

The 10 artworks to check out at Sydney's mammoth The National

The fourth iteration of Sydney's biennial overview of local contemporary art is typically mammoth. Here's where to start.

By [John McDonald](#)

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Surveys of contemporary art are rarely smooth, coherent affairs and *The National 4: Australian Art Now* is no exception. In her catalogue essay, Jennifer Higgie tries to answer the unanswerable question "What is Australian contemporary art?" and comes up with a long list of contradictory propositions. It's not exactly revelatory, but it makes the point – contemporary art can be anything at all.

With 80 artists and 48 projects spread across four (or rather, five) venues, *The National 4* demands a commitment from viewers. If one installment doesn't appeal, will you be motivated to go along to the next? To add a degree of difficulty the Campbelltown Arts Centre has been added to the roster, a good hour's drive from the Art Gallery of NSW. This is a well-intentioned act of inclusiveness for the western suburbs, but it exacerbates the scattered nature of the show.



Elizabeth Day's *The Flow of Form: There's a Reason Beyond a Reason. Beyond That There's a Reason (1797 Parramatta Gaol)*, 2023, at Carriageworks.

The previous iteration of *The National* was presented as the final stage of a three-part project that began in 2017. Now the exhibition has bounced back with five new curators: Aarna Fitzgerald Hanley, Freja Carmichael, Jane Devery, Beatrice Gralton and Emily Rolfe. As it's a strictly female crew, there's no issue about gender parity. Perhaps male curators are the next category to be systematically eliminated by art museums.

As a purely subjective survey of what a group of curators see as significant contemporary art, *The National* has always tended to emphasise the selectors as much as their selections. It makes the curators into personalities, with their choices of artist couched as acts of self-actualisation. I may be out-of-step with the times, but I'd appreciate a little more objectivity. The vogue for personalising catalogue essays is just as wearisome as the need to include "creative" writers in every publication, when the connections with the art are far from clear.

It denotes a movement away from analysis in favour of feeling, with those feelings being closely tied up with personal beliefs. If one believes there is an urgent need to "de-colonise" the museum, one gravitates towards like-minded artists. If one feels that queer artists have been unfairly overlooked, then it's almost a moral imperative to help even up the ledger. Are Indigenous artists more important than non-Indigenous? Do artists who deal with political issues have more urgent claims on our attention than those who paint landscapes or still life?

These are some of the questions *The National 4* raises. We shouldn't be asking: "What is contemporary Australian art?", but "What are the defining principles behind the curators' choices?"

To narrow the focus, I'll look at 10 works from the show, drawn from the four venues. The outlier this year is Natasha Walsh, who has set up her easel in the Brett Whiteley Studio for the duration of *The National 4*, but I've yet to visit this fifth location.

Art Gallery of NSW

Nabilah Nordin

From being a virtual unknown, Nabilah Nordin has become an institutional favourite in no time at all. Her work, which can also be found in *Melbourne Now* at the National Gallery of Victoria and *Fantastic Forms* at Bundanon, has been given the prime location in the vestibule at the AGNSW. Nordin's sculptures are self-consciously experimental, using vivid, eye-catching colours and unusual materials. One piece at the AGNSW, *Discipline*, is made from coloured balloons set in epoxy resin.



Nabilah Nordin's *Corinthian Clump*, 2023, at the Art Gallery of NSW.

Nordin has one thought with many different variations. That idea is to systematically refuse conventional ideas about sculptural form. Her six pieces at the AGNSW form a single ensemble titled *Corinthian Clump*. It's a playful response to the severe neo-classical aesthetics of Walter Vernon's gallery entrance, in which she takes the geometric preoccupations of the architecture, screws them up and glues them together in a new randomised incarnation. It's a game that relies on the continuous fertility of the artist's imagination to keep coming up with forms that break the unspoken rules of art – rather like having to compose sentences without using one or two vowels.