

# FORT GANSEVOORT

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**The National: New Australian Art in Sydney shows works at three venues**

By Sasha Grishin  
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***The National: New Australian Art. Various artists. Art Gallery of New South Wales, until July 16; Carriageworks, until June 25; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, until June 18.***

The *Sydney Biennale* started in 1973 and, in part to counter the criticism that we needed a showcase for Australian art, the *Australian Perspecta* began as a biennial exhibition in 1981, to be held in alternate years to the biennale.

The *Perspecta* ran out of steam (and finances) in 1999 and folded. I remember in that final *Perspecta*, at least the part of the exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), a wonderful array of Gordon Bennett's work. Perhaps it is symbolic that in the revived *Perspecta* (with its somewhat clunky name, *The National*, sounding like a cross between a political party and a national school of art), at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) there is a display of Bennett's final paintings from 2012-13. It is the earliest work in the exhibition and, tragically, the only work by a deceased artist.

*The National* is a collaborative venture, jointly funded by Sydney's three premier art spaces: the AGNSW, Carriageworks and the MCA. Funding has been committed for the next six years, so this is the first of three such biennial exhibitions. Five curators, namely, Anneke Jaspers and Wayne Tunicliffe from the AGNSW, Lisa Havilah and Nina Miall from the Carriageworks and Blair French from the MCA, visited numerous artists' studios across the country and assembled lists of artists of interest; from the shortlist of about 200 artists, the final 48 artists were invited to participate, with many of the works specifically commissioned for the show. It is envisaged that in each future biennial show there will be a different set of curators.

As you move between the institutions, the DNA of each place is hinted at in the selection of work – the sense of tradition and collection at the AGNSW, performance and industrial heritage at the Carriageworks, and the edgy and conceptual at the MCA. While the curators whom I met all emphasised how, in their eyes, despite the different venues, it was one show, I found it more difficult to see a unity of vision. To survey contemporary art practice in a country as diverse as Australia is an impossible task and unifying themes such as "contested histories", identity, gender critiques, cross-cultural appropriations and new technologies are as predictable as they are tenuous in a selection that includes artists from every state and territory.

The selection of artists at first glance appears a bit odd, with none of the obvious names such as Fiona Hall, Tracey Moffatt, Patricia Piccinini, Shaun Gladwell or Bill Henson present. Instead, it is a

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selection of artists who are fairly well-known in professional art circles, but less familiar to the general public. Averaging in their mid-40s, they are far from emerging artists. Take, for example, the two Canberra artists in the show, Raquel Ormella and Peter Maloney, who are known in dedicated art circles, but not among the broader art public. Ormella works in that densely inhabited terrain in contemporary art practice where art and activism intersect and, in her work, the presence and the absence of urban birdlife becomes a commentary on society and the broader environment. Maloney, one of the oldest artists in the exhibition, over the past few decades has developed a sophisticated language of linear abstraction and "anti-collage" works on paper, where absurd sensational tabloid headlines are enmeshed within a painting, creating effective visual and conceptual tensions, sometimes with a homoerotic agenda. Maloney is one of the few artists at the exhibition who manages to combine serious intent with irony and humour to create startling visual inventions.

One of the showstoppers at the exhibition is Yhonnie Scarce's *Death Zephyr* installation at the AGNSW. Scarce is of Kokatha and Nukunu heritage and her land abuts the prohibited zone of the test site at Maralinga. Her piece is a huge installation of bush tucker – elongated long yams, bush bananas and bush plums – made out of hand-blown glass and dangling from the ceiling like a deformed black forest forged unnaturally through extreme heat on desert sands. In a neighbouring gallery, Megan Cope, a Quandamooka Nation artist, in her *Re Formation part 3, (Dubbagullee)* builds a large mound of cement-cast oyster shells layered with black sand and copper slag. Indigenous shell monuments made of oyster shells were destroyed by colonial settlers and were frequently burnt for lime to make cement. Cope creates an effective monument to absence and destruction.

One of the quirkiest pieces is Emily Floyd's *Kesh Alphabet*, an imaginary feminist alphabet, in which the artist creates bold, freestanding, brightly coloured geometric letters to form the Kesh noun "banhe", meaning "inclusion", "insight" and "female orgasm".

At the Carriageworks there are Archie Moore's problematic First Nation flags, Claudia Nicholson's coloured sawdust heart and a very memorable and effective group of "message boards" by Karla Dickens. I had seen before and admired this Wiradjuri artist's fabric work, but the *Fight Club* series came as a revelation. It consists of eight metal rubbish bin lids painted black on which appear powerful blank verse hand-printed in white lettering as a continuous clockwise script. They emerge like modern urban shields highlighting the culture of violence in Australian society. Alan Griffiths' masks and dance boards are effective, elegant and powerful as we have come to expect from this versatile Kimberley elder.

At the MCA, Julia Gough's *The Gathering* is a brilliantly effective video plus installation about Indigenous loss and absence in Tasmania, while the maverick artist Matthew Bradley, in his homespun manner, explores and creates an archaeology of the present. Gordon Hookey has a sprawling provocative canvas in which satire and native defiance create a heady cocktail of imagery, at the same time as the irrepressible Nell creates her own concoction of popular culture, mysticism and rock'n'roll. Ronnie van Hout, possibly best described as a New Zealand artist based

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in Melbourne, in his complex room-size installation, works on the principle of "when in doubt, put it in". Highly self-referential in many of its aspects, the piece creates a space where gothic horror meets the uncanny and the surreal. It is powerful, disturbing, eerie and quite unsettling, even in small doses.

*The National* enters a crowded field of biennials and triennials, with Canberra's *Indigenous Triennial* about to open and Melbourne's *NGV Triennial* opening in December 2017 and building on the success of the huge and ill-disciplined *Melbourne Now* exhibition that introduced so many new names to Australian art. The *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* is scheduled for 2018. Somehow it seems a shame that in the nation's capital, the home of all of our national art institutions, we cannot get together to offer a national showcase of contemporary Australian art practice, as it is only the Canberra institutions, once united, that could offer a unique national perspective.