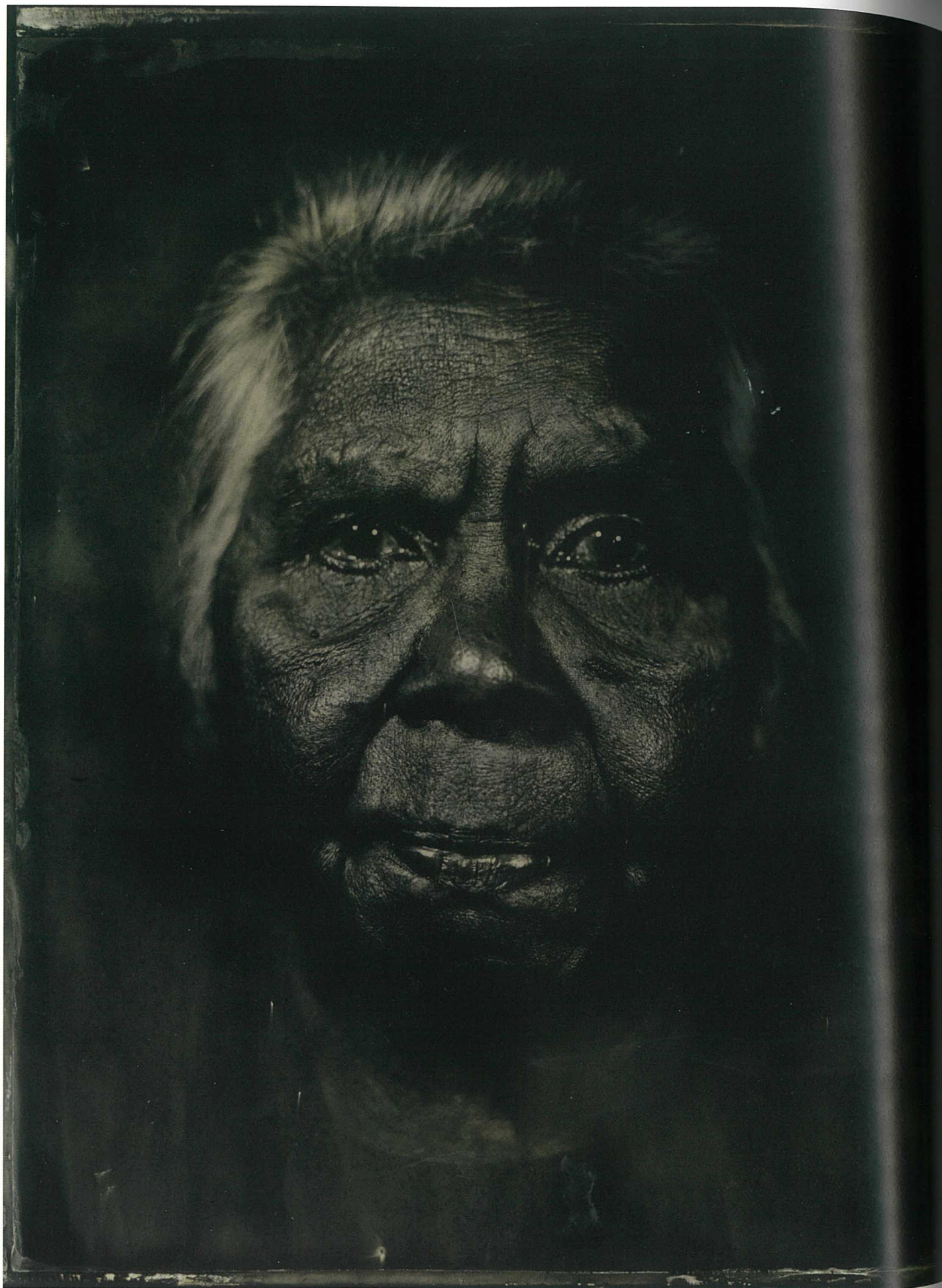


Look



Apr – May 2023

Art Gallery of New South Wales Members



We Need To Talk

Artists unpick our cultural narratives to invite conversation throughout *The National 4: Australian Art Now*, writes curator Beatrice Gralton.

Brenda L Croft *Ali I (Biripi)* 2022
from the series *Naabami (thou shall/
will see); Barangaroo (army of me)*
2016–23, inkjet print from original
tintype, dimensions variable, image
courtesy and © the artist

The National 4: Australian Art Now is a project across four major Sydney institutions – the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Carriageworks and Campbelltown Arts Centre – that seeks to address this moment in time through contemporary art.

The exhibition presents 14 projects across the Art Gallery's original building, and for the first time at the Brett Whiteley Studio in Surry Hills, through a mix of new commissions and recent works that survey the depth and complexity of artistic practice. 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 and new conversations about the architecture, history and collections of our cultural institutions.

For this article we turn to the work of seven female artists in *The National 4* that refers to the role of women as practitioners, teachers, warriors, subjects, mothers, matriarchs, collaborators and holders of knowledge. These works are connected by a controlled sense of urgency and activism: a will to transgress, rupture and shape the future of Australian art through rigor and dynamism.

In 1890, New South Wales Government architect Walter Liberty Vernon was briefed by the Art Gallery trustees to make his design for the new Art Gallery building 'as strictly classical as possible', and the vestibule space at the entrance to the original building reflects this request. Consisting of two central bays with Ionic columns made from polished Kempsey marble, semi-glazed domes, niches for sculpture and ornate tiled floors, the natural materials, symmetry and craftsmanship of the vestibule command a quietening of the mind. In response to this space, Nabilah Nordin's site-specific sculptural installation *Corinthian Clump* 2023 presents as the punk-rock cousin of classicism. The installation extends Nordin's existing sculptural inventory and approach to making, which embraces a no-holds-barred takedown of the authority of formalism. The result is a brightly coloured and ambitious family of sculptures that unfurl within the vestibule. Their tendrils and lumpy forms deploy an elaborate combination of rubble and parody that welcome us into this historic location.

The expansive entrance court of the original building is a natural meeting place. Occupying its southern wall, interrupted only by the archways to the Grand Courts, are 48 large-scale photographic prints from the Gurindji/Malngin/Mudpurra artist Brenda L Croft's series *Naabami (thou shall/will see): Barangaroo (army of me)* 2016–23. These are the faces of First Nations girls and women from New South Wales and the Australian Capital





Territory, photographed by Croft using an 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 extends over the entrance court and commands an enduring presence.

Esther Stewart's site-specific commission encourages a closer reading of our built environments and the history embedded within them. The vernacular of Australian architecture and domestic interiors has been central to Stewart's work for over a decade. For *The National 4*, she has created one monumental painting, built from 12 separate panels, referencing a 1970s canary yellow and dark brown kitchen that the artist found and purchased through Facebook Marketplace. Hard-edged and modular, the paintings are composed using a restricted palette and lexicon of forms that indicates cupboards and appliances, rangehoods and splashbacks. Stewart's references to the floral patterning of tiles and linoleum are lyrical and tender and affirm the validity of the interior as high art.

Through the last two years of pandemic living, many of us paid more attention than ever to our lived environments. Wollongong-based Madeleine

These works are connected by a controlled sense of urgency and activism: a will to transgress, rupture and shape the future of Australian art through rigour and dynamism.

Left to right: Madeleine Kelly
Pelican Analogues 2023, oil and
acrylic on polyester, 150 x 110 cm,
image courtesy and © the artist

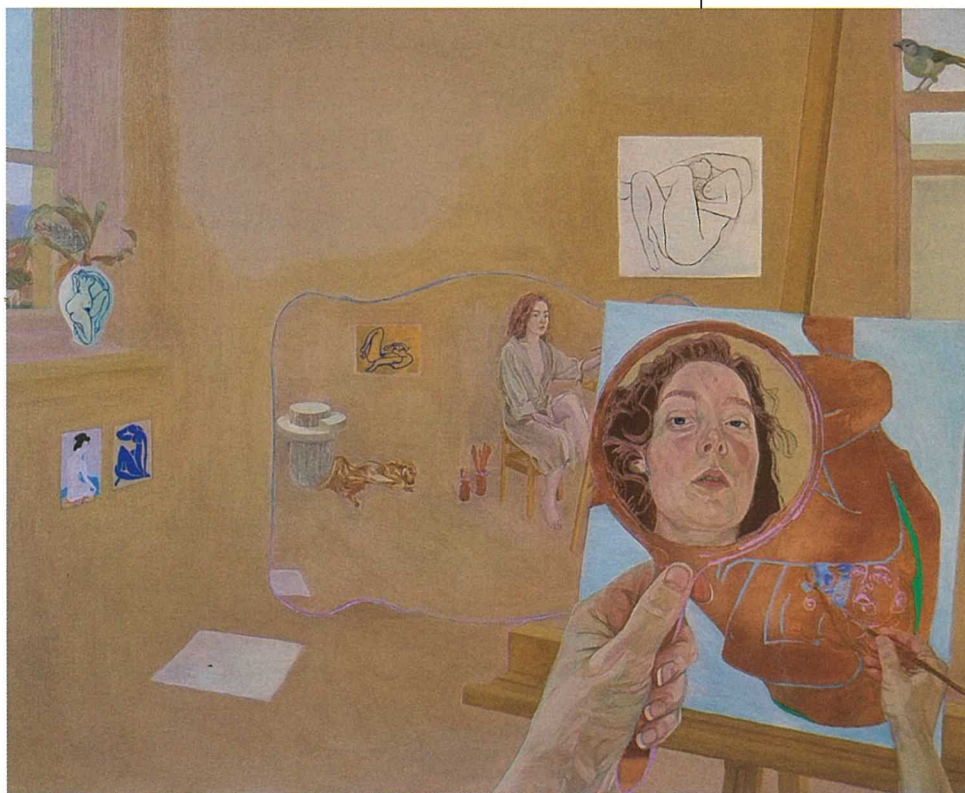
Esther Stewart *Panel A for The
National 4* (working title), 2023,
acrylic on aluminum, 149.1 x 180.0 x
6 cm, image courtesy the artist and
Sarah Cottier Gallery © the artist

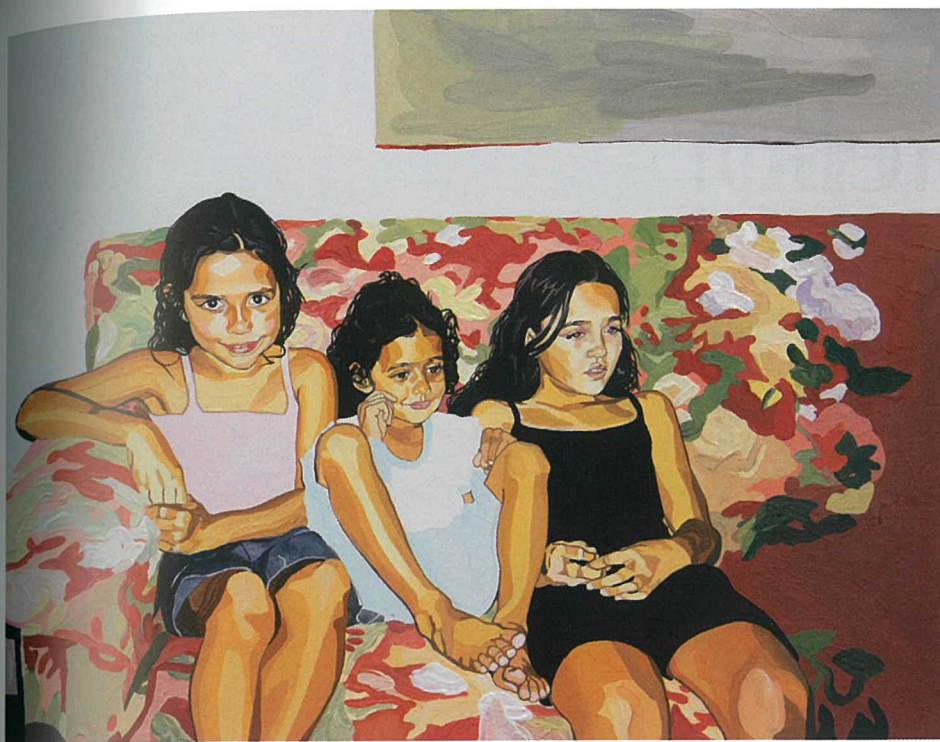
As we emerge from two difficult years of isolation and dislocation, these works help make sense of this place that is not as we left it.

Kelly adapts 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 paintings suggest a web that supports a world we cannot see, a mysterious portal into a place where art explains 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.

The concept of seeing, of bearing witness, or being seen is paramount in Heather B Swann's sculptural installation *Leda and the Swan* 2019–23. Nature, history, philosophy and literature are the conduits feeding much of Swann's art, a practice that probes the physical and mental extremes of the human condition. *Leda and the Swan* is a contemporary wrestle with this ancient story's aspects of sexual violence that have often been suppressed or ignored by artists in favour of a sensuous-erotic reading. The last two years have seen advocates inspire mass action in the fight against sexual abuse, including depictions in historical art (such as Macushla Robinson's critical survey 'Every Rape in the Met Museum' 2022). This is a new wave in a long history of protest and resistance and here, Swann deals directly with the ongoing effort for women to stand our ground.

Picking up this idea for a new generation of artists is Natasha Walsh, whose body of work *Hysteria* 2023 goes beyond the call to stand one's ground





Left to right: Natasha Walsh *Dear Brett (The Nude Room)* 2022, oil on copper, 40 x 46 x 3.5 cm, image courtesy the artist and N. Smith Gallery © the artist

Thea Anamara Perkins *Three sisters* 2021, acrylic on clayboard, 30.5 x 40.5 cm, image courtesy the artist and N. Smith Gallery © the artist

by demanding a renegotiation of the terms. At the Brett Whiteley Studio in Surry Hills, Walsh has set up her own studio for the duration of *The National 4*, and over this time will recreate iconic paintings by male artists where the emphasis of the new work is on 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.

The power of representation, activism and the strong bonds of family underlie the work of Arrernte and Kalkadoon woman Thea Anamara Perkins. Her Arrernte name Anamara refers to a river and a Dreaming that runs north of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and the Perkins' family name is synonymous with the pursuit of civil rights for the First Nations people of this country. The granddaughter of activist Charlie Perkins, daughter of former Art Gallery senior curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art Hetti Perkins, and niece of filmmaker Rachel Perkins, as a child Thea spent hours attending rallies and demonstrations in the public spaces of Sydney and beyond. As an artist, she trawls the family archive of photographs and ephemera seeking images that resonate strength, cultural determination and the intimate, unspoken bonds of family. For *The National 4*, she has brought together an important group of paintings from the last two years as well as seven newly commissioned works. Creating this pictorial reunion in the Art Gallery of extended family past and present feels timely in a period when togetherness has all but been impossible.

Perkins' very personal installation reflects an ever-shifting understanding of who we are, where we have come from and what we want to talk about. This is very much at the core of what *The National 4* addresses: an Australia that is culturally syncretic, with history that is ancient and a present that is constantly being made and remade. 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. We need to talk, and *The National 4* is ready for a conversation.

—
Beatrice Gralton, senior curator,
Brett Whiteley Studio

The National 4: Australian Art Now is held across the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Brett Whiteley Studio, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Carriageworks and Campbelltown Arts Centre, until 23 July, free