

THE BIGGER

picture

Cheaper and better drones are drawing more amateurs to the previously obscure world of aerial photography – with results that are increasingly recognised with the status of fine art

IMOGEN REID

From the icy Altay region in Kazakhstan to the remote Lofoten Islands in Norway, a new wave of aerial photography has changed the way we view life with a fresh perspective on shooting the landscapes that have long dominated classical photography and fine art.

Images from the annual Drone Photo Awards, which attracted 13,000 entries from 104 countries last year, went viral during 2021 as a means of virtual escape during extended periods of isolation.

Maria Pannati, a member of the organising committee of the Siena International Photo Awards, which organises the Drone Awards, says enthusiasm for the method — and its results — is driven by “the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective and catch images from places that we couldn’t document before the drones”.

Brad Walls, a 29-year-old from Sydney who designs apps for a living, has carved himself out a successful sideline as a fine-art aerial photographer, a mode of photography more and more are tapping into. Prior to picking up his first drone four years ago, Walls had never even touched a handheld camera.

Now, his work — including *Detached*, in *Harmony*, which comprises some of the striking, almost abstract sand dune images that adorn these pages — captures scenes of the Australian summer that have garnered attention here and overseas.

“I never practised or learnt about it, but I went on a holiday and picked up a drone and started flying around and taking pictures,” he says. “I don’t have any kind of arts degree, so it all comes from practice.”

Without any formal training he placed second in the 2021 Fine Art Photography Awards “Conceptual” category, and silver in both the prestigious PX3 awards and Moscow Fine Art Awards of 2021,

prizes usually awarded to artists using handheld cameras. His collection of shoots, including *Pools from Above*, *Water Geomorphs* and the most recent series, *Detached*, in *Harmony*, have even been compared to the work of Slim Aarons and David Hockney.

Asked about the comparison, Walls says: “It’s obviously a huge compliment, but I try not to think about that stuff too much.”

Rather, he cites as his inspiration a more ob-

scure early 20th Century fashion photographer, Clifford Coffin.

Walls has a following of more than 30,000 on his Instagram page, where fans adore his signature compositions of geometric patterns, repetition and symmetry.

“My interest (in aerial photography) stems from the cross-over of technology and art,” Walls explains. “Drones offer a new modality of expression, or rather, a more accessible modality from the air. I believed their offering was under-utilised in a photographic artistic sense. They had more to offer than landscape images.”

Advances in technology, he

adds, have made the art form more accessible. “Ten years ago, drones were quadruple the investment. Additionally, the camera technology wasn’t there either,” he says. “Societal sentiment around drones seems to be more positive than it was. That may also be an influence.”

Walls uses a DJI Mavic 3 — “the top foldable drone with a great sensor for its form factor. Anything more powerful and I would be

pho-

pher before and knew that he was known for being a very eccentric character. Now they call him one of the great lost photographers of the Vogue photography era, and so many get captivated by his story because he did push a lot of boundaries.

“The imagery for (Coffin’s) day was very forward and I grabbed on to that because I’m always pushing uphill using drones in a way that’s a little different, and Coffin was one of the characters that pushed fashion photography sideways.”

Fascinated with how the models were arranged in Coffin’s photograph, *Models Sitting on Sand Dunes*, Walls wanted to use similar techniques to capture the state of the world during the pandemic. Like many, the artist had experienced how distant and repetitive life had become, and placed a keen focus on this element in his work.

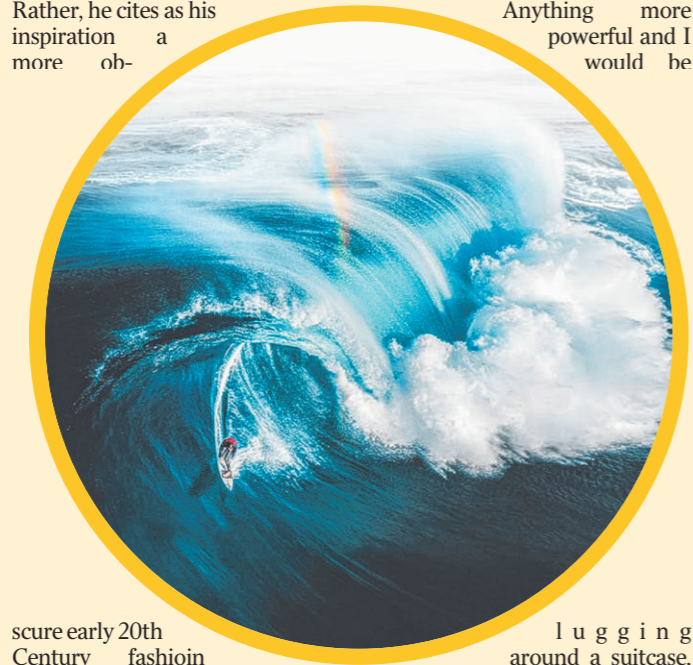
“I saw how his models were spread out in the vast space and knew something was there to work with and make that into a series. Working with a drone, you have a lot of space that you can use a lot of angles,” he says.

Shot on the sand dunes near Newcastle in NSW, his drone hovering above the model captured the uniformity and surrealism of the series. “The figures are purposefully static, to symbolise how we have been frozen in time over the past 18 months.”

It took Walls nine months to finalise the images to use in his latest collection.

“Looking from a different perspective down on life is very interesting to me. And so this was a difficult thing to just use one subject,” he says. “I generally like to use people because it’s very relatable for people to look at.”

Increasingly, Australians are performing admirably on the world stage when it comes to embracing drone photography. Perth-based photographer,



Clifford Coffin's 1940s photograph, *Models Sitting on Sand Dunes*, which is not ideal for my type of work.”

Walls says tight flying regulations have hindered creative licence when it comes to conducting shoots.

“The regulations do make it difficult to execute artistic shoots. Over time, I would like to see the regulations relaxed, allowing for more creative freedom to artists,” he says.

A photograph taken by Coffin, whose pictures were featured in British Vogue during the 1940s, has long been on his Pinterest board, Walls reveals.

“I had heard of the photogra-



“Drones offer a new modality of expression ... a more accessible modality from the air. I believed their offering was under-utilised in a photographic artistic sense. They had more to offer than landscape images”



Phil De Glanville won the Drone Award Sports category last year for his aerial photo, *Gold at the End of the Rainbow*, showing WA surfer Ollie Henry surging ahead of the barrel of a giant wave in the southwest of the country. The previous year, it was Australian drone photographer Jim Picot who took out the top award for his breathtaking shot, *Love Heart of Nature*, which captured a school of salmon forming the shape of a heart with a

A hard life but, at the end of the day, perfectly in tune

The remarkable story of Carrie Jacobs-Bond is part of our series on the secrets behind the music we love

ALAN HOWE



The Myers Opera House in Janesville, Wisconsin, is gone now, demolished in 1975 to make way for a bank. It had been built shortly after the Civil War and served as an entertainment venue in the era before radio and recorded music. Middle-class households aspired to own a piano and back then many people had at least a rudimentary understanding of it. Poorer folk played fiddles and banjos.

In December 1870, shortly after the Myers opened, it hosted a musician named Tom Wiggins, who was shown to the stage and, on

piano, performed some classical pieces and a few then-popular songs. He had a party trick: a local was invited up to the piano to play something — anything, perhaps something they had composed — and Wiggins would astonish the audience by returning to the piano and repeating it, note for note.

He was 21, uneducated, blind, probably autistic and, until a few years before, had been a slave. His former owners “managed” him.

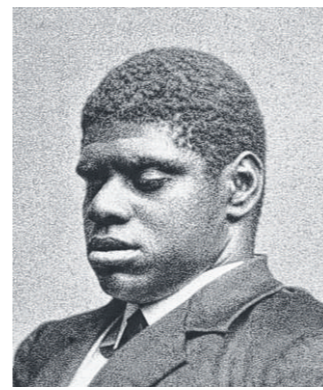
Eight-year-old Janesville resident Carrie Jacobs (later Jacobs-Bond) was there. She too was gifted on piano and about to start lessons with a Professor Titcomb.

That night it was Titcomb who was asked to play something for Wiggins. He played his own composition but a man standing near the piano reached over and struck a random note at the other end of the keyboard. That would bring the black lad to heel. Jacobs-Bond

watched. “Blind Tom ... played the composition beautifully and when he came to that note which he could not reach with his hands, he leaned down to the keyboard and struck it with his nose.”

Jacobs-Bond thought Wiggins “quite the most wonderful man in the world” and dedicated herself to a life in music.

That life, during which she overcame challenges that would have demoralised most of us, was a series of victories over the odds so that by the first years of the new century, she was among America’s most loved songwriters with three landmark hits between 1901 and 1906. She performed at the White House for US presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge and Warren Harding, starred on stage in London with Enrico Caruso and, when she died, was eulogised by former president Herbert Hoover.



Pianist ‘Blind’ Tom Wiggins in 1880

One of her songs, *I Truly Love You*, was used in a vital scene in acclaimed Academy Award-winning film *It’s A Wonderful Life*, starring James Stewart.

It was covered by Al Bowlly, Bing Crosby and Pat Boone. Jacobs-Bond became the first

woman to sell a million copies of a song (as sheet music, gramophone records were still a novelty). Another song, *Just Awearin’ for You*, was covered by a dozen including Crosby with a definitive version by Paul Robeson. Soon after, in 1906, Jacobs-Bond wrote her finest song, *At the End of A Perfect Day*, selling more than five million copies of it as piano rolls, sheet music and shellac 78s.

She entertained American troops in Europe during World War I, and in 1941 America’s General Federation of Women’s Clubs lauded her contribution to the progress of women. She was also among the inductees in the first year of the Songwriters Hall of Fame with Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Hank Williams, Scott Joplin and Woody Guthrie.

Yet today she is all but forgotten. Many of her parlour songs have perhaps dated beyond re-

demption, but her hits regularly garner popular culture references, and the beautiful melody of *At the End of A Perfect Day* is still widely performed.

She was born Carrie Minetta Jacobs during the Civil War, on August 11, 1862, the only child of a doctor and his wife whose home rang to the sound of music. The untutored child found she could easily pick out tunes on the piano, even mastering Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2.

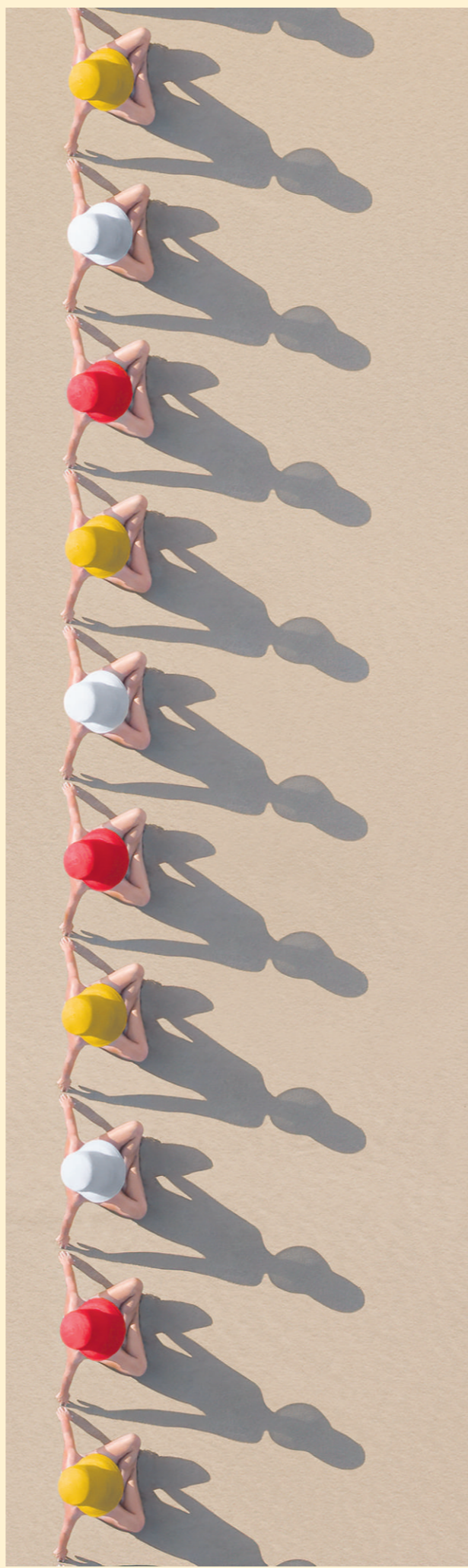
Then she saw Wiggins. After his conquest on stage he played a piece of complex chords and Carrie was encouraged by her father on to the stage to play them back. She did.

Married briefly at 18, she had a son, Fredrick. That marriage failed and about 1887 she wed Frank Lewis Bond. They had known each other as children. It was a happy union, but Carrie was plagued by

rheumatism, which restricted her movements, her husband was later made redundant and then, in 1895, he was struck with a snowball, fell heavily on to the ice and suffered fatal injuries. Carrie said his last words were: “My darling, this is death. But, oh, how I want to live.”

She realised she would have to start writing more music to make ends meet, buying a small house and taking in boarders, and then a smaller one while selling her furniture as Frederick completed his school years. She performed house concerts, and started to teach piano. In later years she and Frederick set up a small music publishing enterprise covering her own works then just gaining popularity.

Before long, she would be making \$1m annually. Very few artists then (and too few in the future, just ask The Beatles) realised the value of their copyrights, or could afford the patent process to protect them.



Getting Started

DRONE PHOTOGRAPHY

Experts say the DJI Mavic 2 Pro is the go-to for enthusiasts at any level, available for around \$2500 from camera stores and sites. It features a professional-grade Hasselblad camera. To check the regulations for flying drones in Australia: visit casa.gov.au/knowyourdrone/drone-rules

shark swimming inside it. Earlier in 2021, a drone shot by Steve Irwin's son, Robert, won the People's Choice Award in the renowned annual Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. The image, *Bushfire*, depicted a fire tearing along a line in far north Queensland. Irwin launched his drone after spotting smoke near the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve in Cape York. Picôt tells *The Australian* taking out the

top spot in the prestigious Drone Award competition was "mind boggling" due to the sheer size of entries, adding that drone photography is coming to be recognised as a form of fine art.

"You can call it that (fine art) because it's interpreted by the photographer in the sense that it's still a camera... you're still capturing shots, and it's what you do with the shots in post-production, in editing," he explains.

Since buying his first drone while on holiday in Hawaii with his family six years ago, Picôt has owned several, including the DJI Mavic Pro 3, which he is still yet to unbox.

"Until the Mavic Pro 3 came out, the Mavic 2 was the go-to drone consumer drone," he says. "With the drone you can get so many different compositions in one flight. They're just incredible."

However, Picôt also has a fondness for older drones, especially the Phantom 4 Pro, which those new to the hobby may overlook.

"It's big and bulky but it's amazingly agile and as long as you can keep pressing the mechanical shutter... you can get the shot in a split-second."

Panniati, a member of the organising committee of the Siena International Photo Awards, says the growth drone category has

been spurred by cheaper and more widely available drones.

"Thanks to the technology in the drone industry now we are able to drive the drone without seeing it, opening to the opportunity to shoot marvellous footage and images that we couldn't have imagined before," she says.

Brad Walls will exhibit *Detached*, in *Harmony* this year. For details visit bradscanvas.com. For more of his sand dune images go to theaustralian.com.au

Detached, in Harmony series (main, above, left); Love Heart of Nature Inset left; Gold at the End of the Rainbow (far left)

Clockwise from top Judith Durham, Bing Crosby, opera singer Paul Robeson, a scene from *It's A Wonderful Life*; and songwriter Carrie Minetta Jacobs-Bond, centre

In 1914, Frederick wrote a poem for which his mother wrote the music. It was recorded by opera star Ernestine Schumann-Heink and was a tribute to a grateful son to a hardworking mum: "Out in life's garden, where sympathy grew, I found a heart, 'twas the heart of you."

A few years later the pair moved to California where in 1909, while staying at the famous Mission Inn and about to go downstairs for dinner, Jacobs-Bond thought thankfully about the friends she was to join and quickly wrote out the lyrics to *At the End of a Perfect Day* and folded them away.

Months later while humming a new melody, she was asked if it was her new song. It might be, she said, and that night moulded those words around the tune.

It became very popular and the melody has endured. It was played

to the first-class passengers in the dining lounge on the *Titanic* – well, at least for the first four days. It was covered by Crosby and Robeson, Mahalia Jackson and later The Fureys. Barbara Stanwyck sings it in the 1940 film *Remember the Night*, and Judith Durham used it to close her British TV special in 1970 after leaving The Seekers.

Jacobs-Bond had one last mountain to climb, but she continued to write and perform until aged 86.

Frederick had suffered chronic illness for years and was doleful. In 1932 he drove to their alpine weekend at Lake Arrowhead outside Los Angeles. He lit two candles, wound up the 78 player, put on his mother's *At the End of a Perfect Day* and shot himself.

They are interred together near Michael Jackson at Glendale's Forest Lawn Memorial



BACK ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Dodgy lodgings, underwhelming cuisine and the threat of crocodiles can't detract from a Top End trip of a lifetime

DAVID MEAGHER

WISH EDITOR



"Don't have the souvlaki."

But then, why would you? We are a long way from a Greek taverna. In fact, we are in Kakadu National Park on a boat cruise along the Yellow Water wetlands, heading back to the dock when, naturally, discussion turns to what we should do for dinner.

Restaurants in this part of the Northern Territory are thin on the ground and book out, so planning is essential unless you want to have corn chips in your cabin for dinner. There's a total of three places to eat near where we are staying in Jabiru, and we've already dined at one of them twice.

"What about the golf club?" S asks.

"Oh, the golf club sounds nice, let's try that," says R, no doubt imagining an upscale air-conditioned interior with wicker furniture, club sandwiches, Long Island iced tea and views of the fairways.

Then Trish, another tourist on the boat who is seated in front of us, briefly turns and says, "I wouldn't". S leans forward and asks why not and Trish then offers us her review of the souvlaki she ordered. "I don't even think it was lamb," she said and then turned to face the front again. I raise an eyebrow and mouth to S: "Souvlaki? WTF?"

The four of us – J, R, S and me – had been on the road in the Northern Territory and Western Australia now for almost a week at this point and we knew what to expect from the restaurants in the area, which is to say not much. The food here is underwhelming at best and there's plenty of it – especially barramundi and as much as I like barramundi, well before week's end I never want to see it again.

But we didn't embark on a Top End road trip for a culinary adventure (Subway is included in a list of best restaurants in Kununurra I found online). Or a fine wine experience ("We have sauvignon blanc" is the response from a waiter when I ask if they have a wine list). Or for the luxury accommodation (I sent a photo of me working on my laptop from outside my room at the Timber Creek Hotel to a colleague and she asked why I was sitting outside a public toilet).

We came here for the scenery and to explore a part of Australia we had never been to. We came for the wide-open spaces and as an escape from the city between lockdowns. The four of us live near each other in the inner city of Sydney and the long, straight, traffic-free roads with their 130km/h speed limits, the ever-changing landscape and the foreignness of the region to us were a thrill. We scrambled over large boulders to reach a spectacular swimming hole at the top of Emma Gorge, hiked in the Keep River National Park and didn't see another person for hours (heaven), flew over Purnululu (aka the Bungle Bungles) and

couldn't fathom that the rock formations were only discovered by white people in 1982 and experienced sunsets that took your breath away.

We were a long way from Darlinghurst and didn't care about fine dining or thread counts. Our road trip in a rented Toyota LandCruiser covered nearly 2000km between the four Ks: Katherine, Kununurra, the Kimberley and Kakadu.

We did our research. Well, J did the research and we obeyed. We decided to go in the last week of May, after the wet season. Of course, that's when a lot of other

been on the road for some time when we meet her. She tells me where they've been and shows me photos on her iPad and I volunteer our itinerary in an effort to make polite conversation – she gave us her spot by the pool after all.

"Kakadu? I've heard mixed reports about Kakadu, I'm not sure I'd go there."

Mixed reports about the World Heritage-listed site I've been keen to visit since I was a child and that people travel the world to see? Clearly, unlike with Trish, we chose not to take Pat's advice.

When the others arrive at the pool and see me talking to Pat, I introduce her. "This is Pat, she's heard mixed reports about Kakadu," I say. J, S and R are speechless for the second time in less than an hour.

The first time was when we arrived at our accommodation, the Nitmiluk Chalets, just outside Katherine. We drove past the "chalets" three times because we didn't think the collection of de-



SUNSET AT NITMILUK, TOP; AND SCENES FROM DAVID MEAGHER'S NORTHERN TERRITORY ROAD TRIP

“

Better than Google in these parts is word of mouth from the grey nomads who have been on the road for months ... and are very happy to share their wisdom. Take Pat as an example ...

people also planned to go, so we had to compromise a little when it came to our accommodations. A boom in Australians seeing the Top End for the first time while international borders were closed, and a lack of hospitality workers thanks to the pandemic, means some things are just not open and others are short-staffed and operating on restricted hours or offer limited services. Because of that, better than Google in these parts is word of mouth – specifically from the grey nomads who have been on the road for months and know it all and are very happy to share their wisdom.

Take Pat as an example. We met Pat on our first night – she bequeathed us her spot by the pool at the "resort" we were staying at. Pat and her husband had

mountable buildings on the edge of a dusty camping ground fitted the description of a chalet. They looked more like builders' offices on a construction site.

R, trying to put a positive spin on our digs, says he doesn't know why people are so down about de-mountable classrooms. "It's just Modernism," he says. Later that night R got stuck in the shower cubicle and had to be freed by J. That's what being married is all about.

At Edith Falls we find an open swimming spot that is deemed to have a "very low crocodile risk", according to a sign at the entrance to the path that leads to the falls. One by one, J, R and then S take a cautious dive into the water. I let the others go before me and think to myself, I wonder where the car keys are. But it's hot – really hot – and the water in the small but picture-perfect lake looks so inviting I decide to concentrate on the words "very low" and not on the fate of Rebecca Gilling in the 1983 TV miniseries *Return to Eden*, which I watched a few weeks prior.

Then Maureen, a grey nomad sitting on a log just where the others enter the water, introduces herself and says: "It's totally fine, there's no crocs in there, we've been swimming here many times over the years." So I take the plunge. The water is as heavenly as it looked. When I surface, Maureen says: "Mind you, a couple of years ago they pulled a big saltie out of here."