

The National Expands Its Scope as Artists See Big Picture

By [Tim Stone](#) | Sydney, 31 May 2023



Nabilah Nordin, *Corinthian Clump* (2023). Exhibition view: The National 4: Australian Art Now, Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney (24 March–23 July 2023). Photo: © Mim Stirling/AGNSW.

After the isolation of Australia's pandemic response, The National 4 seeks to reaffirm the relevance of the gallery as a place to experience art with a dynamic showing of contemporary Australian art ranging across geographically and culturally diverse communities.

The National 4: Australian Art Now is the fourth in this biennial survey of Australian contemporary art. Initially conceived as a partnership between [The Art Gallery of NSW \(AGNSW\)](#), [Carriageworks](#), and [Museum of Contemporary Art Australia \(MCA\)](#), the 2023 edition sees organisers expand the exhibition's footprint to include [Campbelltown Arts Centre \(C-A-C\)](#) on Dharawal land in Western Sydney (24 March–23 July; 30 March–25 June; 31 March–9 July; 30 March–25 June 2023).



Heather B Swann, *Leda and the Swan* (2018–2023). Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney (24 March–23 July 2023). Photo: © Mim Stirling/AGNSW.

The exhibition is intended to represent a range of diverse aesthetic approaches, cultural positions, and perspectives on Australia and the world, with 48 newly commissioned art projects and over 80 artists. While the exhibition has no single thematic focus, certain 'critical ideas and tendencies' have come into view, according to MCA Senior Curator Jane Devery. 'Community, collaboration and belonging has such a strong presence across the whole four exhibitions that comprise *The National* this year', says Devery.

At each participating venue, curators have explored different strategies to engage audiences and activate public spaces. At Carriageworks in the Sydney suburb of Redfern, curators Aarna Fitzgerald Hanley and Freya Carmichael commissioned Naarm/Melbourne-based dance artist Jo Lloyd to create a new work for Carriageworks' vast foyer space.



Jo Lloyd, *FM Air* (2023). Dance performance, sound. 40 min. Performers: Jo Lloyd, Rachael Wisby, Thomas Woodman. Performance view: The National 4: Australian Art Now, Carriageworks, Sydney (30 March–25 June 2023). Photo: Zan Wimberley.

Taking the idea of scent as inspiration, Lloyd and her collaborators use movement and gesture to render an olfactory experience in physical form. In *FM Air* (2023), three dancers, including Lloyd, twist and turn in a cloud of grey gauze, jostling each other like molecules dispersed from an aerosol pump. Eventually breaking free from the cloud, they go their separate ways before collapsing on the floor, breathless and sweaty.

Other works at Carriageworks engage with ideas of 'sites for storytelling' and 'cycles of generational knowledge that persist and remain', says Fitzgerald Hanley.



Erika Scott, *The Circadian Cul-de-sac* (2023). Mixed media. 410 x 500 x 500 cm, irregular. Exhibition view: The National 4: Australian Art Now, Carriageworks, Sydney (30 March–25 June 2023). Courtesy © Erika Scott. Photo: Zan Wimberley

One of those is Erika Scott's *The Circadian Cul-de-sac* (2023), a towering hourglass structure rising from an inflatable pool and adorned with agricultural pipes, hoses, aquarium paraphernalia, and all manner of detritus.

Although seemingly functional, with water visibly coursing through some of its pipes and bubbles percolating away in isolated pools, Scott's imposing timepiece has been rendered redundant by intervention and malfeasance; clogged with mostly plastic rubbish, it's unable to tell time because at this stage of the anthropocene it's already too late.



Elizabeth Day, *The Flow of Form: There's a Reason Beyond a Reason. Beyond That There's a Reason (1797 Parramatta Gaol)*, Carriageworks, Redfern (2023). Unravelling op-shop garments, muslin. 2223 × 650 × 5 cm, irregular. Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, Carriageworks, Sydney (30 March–25 June 2023). Courtesy © Elizabeth Day. Photo: Zan Wimberley.

Trans-generational cycles of trauma are explored in Elizabeth Day's *The Flow of Form: There's a Reason Beyond a Reason. Beyond That There's a Reason (1797 Parramatta Gaol)* (2023), a scale replica of the facade of Sydney's Parramatta Gaol made from unraveled op-shop garments.

For over 30 years, Day has worked as a mental health worker in prisons and correctional facilities. She sees the process of unravelling jumpers as a way of engaging with past trauma, refashioning the thread into new panels, some emblazoned with text, others abstract. For Day, these works are about art's healing and restorative power.



Left to right: Susan Balbunga, *Bamugora* (2023). Pandanus spiralis. 180 cm diameter. Naminapu Maymuru-White, *Milŋiyawuy – Celestial River* (2023). Earth pigments on stringybark. Dimensions variable. Katie West, *The women plucked the star pickets from the ground and turned them into wana (digging sticks)* (2023). Steel star pickets, found farm machinery, radios, fabric, beads. Dimensions variable. Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, Carriageworks, Sydney (30 March–25 June 2023). Photo: Zan Wimberley.

In Katie West's installation *The women plucked the star pickets from the ground and turned them into wana (digging sticks)* (2023), archaic radios with aerials splayed and adorned with yarn are suspended on rusty star pickets, usually found fencing-off vast outback cattle stations. Listen closely and the radios can be heard humming with assorted bird calls and other sounds recorded in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. A Yindjibarndi woman who lives and works on Noongar Ballardong Country north of Perth, West invests her work with multiple connections to country; the colour of the thread and fabric in the work derived from plant matter gathered from the landscape.

Over at Campbelltown Arts Centre (C-A-C), curator Emily Rolfe has overseen the development of eight projects and ten artists in works that extend ideas often explored at the Western Sydney gallery, including 'art that has strong and unique connections to community; art that creates connections and questions personal and national histories; and art that creates space for listening', says Rolfe.



Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan with the Fruitjuice Factori Studio, *Another Country (The Juncture of Between Becomes Comfort Zone)* (2010–2023). Mixed media. Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney (30 March–25 June 2023). Photo: Mim Stirling.

Collaboration between Meanjin/Brisbane-based Filipino artists Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan and their Philippines-based Fruitjuice Factori Studio has produced the large-scale installation *Another Country: (The Juncture of Between Becomes Comfort Zone)* (2010–2023).

The work features a second-hand wardrobe filled to capacity with neatly stacked clothes and all manner of worldly possessions sourced mostly from opportunity shops, and an upturned, rusty fishing dinghy transformed into a Southeast Asian-style watercraft through the addition of bits of timber, wooden bowls, plates, and knick-knacks. The artists, working with their children, have invested both the vessel and the wardrobe with complex and multi-layered personal histories, their chosen materials 'indirectly connect[ing] with the community', says Alfredo.



Brook Andrew, *GABAN* (2022) (still). Three-channel video installation. 66 min 24 sec. Exhibition view: The National 4: Australian Art Now, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney (30 March–25 June 2023). Photo: Mim Stirling.

Also at Campbelltown is Brook Andrew's *GABAN* (2022), a three-channel video installation that seeks to convey the 'disconcerting experience' many First Nations and Indigenous peoples are confronted with when visiting a museum. Staged as a theatre-piece set within a museum collection, *GABAN*, which means 'strange' in Wiradjuri language, was first presented in Berlin in 2021 and again at the AGNSW in December 2022.



Here at C-A-C it takes the form of a multi-screen filmed performance with a cast of First Nations and Indigenous performers who embody both objects seized by institutions and the colonial concepts that confine them. As the loose narrative unfolds, the voices of the objects, previously silenced by Western methods of collection, classification, and display, rise up against their oppressors and reclaim their connection to the communities from which they were stolen.



Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association Artists, *YOYI (dance)* (2020) (detail). Four-channel video, HD, colour, sound. Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney (31 March–9 July 2023). Courtesy © Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association Artists. Photo: Jenni Carter.

Occupying MCA's level-one gallery space, *YOYI (dance)* (2020) also explores connection to community. In this four-channel video installation produced by the Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association Artists from Milikapiti, Wulirankuwu, Melville Island in the Northern Territory, each of the 30 artists perform a dance featuring gestures associated with their animal totem, providing a glimpse of a complex language and belief system whose origins stretch beyond recorded time.



Ivi, Kato Kakala (2022–2023). *Ngatu (barkcloth)*, single-channel video, HD, colour. Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney (31 March–9 July 2023). Courtesy © Ivi. Photo: Anna Kučera.

Also at MCA, Ivi artist collective have embarked on *Kato Kakala* (2022–2023), a collaborative project that will gradually manifest over the duration of the exhibition. Working with communities from Australia, Aotearoa, Hawai'i, Tonga, and Fiji, three Australia-based Ivi members will create a large-scale *ngatu*, or drawing, made on the paper-like bark of the mulberry tree, which will be gradually woven into a large mat.

Inspired by the Samoan concept of *va*, which is loosely defined as the space between us that keeps us connected, the participant's connection is made visible in a work where the process of making is considered equally as important as the final product.



Nicholas Smith, *decorator's touch* (2023). Exhibition view: The National 4: Australian Art Now, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney (31 March–9 July 2023). Courtesy © Nicholas Smith. Photo: Anna Kučera.

Occupying the city-corner of the MCA's level-three gallery space is Nicholas Smith's playful yet slightly disturbing *decorator's touch* (2023). Composed of three distinct spaces formed by suspending large screens fashioned from automotive vinyl, photographs, and drawing paper, Smith has placed two floor-based sculptural tableaus. *Ribbons and Piss* (bed) (2022) consists of a foam mattress neatly quartered into equal parts by pink floristry ribbon on which rests *body* (2023), a torso-sized vessel made from burnished terracotta smothered in beeswax. Fleishy in colour and more plastic in appearance than earthenware, *body* resembles an oversized pair of shrivelled-up testicles.

In an adjoining space is another of the fleshy appendages, this time placed on top of a stunted Corinthian column, expertly constructed from cardboard and framed by a hanging tapestry made from offcuts of automotive vinyl. With *decorator's touch*, Smith has assumed the roles of interior designer and artist, demonstrating both his mastery of materials and space while commenting on how our surroundings affect our identity and how our bodies are received and operate in the world.



Nicholas Smith, *decorator's touch* (2023). Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney (31 March–9 July 2023). Courtesy © Nicholas Smith. Photo: Anna Kučera.

AGNSW curator of *The National* Beatrice Gralton, who is also Senior Curator, Brett Whiteley Studio at the AGNSW, sees the exhibition as a way to 'affirm the relevance of these civic spaces to people's everyday lives' after the isolation of the pandemic.

Nabilah Nordin's *Corinthian Clump* (2023) welcomes visitors with a series of five sculptural assemblages fashioned in response to the gallery's Neo-classical sandstone vestibule at the entrance of the building. With *Corinthian Clump*, Nordin seeks to push the limits of over-abundance and excessive ornamentation often associated with the Corinthian architectural style.



Nabilah Nordin, *Corinthian Clump* (2023). Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney (24 March–23 July 2023). Photo: © Mim Stirling/AGNSW.

Resembling the branches of climbing plants suffocating their host, parasitic corals, or even sticky structures hewn together by insect secretions, Nordin's organic forms thrust skyward, haphazardly buttressed by bits of wood, adhesives, and unseen internal structures, and rendered in a wide array of colours and textured surfaces that range from a riot of bright orange, blue and pink pigments in *Statue* and the striking Yves Klein blue of *Palace* to *Discipline's* adornment with colourful, but airless party balloons.

Surrounded by locally hewn sandstone, Nordin's forms teeter somewhere between fragility and resilience. 'I embrace support structures, spillages, fragility, imbalance—everything classical sculpture does not', explains Nordin in an accompanying text.



Brenda L Croft, Naabami (thou shall/will see): Barangaroo (army of me) (2019–2022).
Exhibition view: The National 4: Australian Art Now, Art Gallery of New South Wales
(AGNSW), Sydney (24 March–23 July 2023). Photo: © Mim Stirling/AGNSW.

Brenda L. Croft's powerful *Naabami (thou shall/will see): Barangaroo (army of me)* (2019–2022) greets the viewer in Kaldor Hall, the large lobby and exhibition area beyond the vestibule, strategically filling the wall outside the entrance to the gallery's Grand Courts, which house mostly European and Colonial works from the 15th to the 19th centuries.

On display are 45 large-scale photographic portraits of Indigenous women and girls, ranging from elders to young children, among them MP Linda Burney, the first Aboriginal woman to be elected to the federal House of Representatives. Several individual portraits pop with the power of a TIME magazine cover—their faces etched with a mix of anger, sadness, hope and resilience—and together these portraits emit a formidable intensity.



Brenda L Croft, Naabami (thou shall/will see): Barangaroo (army of me) (2019–2022). Exhibition view: The National 4: Australian Art Now, Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney (24 March–23 July 2023). Photo: © Mim Stirling/AGNSW.

Naabami (thou shall/will see): Barangaroo (army of me) commemorates the legacy of Cammeraygal woman, Barangaroo, the second wife of Bennelong. In recent years Barangaroo's name has become synonymous with the Barangaroo Precinct, a former industrial wharf area in Sydney's CBD that is now home to a casino, office towers, and residential apartments. Croft's work brings into sharp focus the practice of naming sites after historical Indigenous figures as a form of 'de facto memorial' which ultimately masks commercial motivations. Here, Croft has summoned the collective force of an army of Indigenous women to serve a powerful indictment on those who have misused Barangaroo's name for their own purposes.



Gerry Wedd, *Where Are We Now? (Where are we now?)* (2020–2023). Exhibition view: The National 4: Australian Art Now, Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney (24 March–23 July 2023). Photo: © Mim Stirling/AGNSW.

Greeting visitors as they step off the escalators on the AGNSW's lower level two, is Gerry Wedd's *Where Are We Now? (Where are we now?)* (2020–2023), comprising over 661 ceramic white and blue tiles, plates, vases, and small figurines.

Presented en masse and resembling the kitchen of a colonial-style country home, complete with a mantelpiece and shelving, on closer inspection something is amiss in Gedd's kitchen; at one end of the mantelpiece sits a bong fashioned from a sports drink bottle, rendered expertly in clay, while skulls, dubious figures, and social and political statements such as 'Good Times for a Change' and 'Chaos Reigns' adorn vessels and plates. Gedd is deeply invested in ceramic's potential as a quiet and disarming medium to communicate progressive ideas to a broad audience.



Léuli Eshrāghi, *afiafi* (2023) (detail). Glues, metallic foils, and iron powder on cotton 'ie (sarongs); poem on vinyl; two-channel digital video, HD, colour, sound. Exhibition view: *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney (31 March–9 July 2023). Courtesy © Léuli Eshrāghi. Photo: Anna Kučera.

The National 4 has been successful in representing a range of perspectives and experiences as diverse as the Australian continent is large. But while it's tempting to see the overall exhibition as a neatly defined snapshot of Australian contemporary arts practice, it's important to note that this survey has been shepherded into view by curators, each with their own concerns and considerations.

Nonetheless, exhibiting venues have been successful in capitalising on *The National 4* to reinvigorate their public spaces and re-engage with both artists and the public. And while the pandemic significantly restricted the way audiences engaged with art, its impact on Australian artists and their practice appears far less consequential. As the public health crisis gradually fades from view, *The National 4* suggests Australian artists have their eyes firmly fixed on persistent and long-lasting concerns. —[O]