

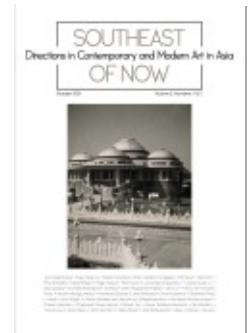


PROJECT MUSE®

Symbiosis as Resistance in *The National* 2021 : New
Australian Art

Claire Ollivain

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,
Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2, October 2021, pp. 365-374 (Article)



Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2021.0014>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/838733>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
[44.192.93.109] Project MUSE (2024-03-29 11:11 GMT)

Symbiosis as Resistance in *The National 2021:*

New Australian Art

CLAIRE OLLIVAIN

Showing at three major cultural institutions in Sydney, *The National 2021: New Australian Art* is the third in a series of biennale survey exhibitions placing a spotlight on contemporary Australian art. There is no unifying theme to different iterations of *The National* across the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Carriageworks and the Museum of Contemporary Art, contradicting a potential reading of the title as a suggestion of national commonality. Nevertheless, interconnected threads of concern can be discerned, given artists' engagement with issues of present urgency and the distinct curatorial gesture at each institution. The socio-political and ecological upheavals of the last year: the 2019–20 bushfires in Australia, the Black Lives Matter protests, the pandemic, have shaped both artists' and curators' choices in *The National 2021*. One significant common thread is a renewed interest in practices of care and symbiosis among human and non-human networks, in recognition of the disastrous impacts of colonisation.

When introducing the first of the three biennales in 2017, the curators clarified that in titling the exhibition *The National*, their intention was not to “define contemporary art in Australia through a set of shared characteristics or conditions”, nor to present “an identifiably ‘national’ (Australian) art”.¹

[Southeast of Now
Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2 (October 2021), pp.365–74]



FIGURE 1: Fiona Hall. *Exodust*, 2021. Burnt tree, rope, iron bell, LED lighting, eucalyptus sapling, birds' nests, water-based oil on burnt book, water-based oil on burnt fabric. Photograph by Felicity Jenkins. Courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Instead, it was chosen to suggest the exhibition's scope and to reference how contemporary artists provocatively destabilise the ideology of nationhood. The idea of the 'national' is followed by a question mark and a call for truth-telling for many of the 39 artists, collectives and collaborations presented in the 2021 survey.

The curators of *The National 2021* have embraced as driving forces in contemporary art those perspectives excluded by Australian history and the Eurocentric art world, prioritising artists with First Nations and migrant heritage in an attempt to decolonise the museum.² Concurrently, in placing these artworks in an institutional setting, the curators face the risk of reducing hybridity to essentialised interpretations that rely on an artist's biography.³ Given *Southeast of Now's* focus on the visual culture of Southeast Asia, this review will look mainly at artists of Asian heritage. While there are connections between their works, it is important not to reduce their specificities and the localities from which they emerge into a uniformity defined by difference.

The tensions between contemporary art and its display in institutions with a colonial history is apparent upon entering the AGNSW, where Fiona Hall's sublime installation *EXODUST* brings charred memories of ecological disaster into the neo-classical space of the vestibule. It is a spiritual and

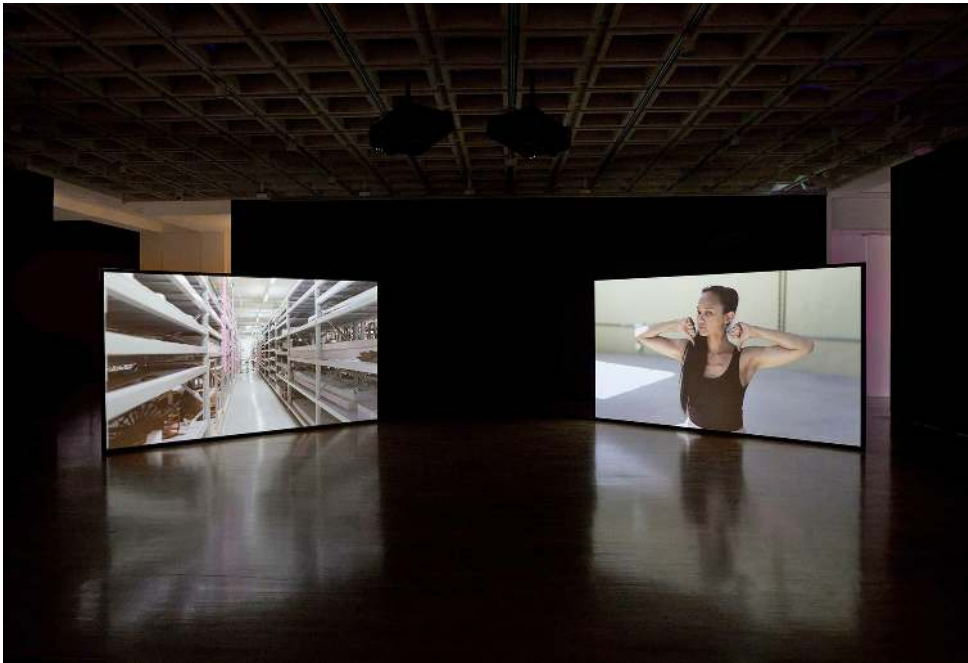


FIGURE 2: Leyla Stevens. *Patiwangi (The death of fragrance)*, 2021. 2-channel HD video installation, stereo sound, 8:57 minutes. Photograph by Felicity Jenkins. Courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales.

visceral memorial to the 3 billion non-human beings that died from the bushfires, a disaster traceable to the colonial mismanagement of Indigenous lands. The fragility of the burnt tree branches containing empty bird nests and the charred coffin out of which a small eucalypt sapling grows contrasts with the durable sandstone and marble columns of the gallery—hallmarks of colonial architecture and Enlightenment values. Situated in an interstitial space where audiences enter and leave the building, the installation makes an ecological intervention into built space to suggest interconnected cycles of life and death, destruction and regeneration. Hall brings us into unavoidable proximity with the consequences of climate inaction while demonstrating that, desensitised, we are always walking past the signs of loss.

A common thread among some works at *The National* is a critique of the power structures embedded in the collecting of art. Showing at AGNSW, *Patiwangi (The death of fragrance)* is a two-channel video installation, created by lens-based artist Leyla Stevens. On one screen is documentation of Balinese art from collections belonging to AGNSW and the Australian Museum, while on the other we see Javanese-Australian dancers Ade Suharto and Melanie Lane embody ritual history through performance. Stevens interrogates how European modernists painted Balinese female dancers as exoticised, passive



FIGURE 3: James Tylor. *We Call This Place... Kaurua Yarta*, 2020. Etched daguerrotype and vinyl. Photograph by Felicity Jenkins. Courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales.

muses. Informed by the work of Balinese female painters who are under-represented in the collections, her dance piece collapses time to reinstate the active and collaborative role of women in Balinese artmaking.⁴ Stevens' plan to shoot the performance in Bali was halted by pandemic restrictions, prompting her to engage with the Indonesian diaspora in Australia. This imbues the work's exploration of histories forgotten by the archive with an attention to the local that recurs throughout *The National*.

The tension between stillness and movement, past and present in Stevens' work is driven by her theoretical approach of counterpoint—bringing two disparate elements together to forge an alternative narrative that ruptures categorisation. The freestanding screens on the gallery floor hold a commanding spatial presence in the darkened room and can be looked at from either side. Fittingly, they sit opposite James Tylor's installation *We Call This Place... Kaurua Yarta*, which also challenges the role of Eurocentric narratives in the history of art through counterpoint strategies. Tylor's work reclaims the 19th-century practice of the daguerrotype from European colonialists who claimed possession of the landscape and Indigenous peoples by photographing them. Tylor, an artist with Kaurua, Māori and European ancestry,



FIGURE 4: Phaptawan Suwannakudt. *RE al-Re-g(l)ory*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, white mesh, plyboard. Photograph by Felicity Jenkins. Courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales.

speaks back to the tradition of the medium by superimposing traditional Kaurna names over photos of significant cultural sites, reaffirming his connections to Country. In both, we see contemporary artists who defy categorisation using strategies of deconstruction to voice resistance to the exploitation of ‘otherised’ people and lands.

Importantly, the scope of *The National* is not limited to ‘national’ concerns, with artists suggesting the interconnectedness of local histories of violence with global legacies of imperialism. Originally trained as a mural painter in Thailand, Phaptawan Suwannakudt’s *RE al-Re-g(l)ory* installation at AGNSW is one of the boldest political statements of her oeuvre. Displayed are painted reworkings of Thai government propaganda posters, punctuated with white boards that generate a three-dimensional presence, reminiscent of bodies in a crowd. The June 2020 Black Lives Matter protest in Sydney was a catalyst for the artwork, prompting her to recall memories of growing up under a military regime, where silence on political matters was the safest option, especially for women. Suwannakudt was a student on 6 October 1976, when police and paramilitaries massacred student protestors at Thammasat University. Through the symbolism of the white boards, she suggests a continuity between the taboo of the massacre with recent student protests in Thailand where students held up A4 sheets of blank paper to hide their identity.

Suwannakudt’s recontextualisation of anti-communist propaganda posters which were widespread during the Cold War era—likely funded by the United



FIGURE 5: Abdullah M.I. Syed. *Currency of Love*, 2016–21. Ongoing series, hand-cut bank notes on pure pigment print on paper, 24 karat gold leaf. Photograph by Felicity Jenkins. Courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales.

States Information Agency to promote their national imperial interests—contrasts their didacticism with the ambiguity of the white board.⁵ The title *RE al-Re-g(l)ory* plays on the prefix re- and the notion of allegory, suggesting how the repetition of historical memory affects our personal understandings of current events. Suwannakudt invokes cross-temporal and cross-regional connections between political disruptions and acts of protest, responding to the urgency given to truth-telling and overcoming silence in the last year.

Other artists at *The National* conceived of art as a vehicle for change by looking inwards at domestic regimes of care rather than outwards to political movements. A highly personal and human-focused suite of works, Abdullah M.I. Syed's *The Longest Way Around is the Shortest Way Home* at the AGNSW is a tribute to his late mother Azra Waseem. Locating the political in the personal and local, Syed sees his art as poetic resistance (*manzoom muzahamat*), a form of activism that advocates for community-building, care, vulnerability and family to address unequal power structures.⁶ A veneration of care is unmistakable in Syed's practice.

For the *Currency of Love*, he selected and made prints of decaying leaves from his late mother's money plants that she nurtured while her sons were away from home. Then, borrowing from the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, he filled in the leaves with intricate gold leaf and repaired the missing fragments with



FIGURE 6: Justin Shoulder. *AEON†: TITAN ARUM*, 2021. Mixed-media installation, stereo sound, live work. Photograph by Felicity Jenkins. Courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales.

banknotes. This work draws on the practice of the *rafoogar* in South Asian culture; the healer of damaged cloth is akin to the mender of relationships and the world. The artwork subverts money as a sign of power and privilege, suggesting that systems of economic exchange are imbricated in the ‘natural world’ and vice versa. Syed’s painstaking attention to detail and his gentle, reparative treatment of the plants re-enacts his mother’s love, reimagining relations with the non-human to embrace symbiosis.

Justin Shoulder’s immersive mixed-media installation *AEON†: TITAN ARUM* takes inspiration from plant forms in a different direction. A multi-sensory imaginary garden that is both fantastical and seductive, it is a highlight of the exhibition, provoking interest on a bodily-sensorial rather than just cerebral register. Entering the dark room, I observed the unsettling soundscape and the sublime sensation of being in the presence of breathing and moving plant life, as the forms moved and made contact with each other. It is a stunningly affective artwork, evoking both the Panangbenga Festival in the Philippines through the ceremonious display of plants, and carnivalesque nightlife through the flamboyant multi-textured materials and colourful neon lights.

Known for their work in Sydney’s queer performance scene, Shoulder animated the installation with performances, using their body to inhabit

and be given birth to from openings in the plants at different times during the exhibition. The artwork speaks to primordial creation myths but also the seduction and dangers of 'nature'; it is named after the *titan arum* flowers in Southeast Asia, which are phallic in shape and emit a pungent decaying smell that lures flesh flies and beetles. Like other works in *The National, AEON†: TITAN ARUM* gestures toward ecological relations of symbiosis as an alternative to the destructive 'otherisation' of queer people and people of colour. Rejecting the violent colonial equation of a 'natural' state with a heteronormative one, Shoulder's communal garden and performance embodies the potential of queer Filipinx futurity to create new worlds.

Another powerful work incorporating performance is Vernon Ah Kee and Dalisa Pigram's *Gudirr Gudirr*, a collaborative three-channel digital video and sound installation. Showing at Carriageworks, it presents a moving call of anger at the violence of colonialism in the past and its continuation in the present. Director Ah Kee used his characteristic style of portraiture and text combined with shots of Pigram's solo dance performance, a hybrid of traditional Aboriginal movement and the martial art silat from her Malay heritage. Shot in Broome on the land of the Yawuru people where she lives, Pigram uses her body and voice to bring to light untold stories of the interactions between Aboriginal people and Asian migrants in north-western Australia. In the 1880s, colonial pearling masters brought in Japanese, Malay, Chinese, Filipino and Timorese workers to join local Aboriginal people who were forced to dive for pearls.⁷ *Gudirr Gudirr* responds to how these communities, and their mixed-heritage children, were systemically oppressed and controlled by European colonists. The film is weighty with the traumas of the past and warning for changes to come, but in the fluid physicality of the performance, moments of lightness invite us to listen to emergent potentialities.

The National 2021 walks the tension between mourning and hope, destruction and possibility. Showcasing artworks that draw attention to global resistance narratives, the exhibition reflects recent shifts in consciousness by advocating for art as an agent of decolonial change. Broadly, *The National* suggests that our contemporary moment is defined by multiple coalescing crises that are reaching a turning point. Its modus operandi is to look beyond Eurocentric values, encouraging us to confront the destructiveness of Australia's colonial structures and imagine alternative frameworks of care in place. While Indigenous resistance has existed on the continent since invasion, it has taken hundreds of years for museums to begin making active efforts to dismantle the colonial imaginary of the 'nation'—change is only just beginning.

BIOGRAPHY

Claire Ollivain is an Honours student at the University of Sydney, majoring in English and Art History. She is an editor of the student newspaper *Honi Soit* which publishes news, culture, opinion and satire. In 2020 she was awarded the Francis Stuart Prize for Asian art history at the University of Sydney and was also a member of the Art Gallery of New South Wales youth collective. Her interests are in film, photography, and the relationship between politics and aesthetics.

NOTES

- ¹ Anneke Jaspers, Wayne Tunnicliffe, Lisa Havihand, Nina Miall and Blair French, "Curatorial Introduction". *The National: New Australian Art*, 2017. <https://www.the-national.com.au/essays/curatorial-introduction/> [accessed 2 July 2021].
- ² Erin Vink, "Idle no more: Confronting colonialism and the art museum". *The National: New Australian Art*, 2021. <https://www.the-national.com.au/essays/idle-no-more-confronting-colonialism-and-the-art-museum/> [accessed 2 July 2021].
- ³ Matt Cox, "Sharing time with the past and caring for the future". *The National: New Australian Art*, 2021. <https://www.the-national.com.au/essays/sharing-time-with-the-past-and-caring-for-the-future/> [accessed 2 July 2021].
- ⁴ Ruby Arrowsmith-Todd, "Artist text", Leyla Stevens. *The National: New Australian Art*, 2021. <https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/leyla-stevens/patiwangi-the-death-of-fragrance/> [accessed 2 July 2021].
- ⁵ Natalie Seiz, "Artist text", Phaptawan Suwannakudt. *The National: New Australian Art*, 2021. [https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/phaptawan-suwannakudt/RE%20al-re-g\(l\)ory/](https://www.the-national.com.au/artists/phaptawan-suwannakudt/RE%20al-re-g(l)ory/) [accessed 2 July 2021].
- ⁶ Susan Acret, "Poetic resistance Abdullah M.I. Syed". *ArtAsiaPacific*, 2021. <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/123/PoeticResistanceAbdullahMISyed> [accessed 2 July 2021].
- ⁷ Ben Collins, "Reconciling the dark history of slavery and murder in Australian pearling, points to a brighter future". *ABC Kimberley*, 2018. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-09/slavery-in-australian-pearling/10217488> [accessed 2 July 2021].