

# BENDIGO ART GALLERY

Living Connections:  
Reflections on care,  
kinship and Country



## Bendigo Art Gallery Introduction

Bendigo Art Gallery is one of the oldest and largest regional galleries in Australia. Audiences come from around Australia to our innovative international exhibitions, public programs and events. Our vision is to be a leading gallery that is recognised internationally and contributes creatively, culturally, socially and economically to the Bendigo, Victorian, and national communities. We seek to do so by using BAG's collection, exhibitions, education, and public programs to engage, enrich, excite and educate.

Bendigo Art Gallery's collection includes over 5,000 works of art and design from the 1850s to the present day, including art from the Bendigo goldfields, 19th century European paintings, sculptures and decorative arts.

## Exhibition Rationale, Historical & Cultural contexts

'Living Connections: Reflections on care, kinship and Country' showcases contemporary paintings from Bendigo Art Gallery's collection by First Nations and non-First Nations artists from across Australia, including the Kimberley in Western Australia, the Central Desert and works by local artists living and working in the Bendigo region. Featuring a wide range of environments and artistic approaches, selected works are brought together in conversation around broad relating themes.

Each artist conveys personal stories and connections to place, community and the natural world through their distinctive style, choice of materials, techniques, and cultural perspective. Together they emphasise care and stewardship and highlight the deep bonds between land, people, and tradition, while reflecting on identity, kinship, and belonging across generations.



Located in the first space visitors encounter upon entering the gallery, the exhibition centres First Nations art and storytelling, demonstrating Bendigo Art Gallery's commitment to celebrating the diversity and vitality of First Nations art and culture. The previous exhibition in this gallery space also featured large paintings by First Nations artists from the gallery's collection so the curator was conscious to select different artworks and draw out different themes to frame this exhibition. A starting point for this selection was a number of contemporary paintings acquired by the gallery in the last 5 years that had had little to no opportunity for display; many of which are large in scale benefitting from the long walls and high ceilings of this gallery space. These new acquisitions helped to shape the exhibition themes and guide the selection of works to display alongside them.

The First Nations artists featured in this exhibition draw immense inspiration from their connection to Country, expressing its stories, sacred sites, resources, and natural beauty through their work. The exhibition offers a great opportunity to explore the individuality of contemporary First Nations painting practices across Australia and for visitors to reflect on a holistic view of Country.



“For First Nations people the term Country has deep meaning, encompassing everything in the sky above our heads through to microorganisms below ground and everything in between. Many First Nations people believe everything is alive, the trees and the rocks, animals, dirt, everything alike. All of these things are our kin and we show respect for them. We are considered a part of Country and Country is considered a part of us, it sustains and defines us, and we must show respect and protect it where possible.

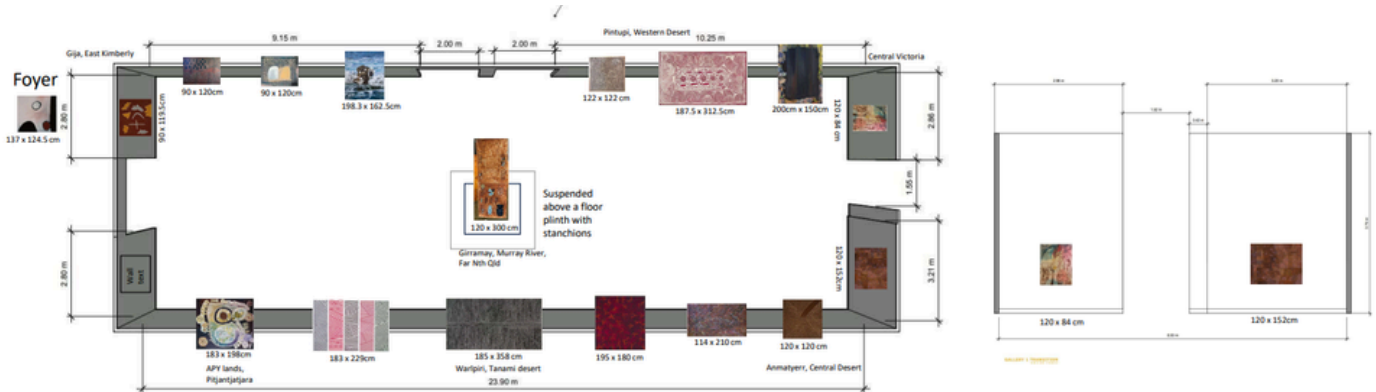
Each tribe has particular Country that is considered connected to them, not owned, but with a very close connection. Each Country has unique stories and songlines, that are passed down through generations as an integral part of the identity, culture and lore of that tribe.”

- Lorraine Brigdale, First Nations Curator, Bendigo Art Gallery

Featured in the exhibition are paintings by senior tribes' people like Gija artist Mabel Juli Wiringgoon, who is also a law and culture woman. These artists are important keepers of the stories, songlines and symbols of their Country. Such artists have lived their lives learning and sharing about their culture, lore and tribal ways in a visual and spoken manner. Artists like Mabel express special, personal and tribal ideas in their art, through unique iconography and sometimes the material they use. The stories are not always possible to decipher, and that is okay. The way icons and symbols are used has significant meaning to the artist, tells the story of the artist and their personal and cultural connections to sites and stories they illustrate in their work. These are unique and exclusive to each artist and their communities and are not for use by others outside of this cultural context.

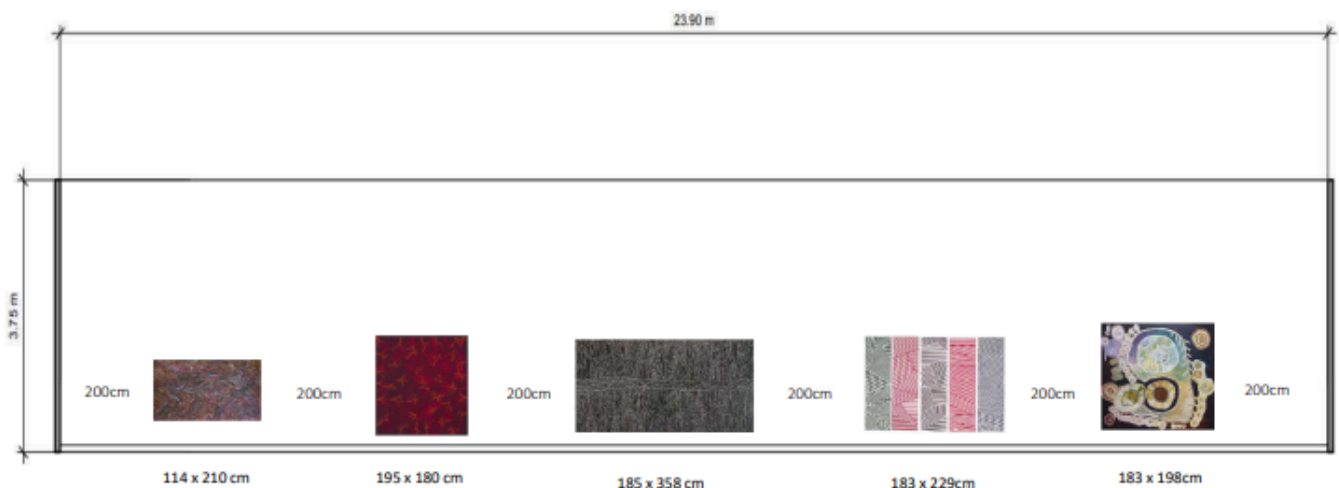
Many First Nations artists whose work is featured in this exhibition live on their tribal Country in remote communities, where Art Centers serve as vital cultural hubs. These spaces support artistic practice, storytelling, and knowledge sharing while fostering social connection, collaboration, and the continuity of culture for future generations.

## Exhibition layout and curatorial considerations



Exhibition Layout planning

An exhibition design is created for each exhibition to help visualise and plan the installation and ensure an engaging and organised experience for visitors. It allows the curator to consider connections between artworks, determine how many artworks will fit in the available space, and ensure a cohesive exhibition story. It assists the curator to collaborate with other gallery staff to prepare for installation, identify potential challenges, and figure out what display furniture (like plinths or specialised mounts) are needed. It also helps to ensure safe movement of visitors through the space, especially large groups like school tours.



Exhibition Layout planning



For some exhibitions, curators work with specialised exhibition designers using software to create scale models and incorporate additional design features. For this exhibition, the curator made a simple layout plan using PowerPoint, approximating the scale of artworks. During installation, gallery technicians and the curator worked together, adjusting as needed based on the design.

Although each artist in this exhibition has their own unique style and visual language, common threads emerge among those who share Country, family ties, stories, natural environment and ways of working. In most cases, the work of First Nations artists in the exhibition have been grouped by language group, geographical location and communities of practice with works by non-First Nations artists interspersed throughout according to scale, thematic connections and complimentary colourings.

The work of local artists, Adam Lee and Kylie Banyard are displayed side by side as both draw inspiration from bushland in central Victoria and involve their children in their creative process. These various placements aim to highlight similarities and distinctions between artworks, and their depiction of unique environments, artistic lineages, and the contexts in which they are created.



Surrounded by rich expressions of artists' connections to place and Country, this exhibition also serves as a meaningful context for gallery staff to Acknowledge Country during tours, events and VIP visits; paying respect to the Traditional Owners of the land on which the gallery is situated and extending this respect and appreciation to all First Nations people, locating this practice within the long and continuing tradition of art and culture on Dja Dja Wurrung Country and across First Nations Australia.

## Materials, techniques and ideas

The exhibition showcases a breadth of painting techniques, processes and use of materials including natural pigments like ochre and dyes, organic material, synthetic polymer (acrylic) and oil paint. Contemporary First Nations artists carry forward a rich cultural practice using visual language and traditional materials to tell stories, pass on lore, and connect to Country. The First Nations artists in this exhibition reflect on these traditions in various ways, creating a dynamic dialogue between the past and the present.

Ochre is used in many works across the exhibition; its textural quality and distinct earthy tones are particularly evident in the work of artists from the Kimberly region.

This natural material has cultural and spiritual significance, having traditionally been used to record and share cultural lore, on bodies in ceremony and war, and as decoration or to signify ownership on weapons and tools. The colour of the ochre has a significance to the person who is using it.



Ochres are not accessible in all locations and were traded between Nations across Australia. The use of ochre as a paint requires a binding agent to attach the powdered material to the surface. Animal fat, spit, tree gum and blood and even just water are amongst the things used for this by First Nations people. In his work 'Niyiliyili (Bungle Bungles)', (pictured above left) Gija artist Jack Britten has used traditional materials and techniques taught to him by his grandparents including using ochres with kangaroo blood as a binding agent. Britten's work is inspired by the unique landscape of his Country in the Purnululu region of the Kimberly, known as the Bungle Bungles. Reflecting his deep connection to this distinctive rocky range at the top end of Western Australia, he uses local materials and motifs to depict significant sites and rock forms central to the stories and identity of his people.

During the advent of the contemporary Aboriginal art movement around 50 years ago, many First Nations artists began to embrace acrylic paint as their medium of choice. Since then, First Nations artists have experimented with the creative potential of acrylic paint (synthetic polymer paint), adopting bright and contrasting colours to produce spectacular visions of Country, convey powerful narratives, and challenge conventional ideas about Aboriginal art.

The adoption of acrylics offered First Nations artists a way to share stories beyond their tribal communities. It also posed the challenge of how to replicate the textural quality of natural pigments on canvas and find ways to safely convey ancestral stories, sacred sites, symbols and cultural customs to uninitiated viewers.

Non-First Nations artists featured in the exhibition approach their work from different cultural perspectives and artistic traditions. Inspired by her Italian heritage and European history, Wilma Tabacco works within the Western Art tradition of abstraction, a style that emerged in the early 20th century, with a focus on geometric shapes, colors, and forms rather than realistic representation.



In her work 'Harvest Time I-V' repeated lines of equal thickness in contrasting colors are arranged in various angular combinations across five panels, playing with optical illusion and creating a dynamic energy of orientation and disorientation. The use of bold colours and clear crisp edged lines demonstrates Tabacco's skill in hard-edged abstraction, a field within abstract painting that emerged in the 1960s in a move away from the emotive, gestural forms of earlier abstraction.



Wilma Tabacco  
'Harvest Time I-V', 2001  
oil on linen  
Each panel 183 x 45.7cm; total length 228.5cm

'Touching Wattle' by Kylie Banyard is inspired by a daily ritual with her son, where they touch and talk to plants as an act of hope and care amid rising climate concerns. The canvas is dyed with eucalyptus, emphasising the artist's active engagement with her local environment as both a material and subject of her work. Layers of coloured oil and acrylic paints blend into the surface. The central image of cupped hands in a bushland setting is based on a photograph and painted onto the stained canvas in a sepia tone. Together these soft painterly elements give the work a nostalgic quality which resonates with the themes and pathos underpinning the work.



Kylie Banyard  
'Touching Wattle', 2022  
oil and synthetic polymer paint on eucalyptus dyed canvas  
120 x 84 cm

## Conservation requirements and considerations

Conservation in a public gallery involves specific methods for handling, storage, and the display of artworks to ensure their long-term preservation. This includes carefully controlling the environment by regulating temperature, humidity, and lighting levels. Exposure to dust, too much light, or fluctuations in humidity or temperature can lead to fading, warping or degradation of materials.



The decision to feature only paintings in this exhibition was shaped by several key factors: a desire to highlight new acquisitions of contemporary paintings, the suitability of the gallery space for the display of large-scale works, and the exhibition's extended duration.

In a controlled environment, paintings are generally more resilient than mediums like paper and textiles, making them better suited for long-term display.

At the start of the exhibition, a large work on paper by Girramay artist Maureen Beeron was suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the gallery, allowing it to be seen from both sides. This method of display and the painting's fragile texture, featuring organic materials and natural pigments, made it vulnerable to touch. To avoid damage, a plinth was placed underneath with a stanchion rope barrier around the perimeter.



After three months, this work was removed to accommodate increased foot traffic during the opening of a major international exhibition and to rest the work after prolonged light exposure.

## Featured Artists

Please find below a list of featured artists for further research and consideration:

- Jack Britten (Gija)
- Goody Barrett (Gija)
- Mabel Juli (Gija)
- Ningura Napurrula (Pintupi)
- Lorna Napanangka (Pintupi)
- Gladdy Kemarre (Anmatyerre)
- Josie Petrick Kemarre (Anmatyerre)
- Jeannie Petyarre (Pitjara)
- Dorothy Napangardi (Warlpiri)
- Tuppy Goodwin (Pitjantjatjara)
- Maureen Beeron (Girramay)
- Wilma Tabacco
- Abdul Abdullah
- Kylie Banyard
- Adam Lee

## Further Resources

Dorothy Napangardi - Biographical information

<https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artists/dorothy-napangardi/>

Kylie Banyard - Artist website <https://www.kyliebanyard.com/about>

Adam Lee - Essay for exhibition O Restless Earth which featured Lee's painting 'Blētsian' featured in this exhibition. <https://adamlee.com.au/restless-earth/>

Mabel Juli - speaking about her art and life

<https://nga.gov.au/on-demand/this-place-artist-series-mabel-juli/>