

MEDIA RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE PREMIERES ASIA'S LARGEST EXHIBITION OF FIRST PEOPLES ART OF AUSTRALIA

The extensive survey introduces audiences to the beauty, culture and historical influences behind Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and its resonance with Southeast Asia



Installation view, *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*, National Gallery Singapore 2022.
Image credit: Joseph Nair, Memphis West Pictures

Singapore, 26 May 2022 – National Gallery Singapore invites visitors to see the rich artistic practice of the world's oldest living culture with its latest exhibition, *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*. The largest exhibition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art to travel to Asia gives audiences a rare and comprehensive look into First Peoples of Australia's culture, history, and social action in the present.

Ever Present showcases over 170 artworks drawn from the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art, including many of their most significant artworks. These visually captivating works produced by over 150 Aboriginal and Torres Islander artists highlight the diversity of First Peoples art; with works as far back as 1890 until the present, ranging from paintings, video installations, bark paintings, to sculptures and cutting-edge contemporary art.

The exhibition celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, while also grappling with Australia's complex histories. Art emerges as a tool of resistance, asserting deep connections to Country, as well as using wit and satire to encourage conversations about current key

issues; these works challenge stereotypes about First Nations people and what defines their art. The exhibition also illuminates their historical links with Southeast Asia, through works highlighting the regions' trading encounters by sea, and recent artistic exchanges in batik.

Dr Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore, says, "*Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia* is an embodiment of National Gallery Singapore's ambition to create dialogue between the art of this region and the world. Through this showcase, our audiences are offered a rare opportunity to learn the stories of diverse peoples and foster a deeper appreciation for different forms of artistic expression. We are proud to work with National Gallery of Australia and The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art to display some of their very best works to inspire our visitors to understand the rich history, culture, and artistic practices of First Peoples of Australia. *Ever Present* encourages visitors to reconsider their understanding of Southeast Asia through our historical ties with First Peoples of Australia, to reflect on our shared colonial history alongside ongoing conversations over decolonisation and drawing attention to artistic expressions and voices marginalised by conventional art historical narratives."



Judy Watson, Waanyi people, *stake*, 2010, pigment, synthetic polymer paint, aquarelle and chinagraph pencil on canvas, 228.5 x 195 cm, The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art, Boorloo/Perth, © Judy Watson/Copyright Agency, 2022. Installation view, *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*, National Gallery Singapore 2022. Image credit: Joseph Nair, Memphis West Pictures

Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia is presented in partnership with National Gallery Australia and The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art. This exhibition is proudly supported by Touring Partner Australian Government through the Office for the Arts, Lead Partner Singtel and Strategic Partner Cultural Matching Fund.

Tina Baum, Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at National Gallery of Australia, says, "The history and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a crucial part,

not just of Australia's history, but globally as well. *Ever Present* is an opportunity to share our cultures with an international audience and we are very excited to premiere the largest exhibition of First Nations' art to travel to Asia at National Gallery Singapore. To fully understand the richness, diversity and depth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture would take many generations and lifetimes. But to appreciate it only takes a moment."

Wesfarmers is committed to supporting a richer understanding across the community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, and aspirations. "*Ever Present* includes some of the most important contemporary and historical art produced in Australia, celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and their central role in defining Australia and our national identity." Wesfarmers Chairman Michael Chaney AO said. "After a successful debut in Australia, we are thrilled that Singapore will be the first international destination for this landmark exhibition."

Mr Yuen Kuan Moon, Singtel Group Chief Executive Officer, said, "We are proud to support *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*, especially given our ties with Australia where our Optus subsidiary has served communities for three decades as it strives to be the country's most loved everyday brand. We are deeply inspired by how the First Peoples of Australia use their art to pass on important traditions and to tell meaningful stories in contemporary times. This speaks to Singtel's group purpose, of inclusivity and diversity – which are key to encouraging new ideas and innovations – as we seek to advance and make the world more sustainable for future generations. We invite audiences to visit this exhibition at Singtel Special Exhibition Gallery to experience and be enriched by the extraordinary art and culture of First Peoples of Australia."

Exploration of First Peoples art of Australia: Exhibition highlights

Six themed sections give insight into key aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life and culture through *Ancestors + Creators*, *Country + Constellations*, *Community + Family*, *Culture + Ceremony*, *Trade + Influence* and *Resistance + Colonisation*. Further details can be found in Annex A.



Albert Namatjira, Western Arrarnta people, *Gum tree and sandhill*, c 1938, painting in watercolour over underdrawing in black pencil on paper, sheet 38 x 29 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2009, © Albert Namatjira/Copyright Agency, 2022

Visitors can begin their journey by viewing pieces by Albert Namatijira, the first Aboriginal artist to become widely popular in Australia. Widely recognised as a pioneer of contemporary Aboriginal Australian art, Namatijira blended European landscape styles to capture important sites in his Ancestral lands. In *Gum tree and sandhill*, Namatijira highlights the intricate connections to the site of his ancestral lands (Country), as the gum trees, like so many other large trees in Country, are believed to be Ancestor beings.



Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Anmatyerre people, *Yam awely*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, overall 152 x 490 x 4 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, gift of the Delmore Collection, Donald and Janet Holt 1995, © Emily Kame Kngwarreye/Copyright Agency, 2022. Installation view, *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*, National Gallery Singapore 2022. Image credit: Joseph Nair, Memphis West Pictures

In the same gallery, visitors will be entranced by *Yam awely*, an immersive painting almost 5 meters in length, by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, one of the greatest artists of the desert painting movement in Central Australia. A prominent female artist, Kngwarreye took an ever-evolving approach to art making, only picking up acrylic painting in her 70s. Kngwarreye's paintings

often feature the yam plant, expressively reflecting her knowledge of the growth cycle of this essential food source from the desert environment.



Jonathan Jones, Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi peoples, 1978 Gadigal Country/Sydney, New South Wales, *untitled (walamwunga.galang)* (detail), 2020–21, sandstone with metal, rubber and audio, dimensions variable, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra. Purchased with the assistance of Wesfarmers 2020, 2020.43.A–I, © Jonathan Jones. Installation view, *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*, National Gallery Singapore 2022. Image credit: Joseph Nair, Memphis West Pictures

Ever Present also has a diverse range of artworks that showcase how the past continues to inform cultural and social action in the present. A prime example of how contemporary artists celebrate cultural practices is seen in the special mixed media commission, *Untitled (walamwunga.galang)* by renowned Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist, Jonathan Jones. Using large-scale sandstones grindstones and a soundscape in Wiradjuri language, the artwork emphasises the sophistication of Aboriginal agricultural economy, which was erased by colonial narratives of Aboriginal people as hunters-gatherers.



Installation view, *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*, National Gallery Singapore 2022. Image credit: Joseph Nair, Memphis West Pictures

Ever Present also highlights Southeast Asia's history with the First Peoples of Australia. These include artworks from northern Australia which reflect exchanges that existed for centuries prior to colonisation. They provide evidence of a robust trade in *trepang* or sea cucumber, between traders departing from the port of Makassar in South Sulawesi (Indonesia) to the north coast of Australia.

From the 1970s, the technique of batik was introduced to several Aboriginal Communities in Central Australia, sometimes through direct exchanges and collaborations with artists in Indonesia. *Ever Present* showcases examples of this cultural exchange, through artworks that highlight each Community's distinctive style.

Relating the art and histories of Southeast Asia and the First Peoples of Australia: Southeast Asia Gallery Trail



Christopher Pease, Minang/Wardandi/Bibbulmun peoples, *Wrong side of the Hay (A deserted Indian village)*, 2005, oil on linen, 122 x 180 x 4.5 cm, The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art, © Christopher Pease and Gallerysmith, Naarm/Melbourne. Installation view, *Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia*, National Gallery Singapore 2022. Image credit: Joseph Nair, Memphis West Pictures

For the duration of *Ever Present*, five contemporary artworks by Aboriginal artists will be on display in the Gallery's UOB Southeast Asia galleries. This provides a unique opportunity to reflect on similarities and differences between the histories and art of Southeast Asia and the First Peoples of Australia including their shared experience of colonialism.

Christopher Pease's painting, *Wrong side of the Hay (A deserted Indian village)*, directly references a 1798 engraving of a landscape in Western Australia. However, nothing in the original image reveals that this seemingly peaceful scene was the result of the forced displacement of the Nyoongar people from their Ancestral lands. This work is placed in the UOB Southeast Asia Gallery 3, alongside similar images of picturesque and unoccupied



landscapes in Southeast Asia; visitors are invited to reflect on what else may have been omitted from the artworks which display no traces of colonisation or industrialisation.

Programmes, Curator Tours & Activities

Visitors interested in diving deeper into the histories and culture of First Nations can attend art historical lectures, curator talks, artist dialogues and curator tours throughout the exhibition's duration. Visitors can also look forward to performances, including *Painting the Dance* by Mariaa Randall and Henrietta Baird, and a special edition of the Gallery's *Resonates with Residency* programme, featuring Singapore-based artist, Syafiq Halid.

Visitors may also learn more about *Ever Present* through its related programmes via the *Art Journeys* function at <https://web.nationalgallery.sg/> or through the Gallery's new interactive Activity Cube and Digital Self-Service Kiosks.

***Ever Present: First Peoples Art of Australia* will run from 27 May 2022 to 25 September 2022 at Singtel Special Exhibition Gallery, City Hall Chamber and UOB Southeast Asia Gallery. General Admission (free for Singaporeans and PRs) applies. Viewer discretion is advised for select artworks.**

Disclaimer: National Gallery Singapore respects the diverse points of view of all artists and speakers in this exhibition. The views and perspectives expressed by them are their own and may not reflect the position of National Gallery Singapore.

More information can be found in the following annex or visit the website [link](#) for the latest updates on the exhibition. Media assets are available via this [link](#).

- *Annex A – Ever Present: First Peoples of Australia exhibition sections and artwork highlights*
- *Annex B – First Nations Style Guide: Naming conventions and terms for media*

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About National Gallery Singapore

National Gallery Singapore is a leading visual arts institution which oversees the world's largest public collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian modern art. Situated at the birthplace of modern Singapore, in the heart of the Civic District, the Gallery is housed in two national monuments - City Hall and former Supreme Court - that have been beautifully restored and transformed into this exciting 64,000 square metre venue. Reflecting Singapore's unique heritage and geographical location, the Gallery aims to be a progressive museum that creates dialogues between the art of Singapore, Southeast Asia and the world to foster and inspire a creative and inclusive society. This is reflected in our collaborative research, education, long-term and special exhibitions, and innovative programming. The Gallery also works with international museums such as Centre Pompidou, Musée d'Orsay, Tate Britain, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (MOMAT) and National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA), to jointly present Southeast Asian art in the global context, positioning Singapore as a key node in the global visual arts scene.

In 2020, the Gallery was the only museum in Southeast Asia that received a ranking in The Art Newspaper's annual global survey of attendance at art museums, taking 20th place. It was the first museum in Asia to receive the Children in Museums Award by the European Museum Academy and Hands On! International Association of Children in Museums in 2018. The Gallery also won the awards for "Best Theme Attraction" at TTG Travel Awards 2017, "Best Attraction Experience", "Breakthrough Contribution to Tourism" and "Best Customer Service (Attractions)" at the prestigious Singapore Tourism Awards in 2016 for its role in adding to the vibrancy of Singapore's tourism landscape.

Annex A: Ever Present: First Peoples of Australia exhibition sections and artwork highlights

Ancestors + Creators

Visitors are introduced to the spiritual system that informs much Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders art: the stories of the Ancestors and creation beings who have shaped morality, community, lore and even the landscape itself, from time immemorial. Ancestors continue to inform First Peoples' cultural practices and art until today. The opening section presents artworks which feature stories of the Ancestors, depicting them in varied iconographic forms in paintings, sculptures, and film. The artworks embody the enduring heritage of First Peoples, as it continues to evolve and change over time.



Tjungkara Ken, Sandra Ken, Yaritji Young, Freda Brady, Maringka Tunkin, Pitjantjatjara people, *Seven Sisters*, 2018, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 200 x 300 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2020, © Tjungkara Ken, Sandra Ken, Yaritji Young, Freda Brady, Maringka Tunkin/Copyright Agency, 2022

Country + Constellations

Country + Constellations features beautiful and intricate artworks that celebrate First Peoples' profound spiritual connections with land, and intimate knowledge of the environment. Visitors can look forward to evocative works that are informed by the traditional lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, also known as 'Country', and include natural elements of the landscape, as well as of the skies and constellations.



Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Anmatyerre people, *Yam awely*, 1995, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, overall 152 x 490 x 4 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, gift of the Delmore Collection, Donald and Janet Holt 1995, © Emily Kame Kngwarreye/Copyright Agency, 2022



Albert Namatjira, Western Arrarnta people, *Gum tree and sandhill*, c 1938, painting in watercolour over underdrawing in black pencil on paper, sheet 38 x 29 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2009, © Albert Namatjira/Copyright Agency, 2022



Timothy Cook, Tiwi people, *Kulama*, 2010, natural earth pigments and binder on linen, 200 x 200 x 4 cm, The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art, Boorloo/Perth, © Timothy Cook/Copyright Agency, 2022

Community + Family

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are bound together by a strong sense of family and Community. This section showcases how adversity, including historical experiences of forced relocation from traditional lands, has strengthened their resilience. Featuring portraits, photographs and made objects, the artworks in this section affirm the importance of Community practice, as well as challenging stereotypes of what it means to be an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person.



Michael Riley, Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi peoples, *Untitled [feather]*, from the series *cloud*, 2000, printed 2005, pigment inkjet print, 110 x 155 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2005, © Michael Riley Foundation/Copyright Agency, 2022



Destiny Deacon, G'ua G'ua/Erub/Mer peoples, Virginia Fraser, *Forced into images*, 2001, single channel moving image, Super 8 film remastered as digital file, 9:09min, silent, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2006, © Destiny Deacon/Copyright Agency, 2022

Culture + Ceremony

For some Communities, colonisation resulted in the loss of cultural knowledge. Artworks in *Culture + Ceremony* showcases the revival of these cultural practices through re-creation of ceremonial objects or the recovery of language information from archival sources. Many of the works in this section, such as masks, headdresses, and canvas paintings, also function as ceremonial objects, for example in practices such as traditional dance.



Alick Tipoti, Kala Lagaw Ya people, *Koedal Baydham Adhaz Parw (Crocodile Shark) Mask*, 2010, fibreglass, synthetic polymer paint, Cassowary feathers, feathers, raffia and seeds, 130 x 300 x 7 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2010, © Alick Tipoti



Rover Thomas [Joolama], Kukatja/Wangkajunga peoples, *Cyclone Tracy*, 1991, natural earth pigments and binder on canvas, 168 x 180 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 1991, © Rover Thomas [Joolama]/Copyright Agency, 2022

Trade + Influence

This section focuses on the historical connections with Southeast Asia which date back to the early 17th century, including trade connections with the port of Makassar, now part of Indonesia. These exchanges are still represented in artworks and ceremonies by Aboriginal Communities who participated in this trade. More recently, Aboriginal Communities have also adopted batik techniques into their artworks and developed exchanges with artists in Indonesia. While

sharing many techniques with Southeast Asian batik, the batik works produced by Aboriginal artists in Australia reflect the diverse iconography and culture of each Community.

The *Trade + Influence* section also features an artist from Southeast Asia: Nurabdiansyah, a contemporary artist based in Makassar. His work, a documentation video titled *The Lost Makassan* (2018 – 2022) evokes the cross-cultural relationship between Aboriginal Communities in northern Australia and Makassar. *The Lost Makassan* shows the process of reconstructing a traditional Makassan boat from a wrecked skeleton, found along the traditional maritime trade route, to commemorate the historical connection between the two sites.



Tjunkaya Tapaya, Pitjantjatjara people, *Untitled*, c 1990, silk habutai batik, 262 x 110 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2006, ©Tjunkaya Tapaya/Copyright Agency, 2022

Resistance + Colonisation

The works in *Resistance + Colonisation* present diverse art forms that challenge commonly associated narratives of First Peoples from colonial history, and the nation building-narrative of Australia. The artworks in this section become tools of resistance and social action, as they highlight injustices of the past and present and advocate for a fairer future.



Tony Albert, Giramay/Yidinji/Kuku-Yalanji peoples, *ASH on Me*, 2008, vintage ceramic ashtrays on vinyl lettering, overall 150 x 150 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 2009, © the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Gadigal Nura/Sydney



Judy Watson, Waanyi people, *stake*, 2010, pigment, synthetic polymer paint, aquarelle and chinagraph pencil on canvas, 228.5 x 195 cm, The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art, Boorloo/Perth, © Judy Watson/Copyright Agency, 2022

Special Commissions

Ever Present features two special commissions, *Embassy* by Richard Bell, and *Untitled (walam-wunga.galang)* by Jonathan Jones.



Richard Bell, Kamilaroi/Kooma/Jiman/Goreng Goreng peoples, *Embassy*, 2013—ongoing, canvas tent with annex, aluminium frame, rope, synthetic polymer paint on board, digital video, colour, sound; archive, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist. Image: Public program and installation view on the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia forecourt for the 20th Biennale of Sydney, photography by Document Photography, courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

In 1972, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established on the lawns in front of Australia's Parliament House in Canberra, to raise awareness of the government's refusal to grant land rights to Aboriginal people. It still stands today as a powerful symbol of the Aboriginal rights movement. Quoting the original Tent Embassy, Richard Bell's own *Embassy* (2013 –) is an artwork that creates a public space for imagining and articulating alternate futures for First Nations peoples, while reflecting on histories of oppression and displacement.

Visitors can find this special commission at City Hall Chamber, Level 3.



Jonathan Jones, Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi peoples, 1978 Gadigal Country/Sydney, New South Wales, *untitled (walam-wunga.galang)* (detail), 2020–21, sandstone with metal, rubber and audio, dimensions variable, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra. Purchased with the assistance of Wesfarmers 2020, 2020.43.A–I, © Jonathan Jones

Untitled (walam-wunga.galang) by Jonathan Jones features large-scale sandstones grindstones and a soundscape in Wiradjuri language, the artwork emphasises the sophistication of Aboriginal agricultural economy, which was erased by colonial narratives of Aboriginal people as hunters-gatherers.

Visitors can find this special commission at Singtel Special Exhibition Gallery 2.

Southeast Asia Gallery Trail

The Southeast Asia Gallery Trail is curated exclusively for National Gallery Singapore's UOB Southeast Asia Gallery – the first time the Gallery presents an accompanying special exhibition works within its long-term exhibition galleries.

Five contemporary artworks by Aboriginal artists were selected and placed within *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century* – the Gallery's long-term exhibition on the art history of Southeast Asia. The juxtaposition of the two regions' histories and art bring out conceptual and historical connections between the narratives of Southeast Asia and First Nations, including challenging colonial narratives and depictions and presenting contemporary interpretations of traditional practices and beliefs through art.

The Southeast Asia Gallery Trail begins in UOB Southeast Asia Gallery 1 (Former Supreme Court, Level 3) and ends at UOB Southeast Asia Gallery 14 (Former Supreme Court, Level 5).



Christopher Pease, Minang/Wardandi/Bibbulmun peoples, *Wrong side of the Hay (A deserted Indian village)*, 2005, oil on linen, 122 x 180 x 4.5 cm, The Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art, © Christopher Pease and Gallerysmith, Naarm/Melbourne

ANNEX B: FIRST NATIONS STYLE GUIDE – NAMING CONVENTIONS AND TERMS FOR MEDIA

- “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art” is the proper term, not to be shortened to “Aboriginal art” unless referring specifically to Aboriginal peoples or Communities only. The acronym ‘ATSI’ is not considered acceptable.
- “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art” can be used interchangeably with “First Peoples Art of Australia” or “First Nations art of Australia”.
- Do not use possessive forms when describing the First Peoples of Australia (e.g. NOT Australia’s First Peoples)