

The National 2021: New Australian Art opens at three of Sydney's leading cultural institutions



Collecting, salvaging, resurrecting and repeating: the process three artists with different visions unknowingly share. As their works are unveiled for the opening of The National 2021 today, artists Fiona Hall, Lauren Berkowitz and Isadora Vaughan have one thing on their mind: the environment.

Exhibiting across three of Sydney's leading cultural precincts, works of varying mediums from emerging and established Australia artists have been chosen by curators from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Carriageworks and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

First launched in 2017, The National 2021: New Australian Art is the third in a series of biennials that will run until June 20 at Carriageworks, August 22 at the MCA and September 5 at AGNSW.

Hanging in the entranceway the AGNSW, Hall's installation serves as a stark reminder of the appalling after-effects of the Black Summer Bushfires of 2019-2020.

"It's a piece about the blackness of the fires and there is some sense of resurrection, but for me it's quite a bleak resurrection." The Hobart based artist said.

Her installation, called Exodust, features charred trees which stand within the ten sculpture niches of the neoclassical marbled entrance of the gallery. Between these niches hang strings of charred books on which Hall has written the Latin names of species that have become extinct due to the fires.

"Part of my reasoning for doing that was the number of animals impacted was so astronomical, it's hard to even get your head around," she said. "But when you think of the animals included in

that number, they are tiny things like beetles, dragonflies, freshwater frogs and bees, which makes you think the official figure might be a conservative one.

AGNSW co-curator, Matt Cox said the exhibition “harbours a tension between sorrow and hope”, which Hall conveys in her “site of grieving”.

In Circular Quay, Berkowitz’s impression of the “fantastical visions of earth” described within the pages of *The Zohar*, a classic Kabbalistic text of Jewish mysticism, has taken on the form of two installations. One, called *Fragile Ecologies*, is a composition of cascading columns of colour and light that pool as they reach the ground, which she has ironically made out of plastic.

“I’m interested in the dialogue of what’s going on with the outside world and the amount of plastic infiltrating our waterways, landscape, air and our bodies,” she said. “So on the one hand the work draws on this mythical text on creation which feeds the template of humankind, but then we have the counter-narrative of all this waste and material which is really impacting and damaging our world.”

At Carriageworks, Vaughan’s installation, *Organs of Cognition*, is a reimagined landscape “intended to read as an intermingling of different species, or bodies,” she said.

“The work ... is presenting a coagulated mess, but still somewhat a beautiful complicated version of a system of processes and movements.”

“It is about the entanglement of our bodies with the environment to remind us that we are not separate from the environment and the environment is not separate from us.”

Animal-like forms along with large ceramic basins are held up by slick frames replicating infrastructure. Vaughan said they represent organic forms “made of latex, pig intestines, pig skin casings bunched up inside in the glass orbs.

Carriageworks curator, Abigail Moncrieff said the thirteen artists exhibited in the space were the urgent voices speaking “to our complicated and fractured present” with each of their works “navigating the measure and texture of our actions ... with the work around us”.

IMOGEN REID, JOURNALIST

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