Artists who work with “found objects” usually present a romantic picture of nature in its browns and greens, or they lean towards craft-based traditions like jewellery -- and Jonathan Meyer does neither. He has the approach of the first men on the Moon picking up rocks, not to do an analysis of the pieces but simply to marvel.

Jonathan went to Australia in January 2007 with his family, and stayed through August. Several happy accidents put him in a place – near Margaret River in far southwest Western Australia – where he didn’t intend to be (“but,” he says, “when everything works that well, you feel that someone up there is twiddling knobs”). He engaged with the seed-pods and bones at his feet, on a sturdy sandy soil that reverberated with the thumps of kangaroos a half-mile away.

He was offered a half-built house as a studio and walked there thoughtfully. His curiosity about the environment fought with his sense of being “out of place”. “Actually, I felt in peril of being lost. I was bending twigs along my path for the first few weeks because this bush is very, very disorienting. All I could see was the bush watching *me*.”

He picked up objects that took his eye, “but never before in my life have I picked up a piece of a dead

animal. Yet, these were so bleached, so amazing-looking, they looked to me like cast-off receptacles of life and pieces which had served their purpose." Their purpose in his studio remained unclear. He laid them out on sheets of plywood and saw them in a "non-representational" sense, "just following their cues, really". The "non-representational" is in quotes because the tension in Jonathan's work is created by him reconfiguring an object so it is unrecognisable to our eye (though he has *not* carved or sculpted anything) and still, as we grow more acquainted with the piece, its past speaks to us too.

Jonathan was trained as an architect, and this show hints at that side of his education, but few architects have his botanical knowledge . At least, he admits that he knew the families of plants, about their place in local society, but not definitions of the narrow species. He was trying to imagine himself in the place of the early colonists who stepped into the same picture, with much less background than his on what's-what.

"There is also a kind of undercurrent that I don't want to make explicit, and that is to do with the way the landscape has been inhabited. The 'soul of the place' was ripped up – the whole native population was decimated. There are two aboriginal families still living in the region but theirs is a very compromised existence."

Anyone acquainted with aboriginal art might squint and see those motifs in some of Jonathan's work, but to me the strongest connection is in his use of bold colours. Some of the most remarkable aboriginal painters use not the ochre and dry-green palate but relish colours of bright pastel and purple that they had never seen until they were given commercial paints. Jonathan arrived in Australia with nothing but brushes and did not paint most of his pieces while he was there – but later, when he was back in his Bethnal Green studio.

The other ambiguity is an ambiguity of scale. Most of the solid pieces are miniatures-from-life-sized-objects – as miniature as a vertebrae or a beak. But Jonathan also photographs the pieces, enlarging them to many times their real size – deliberately to put them out of resolution. He is an architect who likes that when you look at an ordinary scale model or a diorama, you assume that you know the scale. "Unless you have the scale you are lost." He says that as an artist, however, "the thing that I don't have to provide is the scale."

Playing on the thin line between what is monstrous and what is beautiful is Jonathan's talent. "I am asking whether it is possible for these qualities to exist at the same time." The pieces have been 'augmented' with

colour or by unusual juxtapositions, but the actual forms, the objects, are unchanged. So the human hand that he sees in a eucalypt flower is more than a pun – it is, he says, "a way of re-animating these things."

The first pieces that Jonathan created, other than sketches, were called the *Incertae sedis* series – in terms of taxonomy, a name given to something when you don't know where it fits. He says, "If someone discovers a new bird or a new tree and it does not have close affinities with other things, it is in this category for a while. Until somebody does more work." There are four of these pieces, on rectangular plywood platforms, which look like moon-landings if viewed horizontally and like an inscrutable boardgame for a sophisticated child if viewed from above. The 'plants' in the landscapes are all once-growing pieces of plants and this kind of re-scaling of them is more than dollhouse. It is speaking about this green area of west Australia as an island, with an island's distinctiveness for growing unusual things.

Two of these pieces were seen before this exhibition, while Jonathan was in Australia. The rest were 'built' once Jonathan had returned to London, and looked even stranger in the East End. "It was incredibly difficult to get the pieces back to the UK. You are not allowed to freely export and import these things – and I

underestimated the rules of CALM (Conservation and Land Management). People seem to be happy with selective logging and housing developments popping up all over this land, but they were not happy when I wanted to send a few dead pieces to the UK as the raw material of my work. I didn't know if they would arrive."

The Australia-London story seems to work through these pieces, as Jonathan is trying to redefine the colonial engagement, and maybe why the original British never worked harder to play the role that Jonathan's environmental enquiries do. Because Jonathan displays many of the pieces as sitting on mirror surfaces, this becomes the "seen from down-under" suggestion. He himself says he does not know what it means to impose this symmetry on his objects.

"Except, there was a very big storm when we were there and many trees were blown over. You have these fantastic trees, Australia's largest – lying down with both the crown and the rootball on the ground. You realize that these trees are almost perfectly symmetrical things, with life above ground and life below."

But pure symmetry from a mirror surface echoes Jonathan's idea of the monstrous, as even in the botanical and biological world there are few examples of perfect

symmetry. Architecture likes imposed symmetry and the objects here that sit on mirror surfaces pose questions about the virtue of symmetry *per se*.

Jonathan says, “The kind of android face that is perfectly symmetrical might be pleasing but it is never beautiful. So, when I put one of my pieces on a mirror, it is an imperfect mirror – so that the reflection is a bit hazy.” Also, he points out, while you can see the original object from most of its sides, what you see in the mirror is only “a way of looking at it”.

Among the flat-work that Jonathan is showing are Rorschach type paintings which work alongside the mirror-objects. “I put gesso onto a canvas, fold it, open it and allow it to dry. The two sides are not exactly the same, but similar. In each, the surface forms crests and valleys and I paint the valleys black.” There is a symmetry *implied* but not argued as a virtue. In fact, perhaps Jonathan is talking about the limits of symmetry, which nowadays few except scientists do. He does embrace my suggestion and says, “I don’t know where I am going with it.”

So, look at the pieces again. The jawbone that both has symmetry and doesn’t. The odd symmetry of a vertebrae. “In isolation, they don’t make sense - they are

part of a larger system… but I want to stop here," says Jonathan. "There is so much done in justifying the way that one has worked. It is the classic mode of the architect, even doing the concept-sketch after the final design, showing a linear progression. And none of this has been linear."

Jonathan says that "it has been difficult for me to work with these things because I feel they are originally perfect. Whatever I am doing to them I am destroying them – though when I found them, they had already become useless." His artistic purpose becomes to give them a second life. "It is is not apocalyptic. I am saying that nature is stronger than we think, and we are more fragile."

So the pieces in this show are not as fragile as they look – you can pick them up and turn them around, just as Jonathan did when he found them. Their strength, he says, is "in their presence, which is saying 'back off' and which I think is inherent in the pieces themselves."

Above all, the collection of works engages with the troubling process of looking at nature, especially Australian nature – always so alien. Australian architect Glenn Murcutt saw the early work and said, "You are actually looking." Jonathan, too modest, takes the praise

with too many grains of salt and goes on to talk about himself as merely a chain in the mythologies. But the story is clear although Jonathan says, "I don't talk my work" and he still describes it as "ebulliently austere."

Jonathan's approach is both ground-breaking and recovering old ground. It taps into the sense of awe and comedy that someone like the very witty 19th-century writer Sydney Smith expressed when he looked at 'nature' in Australia. In 1819 he wrote in the Edinburgh Review about how instead of elms and oxen, nature in Australia seemed to "have a bit of play, and to amuse herself as she pleases."

"She makes cherries with the stone on the outside; and a monstrous animal, as tall as a grenadier, with the head of a rabbit, a tail as big as a bed-post... Then comes a quadruped as big as a large cat, with the eyes, colour, and skin of a mole, and the bill and web-feet of a duck... Add to this a parrot with the legs of a sea-gub; a skate with the head of a shark; and a bird with such monstrous dimensions that a side bone of it will dine three real carnivorous Englishmen."

Jonathan's work is a wonderful, new chapter in the story of how nature can be 'seen' as eccentric. It throws us back on the question of who is more eccentric – Nature or the confounded observer. Michele Field, 2008