

# The National 2021: New Australian Art

By Courtney Kidd  
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'The National 2021: New Australian Art' is a celebration of contemporary Australian art that connects Sydney's key inner city cultural precincts and brings together thirty-nine artists, collectives and collaborative ventures. It offers a resonant and aware collection of ideas, and significantly, now has the stellar commitment from its three supporting institutions to continue beyond this, its third iteration.

For many viewers, 'The National' will be their first live experience of art since Covid restrictions precluded any such exhibitions. Perhaps that explains why there is a wonderful luxury of space across 'The National' in two of the venues – the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Museum of Contemporary Art. After the confinement of lockdowns and domestic containment, on offer is an expansiveness that allows audiences to live and breathe with the works as if to counter the void that Covid inhabited where so much stood still.

By contrast the third venue, Carriageworks, feels congested despite the vast architectural dimensions of the former railway workshop and the wilfully fluid overflow of art works into and out of the strictures of the white cube. That said, this way of showcasing artists, primarily via a more collaborative working means, debunks a traditional linear modus operandi of art production and enables a more discursive appreciation of the venue. It opens it up to be an ambitious space of discovery while concurrently suggesting that any idea of a singular national voice might be in doubt.

At Carriageworks, where curator Abigail Moncrieff has brought together thirteen artist projects that place an emphasis on 'collaboration, kinship and sociality,' take in the magnificent installation by Lorraine Connelly-Northey. *Narrbong Galang* (String Bags), 2021, is a dramatic narrative of objects holding stories made of reworked and recycled scrap metal, the remnants of colonisation. It recalls the grandeur of Sydney Biennales past and some of Rosalie Gascoigne's finest sculptural forms. What impresses is the sustained act of manual labour in the making, a characteristic also evident in the enigmatic painting of Mitch Cairns. Here the artist has collaborated with his father to create a red brick wall on which hangs one of the canvases, and which carries the viewer to a world activated by text and texture while offsetting his intensely refracted style of figurative abstract painting.

Appreciation of the bricolage of works on offer for this viewer was further enhanced by reading wall labels, asking pesky questions of staff and co-ordinating the visit to catch performances that provide a more enriching engagement with works, such as Agatha Gothe-Snape's and Andrew Burrell's immersive virtual environment, and Jacqueline Riva and Geoff Lowe's *Partition #13. Ass Assembly/Assemblée des culs*, 2017-21, the latter both an archive and an evolving performance work that makes up their project, 'A Constructed World.'

At the Art Gallery of NSW co-curators Matt Cox and Erin Vink have brought together fourteen artist projects that 'explore the potential of art to heal and care for fragile natural and social ecosystems.' Their thesis is grounded in Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Manifesto for maintenance art*, 2021, in which she proposes 'a three tiered approach to care – personal, general and earth maintenance – with artists reflecting on the relationships between people and nature, as a concept and as lived experience.' On entry to the gallery Fiona Hall's *EXODUST*, 2021, is a searing reminder of the Australian Summer bushfires that burned more than seventeen million hectares of land and devastated animal and plant life. Hall's installation features charred trees that stand within the ten sculpture niches of the gallery's neoclassical vestibule. Shards of burnt foliage, fabrics, birds nests and books speak of death and regeneration, and offer a raw, heart stopping counter to *Regenerator*, 2021, a gentler more seductive installation, also harnessing the properties of charcoal. It is by Wona Bae and Charlie Lawler, and is installed opposite *Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)*, 2020, two huge luminous canvases from Pitjantjatjara artists Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton.

In the lower level of the gallery where the majority of the works for 'The National' are on display, many by artists of colour, or of immigrant backgrounds, one encounters Judy Watson's *clouds and undercurrents*, 2020-21. Here, the artist has created a stirring installation (as impressive as her recent exhibition at TarraWarra Museum) made of layered floating canvases in a sky blue palette, the colours for this artist evoking site and memory.

From here, 'The National' weaves through individual rooms in seductive and fluid rhythms as if to embrace its themes of repairing and nurturing, poignantly captured in Abdullah M.I. Syed's *Currency of Love*, 2016-2021, and Benjamin Prabowo Sexton's luminous silver gelatin photographs. Photography is also the chosen medium for James Tylor, whose hauntingly beautiful daguerreotypes engraved with text interrogate cultural representations of Australia.

In video installation by Australian-Balinese artist Leyla Stevens we're offered a sensual meditation on the relationship between stillness and action, beneath which lies a charged undercurrent pulsing with the legacies of Bali's political past. The moving image is also gently worked in the landscape of images and sound evoked in Gabriella Hirst's *Darling Darling*, 2021.

At the Museum of Contemporary Art, under the curatorship of Rachel Kent, the pulse is less meditative and more energized as revealed in the work of thirteen artists, mostly women, exploring 'diasporic and familial histories, labour and learning, and wider mythological narratives.' Here symbiosis in nature is an enduring motif, seen in the grand gestural and bodily motifs of Judith Wright's *Nature Nurture*, 2020, or the feminine representation enacted through textile treatments and collage in Sally Smart's impressive theatrical installation.

Caroline Rothwell is another established woman practitioner in this show. Her mesmeric and atmospheric digital animation *Carbon Emission 6, aperture*, 2021, delves into human interaction with nature via cleverly manipulating botanical and industrial forms.

The hand of the artist hovers too in a luminous royal blue tapestry of a roaming dingo from Pakistan-born Sydney artist Mehwish Iqbal. Meanwhile, Sancintya Mohini Simpson's agile handling of the watercolour medium on handmade paper is brought to fine effect in *kuli/karambu*, 2020-2021, where, in naïve style, she depicts community life alongside narratives surrounding descendants of indenture and their diasporic communities.

'The National 2021: New Australian Art' is a splendid overview of what is on offer from contemporary Australian artists of different generations and cultural backgrounds. It highlights an overwhelming commitment to the creation of new art, its iteration referencing many of the bigger themes absorbing artists in the current climate such as the anxieties of COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, planetary responsibility and our relationship to Country. This large-scale survey takes time for the viewer to connect with all on offer across its three venues, but it is worth every moment of looking: looking to see what it does ultimately mean to be Australian in 2021, and looking to understand what nationhood might mean even if it is uncertain, and diffused by shared stories competing in a vast cultural well.