; Peter had failed to learn a simplified version of English called *Dolphinese* that they had tried to teach him. But Peter and Margaret had achieved some form of communication. She later described him trying to sound out the letter M through his blowhole, and they had formed a non-verbal friendship through their months of cohabitation. Peter reminds me of the creature in *Bucca*, floating in a haze, the truth of his knowledge obscured by our brutish attempts to understand him.

Man is obsessed with the dolphin. We have tried to control and understand it through military experiments, speech pathology, deciphering and recreating its sonar. These all betray a desperation to find new ways of existing. In the film *Arrival* (2016), learning an alien language unlocks a completely new way of perceiving time. I think the smarter thing to do would be to hang out with Peter, befriend him and learn through what comes of it. A *bucca* is a Cornish male water spirit. One can imagine Peter slipping off his dolphin skin, gleefully skipping away from his laboratory confinement.

Wilkinson has created a lexicon around *Hullabaloo*, a rich and heady list containing words such as *imp*, *temper*, *topos*, words that make you use the very tip of your lips to sound them out. One of these words is *primordial*, which is a word that came to mind when looking at her paintings. The scenes are brewing, cauldrons of shadows and colours that life may imminently emerge from, or evolve into something new. The bird and the aquatic mammal, both holding secrets from the past and promises for the future. Wilkinson states that to her, primordial is the *first creation, the earliest*.

*Oris* and *Tache* are indicative of this, oozing with potential, teetering on some kind of precipice. *Tache* is delineated into two shades of warm and cool blue, marked by an oxblood sphere in the middle of where the two colours meet. An amoeba, a stain, an egg, a sun, an olive. I once met a theoretical biologist when I was picking olives, who explained to me that he had been working on an alternate theory of the origins of life, the primordial soup. It is comforting to imagine that the theory of life is in flux, unstable and evolving alongside us. That biological logic is not as rigid as we are led to believe.

In an episode of the early 2000s Cartoon Network show *Cow and Chicken*, the aforementioned personified animals are transported backwards to the dawn of time, where they bear witness to the primordial soup. It lies in the middle of a barren yellow desert, covered by a stark blue sky. The soup simmers inside of a puckered abscess, red and churning with miasma. A penny is dropped inside, giving everyone in the present a penny for a head. *Oris* swirls like this pool, orange, bodily and fluid. You wonder what addition to the primordial soup could have given the body wings, or gills?

An olive is a blessed fruit. In the Bible, a dove returns with an olive leaf to signal the end of the great Flood. Mythologically across many cultures and religions, the elements have been gendered, the sky is father and the earth is mother, giving form to the eternal vastness of the skies, or the fecund darkness of the earth. Wilkinson's paintings deal with the sublime in relation to the limitations of the self. In her previous body of work *Belle Plaine*, the body is depicted in fragments, a knee, thighs, calves. The absence of the body in *Hullabaloo* allows us to experience these impossible desires to break through its constraints, in flight or under the water. States that are typically relegated to dreams, a peek of lucidity under the curtain of fantasy.

Romily Marbrook, October 2026