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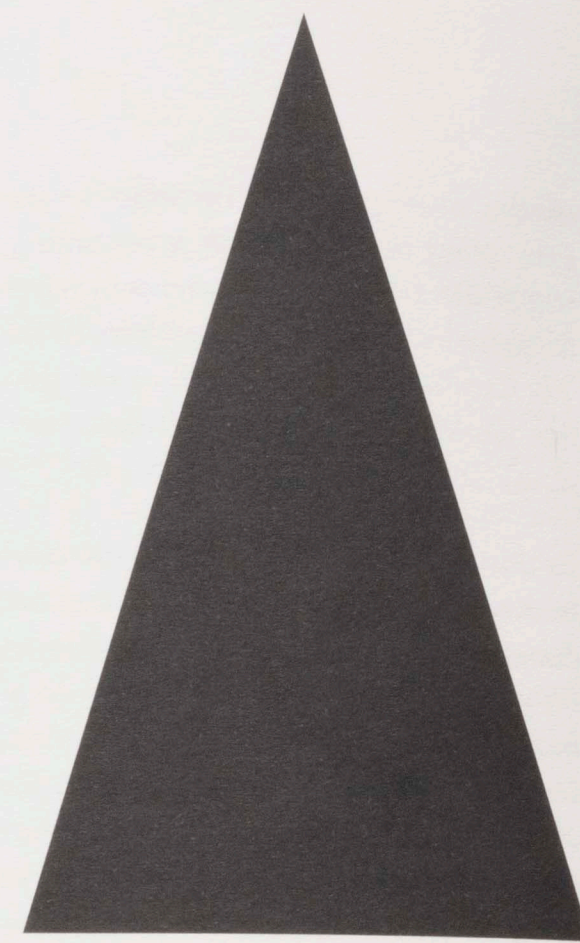


ART AFTER DARK

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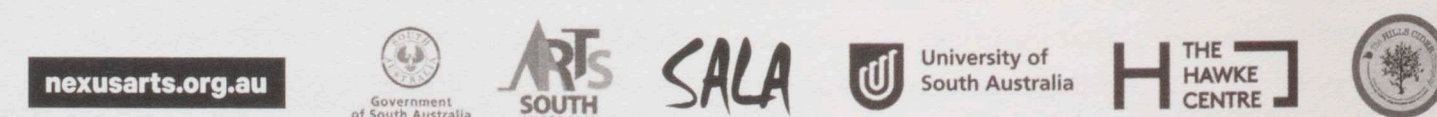
Nexus Gallery

Sohrab Rustami, Murtaza Hossaini,
Ziyaghul Yahya, Farzana Noori, Asif
Hossaini, Zahra Hossaini, Ezatollah
Gulistani, Elyas Alavi

August 10 – September 1
Tuesday – Friday, 9am – 5pm

Exhibition Co-presented at Kerry Packer
Civic Gallery, The Bob Hawke Prime
Ministerial Centre.

Image: Elyas Alavi, from Milky Life series, 2017,
Acrylic and collage on paper, 65x72cm



CHARI LARSSON

BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND GLOBALISM: FOLDS IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ART AT *THE NATIONAL*: NEW AUSTRALIAN ART

How does one curate a contemporary national art exhibition in the era of 'Trump and Brexit'? The very terms, 'contemporary' and 'national' are deliberately polemical, each evoking a range of potentially conflicting artistic responses. The 'contemporary', by its very nature, is unwieldy, open-ended, global and decentralised. The 'national' is also a slippery noun, constantly in the process of being defined and redefined. In the current political and economic milieu, nationalism is framed in pejorative terms, signalling a regressive retreat to closed nation states, protectionism, and a systematic locking down of borders. The current assertion of aggressive forms of nationalism in parts of Europe is considered a by-product of a generalised negativity directed towards globalism. This dangerous strain has recently been dubbed the 'new nationalism' by *The Economist*.¹

The notion that 'Australia' is a term that can be contained and defined has long been the subject of contestation. As I write these lines, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has called for an overhaul of the citizenship test, with new arrivals having to prove their commitment to 'Australian values'. What these values are, however, remain elusive, ephemeral and transient. With nationalism's attendant issues such as right-wing populism, nativism and anti-immigration, this exhibition is both timely and necessary. *The National: New Australian Art 2017* serves as a reminder that Australia's plurality and tolerance of difference are values that can be celebrated, and cherished.

As a three-way curatorial collaboration between the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), and Carriageworks, *The National* inhabits the fault lines between the global and the nation. Forty-eight artists have been selected from every state and territory. Nearly half are women and thirteen are Indigenous. The first of three iterations over a six-year period, the exhibition is a bold and ambitious update to Australia's contemporary arts landscape. With the demise of the *Australian Perspectives* series in 1999, a survey exhibition such as this fills a much-needed gap for Sydney audiences. *The National* differentiates itself in tone and tempo from Sydney's other artistic event, the *Biennale of Sydney*. What emerges is a serious, considered exhibition devoted to assessing the state of Australian contemporary art.

With a wealth of newly commissioned works and performances, the exhibition is self-assured and generous in spirit. The three institutions

sit both separately and apart. Each site has cultivated its own distinct look and feel, distinguished by its individual selection of emerging, mid-career and established artists. One of the most striking aspects of the exhibition, however, is the conversations between the spaces; installations such as Alex Gawronski's *Ghosts* (2017) literally weave the sites together as a series of interconnected folds. Gawronski recreates an iconic architectural feature, and inserts it into another gallery space. The neoclassical vestibule of AGNSW is occupied by six large industrial columns, replicas drawn from Carriageworks' industrial heritage. The AGNSW's concrete grid ceiling has been installed in the exhibition passageways at the MCA. To complete the trans-institutional dialogue, Gawronski installed a three-quarter scale replica of the MCA's art-deco entrance at Carriageworks.

The National delivers an important provocation: the curators evoke the difficulty of defining Australia. Implicit here is the recognition that there is no particular advantage in searching for a 'true' or 'authentic' Australia. As the curators declare in the catalogue introduction, '*The National* is not pitched at presenting an identifiably 'national' (Australian) art, or at composing statements regarding national tendencies, characteristics or identities.'² The risk is delivering an exhibition that has nothing to say. By sketching broadly and attempting to capture all, nothing is actually enunciated. What is left is a self-evacuating vanity project.

The curators evoke this tension deftly and knowingly, adding their voices to an art-historical lineage that has sought to delineate Australia's place in the world. For decades, art historians have tried to define what 'Australian' art is. Australia has variously been imagined as simulacrum, absent, and provincial. In 1974, art historian Terry Smith famously articulated the problem in provincial terms, lamenting Australia's peripheral distance from the centre. Importantly, Smith identified provincialism as 'an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values.'³ Provincialism is much more than the logical consequence of geographical isolation. Instead, it was better understood as an internalisation of the uneven power structures wielded from New York. Later, art critic Paul Foss memorably wrote, 'the whole of Australia is pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.'⁴ In spatial terms, Australia was imagined as the 'other' to Europe.

If Australia is located on the periphery (Smith) or as simulacrum (Foss), one of the challenges this line of thought presents from the vantage point of 2017 is the promotion and maintenance of a meta-physical privileging of origins. *The National* self-consciously enters this history, providing a confident update and pointing to a distinct shift in mood and tone. Gone is the provincial problem and the deferential-ity that defined Australian art practice and art criticism for decades. Australian artists have benefited from globalism and the move to the contemporary. No longer consumed with our provincial status, what emerges is a self-assured assertion of a plurality of possible histories of what Australia can or should be. In recent years, Rex Butler and A.D.S. Donaldson have encapsulated this sentiment, describing a 'non-national' or 'unAustralian' Australian art history eschewing the local and provincial, for the translocal and global. An unAustralian art history is flexible and inclusive enough to accommodate expatriates and diasporic movement.⁵

With these historiographic lessons in mind, *The National* signals an assured reimagining of contemporary Australian art beyond centre-periphery discourse. Gilles Deleuze, who famously insisted in his book *The Fold* that the baroque was not to be understood in ontological terms, is helpful here. Instead, the baroque was operative and iterative, endlessly creating more folds with the capacity to stretch into infinity. Like Australian art, the baroque is notoriously difficult to define. Deleuze's reading of the baroque as a series of folds offers a productive mode for approaching Australian art history. The fold is a potent image for overcoming the dualism between origin and copy, centre and province. Conversations can shift from appropriation, which demands an origin, to the process of unfolding and refolding. Folds can point to unequal power structures, and our cruel colonial histories. History bends as it folds, and unfolds, pleats, creases and even knots in a series of exchanges. History is understood as a sequence of folded, interconnected conversations, extending 'fold over fold, one upon the other.'⁶

Folds in personal history are the subject of Khaled Sabsabi's *Guerrilla* (2016). Sabsabi came to Australia in 1978 with his family to escape Lebanon's vicious civil war. The thirty-three images that comprise the series were taken by Sabsabi in 2006, who returned to Beirut in the wake of the Israel-Hezbollah War, which lasted for thirty-three days. Working in the tradition of documentary photography, Sabsabi creates a record of the visceral effects of the bombing. He takes the authority of the camera, with its indexical claims to truth, only to subvert the practice, by later painting over the photographs. What emerges is an unsettling intermingling between war photography's conventions and the familiar intimacy of the painterly gesture. Sabsabi undermines the medium's mythical objectivity, instead leaving a trace of his physical presence by painting over the photographs.

The theme of migration and displacement is pursued by Hazara artist Khadim Ali, whose wall mural *The Arrival of Demons* (2017) adorns the MCA's foyer wall. Growing up in exile in Pakistan, Ali's image of demon-like figures draws from stories of his childhood. Ali creates a fold between these ancient stories, his own experiences as a refugee, and Australia's border politics: the work is a thinly veiled criticism of

the bipartisan hard-line approach to the treatment of refugees. The foyer wall is a transitional space, designed to facilitate visitors' movement between the flurry of activity around Circular Quay and the MCA's interior galleries. Despite this, the demons hover quietly in the background, as they occupy an in-between liminal space, not unlike the asylum seekers languishing in exile on Manus and Nauru.

If the contemporary is determined by temporal complexity, the fold contains a temporality that is not necessarily linear or chronological. These histories unfold in time and space, creating new narrative structures and possible dialogues. The challenge of defining nationhood is directly taken up by Archie Moore's *United Nations* (2014-2017). Moore's installation was created in direct dialogue with self-taught anthropologist R.H. Mathews, who published one of the first maps identifying a sub-set of Indigenous nations in 1900. Hanging from the ceiling of Carriageworks' cavernous foyer, Moore's series of twenty-eight flags was designed to represent each of the twenty-eight Indigenous nations identified by Mathews in his early map-making exercises. Problematic and incomplete, Mathews' work was later expanded by subsequent generations of anthropologists. Moore's reinterpretation of the early anthropological maps simultaneously evacuates and parodies the symbolism of the colonial and colonising practice. At the same time, it looks self-assuredly forward to a time when the Australian flag decouples itself from the English Union Jack.

Continuing her interest in revitalising lost and forgotten histories, Justene Williams created a fold in art's history with her latest performance work, *A Metal Cry* (2017). Staged for the opening weekend at Carriageworks, Williams mined the unrealised legacies of the historical avant-garde. Her departure point is Italian Futurist artist Fortunato Depero's 1916 costume designs for a performance, *Misimagia*. Williams' signature theatricality and flamboyancy was in full flight, with at least twelve individual performers on set, each adorned with distinctive costumes. Musical instruments, such as accordions and chimes were incorporated into the costumes, allowing movement and sound to become completely integrated. The result was a dissonant cacophony of noise as Williams reenergised Depero's vision of dancer-robots.

One of the most powerful and enduring physical symbols of Australian nationalism is the War Memorial in Canberra. Tom Nicholson's *Comparative monument (Shellal)*, 2014-2017 revisits a chance World War I discovery by Australian soldiers, who accidentally uncovered a Byzantine mosaic in Palestine. The *Shellal Mosaic* was expatriated to Australia and became a founding item in the War Memorial's collection, where it was incorporated into the wall of the Hall of Valour. Decades later, Napier Waller was commissioned by the War Memorial to produce a complementary mosaic in the dome of the Hall of Memory, effectively creating a dialogue between the two mosaics. Taking archival photographs showing the mosaic as a series of fragments waiting to be shipped back to Australia as his point of reference, Nicholson worked with mosaicists at the Mosaic Centre in Jericho to recreate the *Shellal Mosaic* in transit. Nicholson's installation at the AGNSW provocatively proposes a reverse movement, recreating the Byzantine mosaic with tiles selected from Waller's dome and repatriating the *Shellal Mosaic* to its original hilltop location in Gaza.



Acutely aware of its own contribution to Australian art history, *The National* gave visual form to the complexity of what Australia is in 2017. At the end of *The Fold*, Deleuze concluded, 'what always matters is folding, unfolding, refolding.'⁷ Deleuze's observation might be reimagined in terms of contemporary Australia: difficult; contested and painful, yet simultaneously beautiful, diverse, and wonderfully optimistic.

Above: *The National 2017*, installation view, Carriageworks. Photo: Zan Wimberley.

ENDNOTES

1. See 'Trump's world: The new nationalism,' *The Economist*, 19 Nov. 2016. <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21710249-his-call-put-america-first-donald-trump-latest-recruit-dangerous>
2. Anneke Jaspers et al., 'Curatorial Introduction,' in *The National: New Australian Art*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Carriageworks, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2017: 11.
3. Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem,' in *What is Appropriation?*, ed. Rex Butler, Brisbane: IMA Publishing, 2004: 131.
4. Paul Foss, 'Theatrum Nondum Cognitorum,' *ibid*: 120.
5. See, for example Rex Butler and A.D.S. Donaldson, 'Cities within cities: Australian and New Zealand art in the 20th century', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 4, 2011, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/butler.pdf>

6. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the baroque*, Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 3.
7. *Ibid*: 158.