

Exhibition begins a timely conversation

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FULL TEXT

The most vital contemporary art reflects the ever-shifting state of who we are, where we have come from, and what we want to talk about. The National 4: Australian Art Now is an exhibition of kaleidoscopic perspectives across four major Sydney institutions that addresses this moment in time.

The National was initiated in 2017 as a series of biennial exhibitions presenting work made from and for an Australian context. Since the third iteration in 2021, Australia crawled through two years of pandemic life. As much as we may want uncomfortable memories of Covid restrictions and lockdowns to dissolve into recent history, the reality is that for many artists the past two years have been an isolating and difficult experience –not an ideal opportunity to disappear into the studio and make new work.

In many cases, the other work artists relied on (to pay for being an artist) all but disappeared. Exhibitions were cancelled, postponed or closed. Borders were shut. While borders and doors are thankfully open again, the intense dislocation of the pandemic continues to reverberate in ways we are only starting to talk about.

The National 4 in the Art Gallery of NSW historic building, and for the first time at the Brett Whiteley Studio in Surry Hills, includes several site-specific commissions and responses by artists that engage with the architecture, history, and collections of our cultural institutions. There is a strong element of self-identity explored through storytelling in the works selected: a multitude of voices and landscapes that unpick history, as well as art history, to encourage alternative viewpoints.

There is a concentration of artists whose work refers to the role of women as practitioners, teachers, warriors, subjects, mothers, matriarchs, collaborators and holders of knowledge. There are also moments of activism, transgression and rupture, deliberate contraventions of message and materials.

In 1890, NSW government architect Walter Liberty Vernon was briefed to make his design for the new Art Gallery building “as strictly classical as possible”, and the vestibule space at the entrance to the gallery reflects this brief. In response to this space, Nabilah Nordin’s site-specific sculptural installation *Corinthian Clump* (2023) presents as the punk-rock cousin of classicism. The work draws from Nordin’s existing sculptural inventory and approach to making, which embraces a no-holds-barred takedown of the authority of formalism. The result is brightly coloured forms that appear precariously structured, a layered mix of elaborate rubble and parody, and a fitting transition from the gloom of lockdown and social isolation.

The expansive Kaldor Hall on the ground level of the building is a natural meeting place, and the entrance point for the Art Gallery’s collection. Occupying the southern wall are 45 large-scale photographic prints from Gurindji-Malngin-Mudpurra artist Brenda L. Croft’s series *Naabami* (thou shall/will see): *Barangaroo* (army of me) (2019-22). These are the faces of First Nations girls and women from NSW and the ACT, photographed by Croft using a historic wet plate collodion process previously employed by colonial ethnographic photographers documenting the First Nations people of this country. Croft’s army of contemporary female warriors cannot be avoided, their gaze extending over the hall.

As we progress into the interior of the exhibition, works by Esther Stewart and Gerry Wedd encourage a closer reading of our local environments.

For *The National 4*, Stewart has created one monumental painting, built from 12 panels, referencing a 1970s canary yellow and dark brown kitchen she found and purchased through Facebook. Lyrical and tender, Stewart’s hand-rendered tiles, splashbacks and cupboards affirm the validity of the interior as high art.

Ceramicist Wedd was taught to make pots by his mother in the family kitchen. A surfer who makes ceramics –or a ceramicist who likes to surf –Wedd’s blue-and-white wares are a personal homage to a life dedicated to the temperament of the natural world, and an obsession with the history of art and his chosen medium. Handmade in his Port Elliot studio, the 600-plus ceramics that form *Where Are We Now? (Where are we now?)* (2020-23) are a journey through popular culture and current events, incorporating lyrics from songs, poems, and references to images bookended by art history and Instagram. Wedd’s domestic objects inscribe this ephemeral information with an enduring life.

Through two years of pandemic living, many of us paid more attention than ever to our own lived environments. Wollongong-based Madeleine Kelly adopts a microscopic approach to her art, examining the complex exchange between nature and culture, bringing elements as disparate as her garden, the history of art, and the subconscious together. Her exquisite, sensory compositions suggest a web that supports a world we cannot see, a mysterious portal into a place where art is the explanation of science, and nature is the home of geometry, chemistry, and physics. Ever-present in Kelly’s art is the rumbling of modernity and the mechanical disruption of natural order and balance elicited by our extraction and depletion of the environment.

At the Brett Whiteley Studio in Surry Hills, Natasha Walsh has set up her own studio for the duration of *The National 4*, and over this time will re-create iconic paintings by male artists where the emphasis of the new work is the agency of the sitter. Walsh’s dive into art history is an expansion of her research-based practice and illuminates her ability to probe the nuance and complexity inherent in all aspects of representation.

As we emerge from two difficult years of isolation and dislocation, these works help make sense of this place that is not as we left it.

Australia, we need to talk, and *The National 4* is ready for a conversation. Beatrice Gralton is senior curator, Brett Whiteley Studio, at the Art Gallery of NSW. She is one of five curators of *The National 4: Australia Art Now* on display at the Art Gallery of NSW, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Carriageworks and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

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DETAILS

Subject:	Art galleries & museums; Architecture; Artists; Art history; Contemporary art; Pandemics; Art exhibits
Business indexing term:	Subject: Architecture
Location:	Australia
Publication title:	The Australian; Canberra, A.C.T.
First page:	12
Publication year:	2023
Publication date:	Mar 31, 2023
Section:	Inquirer
Publisher:	Nationwide News Pty Ltd
Place of publication:	Canberra, A.C.T.

Country of publication:	Australia, Canberra, A.C.T.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--Australia
ISSN:	10388761
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2792660983
Document URL:	http://ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/exhibition-begins-timely-conversation/docview/2792660983/se-2?accountid=14757
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Last updated:	2023-03-31
Database:	ProQuest One Academic

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