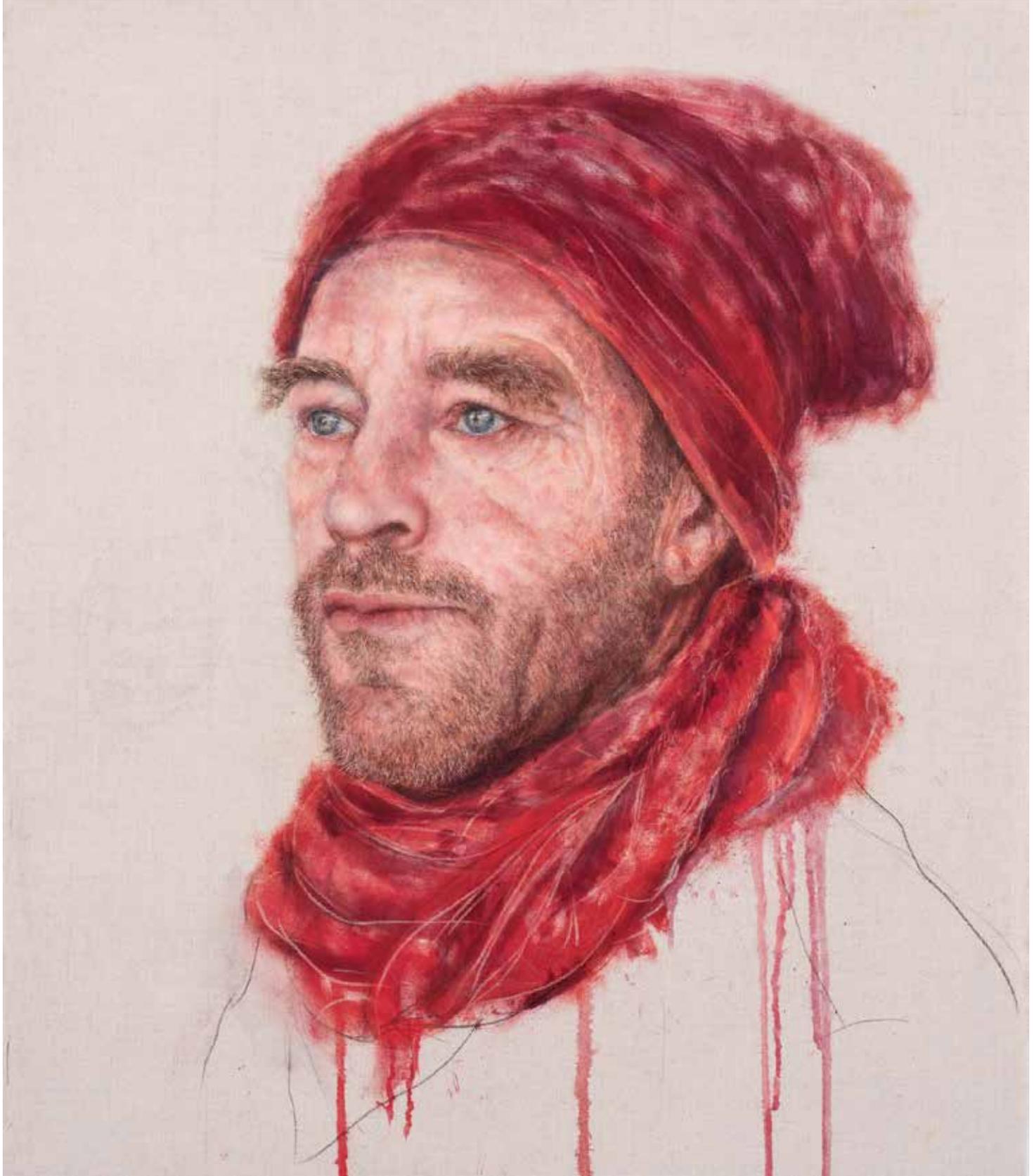


PRIZE PORTRAITS

The Shirley Hannan Portraiture Prize



Rose Wilson: The Stonemason - finalist

Elizabeth Walton talks portraiture with the winner and some on the shortlist

SHIRLEY HANNAN was a multidimensional artist with a particular bent for the functional. In a diverse career Shirley even turned her sharp perception of form to furniture making. Rather than using a burly assistant, she completed the physical preparation of timbers herself (as her husband watched on, no doubt in amazement at how she managed to undertake such work).

Shirley Hannon was practical, unfettered by the scope of her imagination. When she turned her hand and keen eye for design to metalwork, she scoured scrapyards to repurpose for lamps. Once she arrived at portraiture, she found a true home for her many talents.

Amongst her mentors were masters with pastels Daniel Greene and John Balmain. Hannan was a passionate patron of the arts

and continued the John Balmain Portraiture Prize, gradually increasing the value of the prize which is administered by the Bega Valley Regional Gallery.

In her memory, Shirley's son Peter has increased the prize to \$50,000 - Australia's largest portraiture prize - which is awarded for a realistic portrayal of a living person.

The biennial competition is shortlisted by the directors of regional art galleries, with this year's judge Karen Quinlan, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. Quinlan says she found it a joy to be a part of the judging process. "There were many compelling works submitted, reflecting the immense talent in Australia's artistic community. The depth of the stories told through portraiture resonate loudly in the final selection of works. I was impressed by the quality of the entries received for the prize."



Above: Winning Portrait by Cameron Richards of Miss Priya Premkumar and the work in progress opposite
Previous page: Finalist, The Stonemason by Rose Wilson
Tom comes across as a slightly eccentric, a self-confessed philosopher and a great storyteller, though I must admit most of those stories involve

CONTEMPORARY REALIST PORTRAITURE is the art of capturing with emotion what it is to be human. For some, what it is to be fully alive. For others, it is to have connections, to be loved, respected, or revered, and somehow find community in the contemporary world through a medium that has the capacity to present a lively take on modern life, despite its affinity with restraint.

Colleen Stapleton, a finalist in this year's Shirley Hannan Portraiture Prize, recently painted her mother in the garden in a work entitled *Rosie's Winter Garden*. The subject looks down and away from the viewer as she moves through her garden, unaware that she is being brushed into life on the canvas. It is, in its framing, no different than the kind of perspective found in the endless galleries of instagram moments with which we curate our lives. In the artist's hands this momentariness renders all the more meaningful the casual glimpse of her mother; part happenstance, part circumstance, as the viewer is invited to wonder what is blooming just around the corner.

himself, which is entertaining all the same. He is a complex character but with a heart of gold and an exceptional eye to create amazing structures and is well sought after in this area as a visionary stonemason. Tom has a brain full of ideas and when one is brewing, his big blue eyes widen and his gums bump ten to the dozen with such enthusiasm you'd think he'd explode.



In her Shirley Hannan shortlisted work, *Nellie In The Studio*, Stapleton presents a portrait of her sister Narelle Zeller, who is also a finalist in this year's award. Nellie sits at her easel, bare knees and shoeless, apron strung across a scarlet dress, holding her palette of paint as she dabs at the canvas with a long brush. The background is a sequence of brown drapes and white lace curtains, candles and wallpapers, achieved through a combination of impasto and mixed techniques, reminiscent of the artist's view of her big sister during her Nimbin hippy days.

"When you're painting someone that you know as closely as a sister," Stapleton says, "so much of the portrait becomes about the relationship. It's no longer solely about the visual likeness, but it becomes shaped by personal history and emotional connections. I love painting Narelle, I've painted her a few times over the years and each time I feel there's something different to explore."

Shortlisted for a swathe of awards including the Portia Geach Memorial Award and the Kennedy Arts Prize,



Stapleton often publishes time lapse videos of her works in progress. She works on wet, or alla prima, with many paintings completed in a single session, often blocking in a quick study to capture a fresh, simple view of the subject.

Her work shares stories which echo Flemish masters yet also take their place in high art expressions of pop culture. In *The Lady of Shalott*, shortlisted by the Darling Portrait Prize, Stapleton chases the poetry found in the subtle skin tones of her subject in a classic style reminiscent of John William Waterhouse. In *Closer Than My Shadow*, she presents a gypsy girl reaching, finger of god style, towards a shattered vase of long-stemmed tulips and lilies, almost as if the model has a super power that can resurrect the shattered glass. In other works, sumptuously costumed circus girls leap out of fire and into water, as they often did pre Covid, in upmarket theatrical events and private parties!

Stapleton's style of contemporary figurative art which formed part of an exhibition curated by Baltimore's Bennett Collection of Women Realists, is devoured by 'girl of the moment' culture—attracting collaborations such as Stapleton's recent assignment for the Desire edition of Australia's RUSSH magazine. Stapleton painted Maryel Sousa (a premium model in high demand by Givenchy and Gucci) as a reclining nude, with scintillating tones evaporating in all corners of the canvas into such scorching hot reds that even Oil on Linen begins to sound seductive. The melodrama continues throughout her work as a head severed from its torso is served up on a Romanesque table



This page top:
Narelle Zeller;
Colleen in Blue

Left: Colleen
Stapleton in the
studio

Opposite:
Narelle Zeller's
Finalist work
Listening



strewn with tendrils of jasmine. The head bestows a distant gaze painted with supermodel quality makeup—perfect lips and sculpted brows—as the subject casually trails her abandoned masquerade mask. In a lemon-curd-meets-Stella-McCartney kind of affair, RUSSH makes a fashion statement out of opulence, blending collagen powders and other bronzers with soliloquies on folk singers and Burberry and Juneteenth. Presented in that context, contemporary realist portraiture of the calibre of Stapleton’s work steps alongside contemporary culture, retelling the narrative of advertising, romance and drama as high art, the way Annie Leibovitz reimagines photographic portraits into epic tales for Vanity Fair.

Stapleton paints her family – her beloved, her mother, her sister. Meanwhile her sister, Narelle Zeller, who is also a finalist, paints her son. It is the second time this year the sisters have been shown side by side as finalists in the same prize. “We have very different styles,” Stapleton says. “We grew up so closely, but our formative years as artists have been spent living apart from each other, developing our artistic practices. I have studied at Julian Ashton Art School, doing workshops in Canada, Italy and Australia, completing summer school in

Russia at the Repin Academy, which has had an enduring effect on the way that I paint. Narelle has done various mentorships with artists and is largely self-taught.”

Despite the stark contrasts in their journey, Canberra based Narelle Zeller’s work is equally as moving. For the Shirley Hannan, Zeller presents an engaging portrait of her son Tobias in a work entitled “Listen”. Lost in his music, his noise-reducing headphones form a barrier between his inner world and the world of the viewer. Tobias is an up-and-coming anime artist and self-confessed gamer, a boy highly engaged in the pursuits of his generation, at an age the artist says she sees as transitioning from childhood to adolescence. His mother presents his lengthy hair that has outgrown its style, framing his soft toned face and checked shirt with hands dutifully engaged in his gadget, with a gentle focus which she says invites the viewer to step into the story being told.

Zeller recently painted her sister Colleen Stapleton in a floral head piece designed by Canberra-based floral artist Amy Clement, creator of enchanted logs and other kinds of floral regalia - wedding bouquets and everlasting wreaths made from upcycled, reclaimed and recycled materials.



CS 10

Opposite page:
Colleen Stapleton, *Nellie in the Studio*
Below:
Narelle Zeller, *Bury Me With a Mandarin*
Left:
Colleen Stapleton *The Lady of Shalott*
(shortlisted in Darling Portrait Prize)



Zeller's *Bury Me With a Mandarin* is an exquisitely detailed portrait of a young girl looking out of shot, mandarin in hand, which took about 10 months to complete. A 1960s daisy motif takes up most of the canvas, which Zeller painstakingly created by spilling petals, one bloom at a time, until an entire field flooded the scene with orange—or mandarin—tones. The girl meanwhile casually looks out of the frame as though the fruit in her palm will never spoil and the crocheted poncho hugging her shoulders will never go out of style. The carefully rendered under-sketch of her sitter is painstakingly rendered. She is careful not to lose the fine quality of the under drawing which she uses as a reference map to block the colours in. Who is that girl? What is she looking at? Why is she holding that mandarin? The viewer may never know.

Twice featured by PoetsArtist—a Chicago based art gallery specialising in premier contemporary realism and figurative art, Narelle is happy to assume the role of either sitter or painter: "I really enjoy sitting for Colleen. It is interesting being on the other side. I know I'm in good hands with Colleen though and she doesn't disappoint! We are both representational in our painting, with different training influences and technique. Colleen's formal influences shine with her choice of colour and texture and a mix of direct and indirect approaches. I use more indirect techniques with layers and glazing and enjoy focusing on fine details."

They both paint, as Instagrammers will tell you, 'from the heart' – an astute observation for a medium known for frippery and froth. Both artists have thousands of Instagram followers, but rather than assuming the snobbery of vacuous influencers, the girls maintain a casual, approachable nature, and an authenticity in their online presence.

"Painting is a fulltime focus for us both," Zeller says. "We have always been close but sharing this journey in art is really special. I haven't seen the painting in the flesh yet and am looking forward to seeing it with her during the exhibition."

For the moment that plan will have to wait, as the outbreak of COVID-19 plays its role in all things 2020 including the story of this year's prize. The gallery quickly pivoted to some effective video stories of shortlisted entrants in the lead-up to opening night, which was kept to a minimal attendance, depriving the artists of the opportunity to meet and view each other's work.

Most were forced to stay away this year, including Western Australian entrant Mel Taylor. In a true moment of its time, her shortlisted entry *Owen* was featured in a framed video where the artist—in shot—interviews her subject, young Owen, who, in true Covid-style, is also in shot, under a self-portrait of the artist. The interview recounts a charming story of life in Kalgoorlie. Fronting up to a new school as Owen recently did is a challenge for anyone. Yet

for Owen, who has autism, the experience was especially confronting. On the first day he broke his leg. And then began the lockdowns and a series of trepidations which made it almost impossible for him to make friends. He has overcome the setbacks and moved from success to success, recently being accepted at John Curtain College of the Arts as a drama major where he will develop his own practice..

Finalist Matteo Bernasconi has kept his focus on the arts with his shortlisted portrait of Carl Vine, in a tribute to Vine's 20 years with Musica Viva. In this work Bernasconi tried invoke the space where music and art overlap. "I feel that this is a definition of my life!" Bernasconi says. "My partner works in music and is a dancer. Together we constantly create these overlaps in either her events, or my exhibitions." It was through this connection that he first met Carl Vine, whose music, he says, shifts accents, intervals and empty spaces in the same way an artist does. "The composer needs to shape every little aspect, light,



shade, colour, form. The space is an element which can be integrated into the composition to a degree - where space becomes the protagonist in the meaning of a work."

During the pandemic, Bernasconi shuttered his gallery Peach Black Gallery in Sydney, a space he dedicates to expanding contemporary creative conversations that embraces not just visual art, but music, dance, poetry and philosophy. "It's been heartbreaking," he says, "to watch things crumble around us. It has made a lot of people stop, reflect and turn to creative industries to help cope and make sense of these unprecedented times - whether it be through listening to music, meditation, dance, writing or even watching movies and Netflix. This is why I believe that the arts need more support. The arts and philosophy are our most powerful tools."

Bernasconi's greatest desire is to carve a space in our culture that values not just visual artists, but creative

thinkers, influencing future generations, from philosophers, to musicians to writers. "Art, philosophy and literature have been pillars of our culture for thousands of years, but recently we took a different path. It starts in school - the place of formation, where humanistic subjects are gradually decreased and supplanted by more technic-scientific subjects. We behave as though art, philosophy and literature are not essential."

Despite its restraint, realistic portraiture has the capacity to present a more lively take on modern life than a photo, which can at times capture in all its precision something of a lifeless moment. "I find a good portrait much more realistic than a photograph," Bernasconi says. "In painting you can depict a physical appearance but also something else of the subject, that's why a good painting is more realistic than

Below: Finalist Matteo Bernasconi's portrait of Carl Vine
Opposite: Bernasconi in his studio



photography. What our brain perceives is not only what the camera captures. If I show you a photo of me what do you understand about me? If I show you one of my self-portraits I think it would definitely say more about me." A great example of this, he says, is Picasso's Guernica. "How the war was captured is so much more realistic than the actual war photos. Even the greatest master painters sooner or later discovered that physical appearance wasn't the only goal to achieve. All the masters got more loose with the age."

Last year Bernasconi created the Winter Collective, a series of live music performances featuring dance and poetry from different cultures, with art exhibitions and artworks as backdrops, creating a dialogue between the audience and the artists in a similar vein to the Ballet Russes, when Diaghilev, Modigliani, Prokofiev, Picasso, Satie, Matisse and many others collaborated across artforms.

"Combining visual art and music is a powerful combination," he says. "Being able to live and breathe this every day with my partner is a dream come true." Bernasconi left Italy 15 years ago venturing first to London, Barcelona, Seville and Lisbon before visiting Australia for a six months holiday. On 14 July 2020, he became an Australian citizen.

Were it not for the readiness of artists to work and support each other, this year's Shirley Hannan winner, Cameron Richards would never have even entered.

A part-time artist and full-time physiotherapist, the prize announcement was broadcast by video link in the middle of Cameron's working afternoon in downtown Perth, three hours behind Eastern Standard Time. Immediately after the broadcast it was back to work, using his hands to interpret injured backs, necks and shoulders, buzzed by the stellar news that he had won the \$50,000 prize. While his hands did the thinking, the news gradually began to sink in.

Although he has been painting only a few years, Cameron has been drawing for most of his life, rendering every detail with precision. "Studying anatomy definitely gave me a strong technical background for painting," the artist says. "I've always drawn a lot, ever since I was little – everything from sea creatures to monsters." He drew the kids on the bus at high school, giving his sketches away, then graduated to drawing his friends. When considering career choices, he dropped the arts in favour of academic subjects, weighing up careers in graphic design and architecture before abandoning those ideas as he felt they would lead to very rigid expressions of creativity.

He was inspired to return to the visual arts after visiting his aunt, Andrea Brown, who is also an artist. "I remember seeing her studio set up at her house, with her paintings all up around her walls. I wanted to see my own paintings all over the walls in my rooms too."

Richards tends to mark his space up with a grid based on a photograph. At a certain point he must let the photographic inspiration go, as he brings out the impression he is looking for. For his winning entry, Miss Priya Premkumar, this involved sitting down at a café in Fremantle for a whole afternoon, photographing his subject until he managed to capture the look he was after. Priya is painted in a striped shirt, loosely unbuttoned in a casual yet busy manner, with her arms firmly pinned behind her back, looking straight at the viewer. Once Richards rendered the understudy, he tried to take away the smile she wore in the photo, to make her look a little more serious as he chased that first impression he had of her on the day they met. "She was the senior physician in my very first physiotherapy job, which I found a bit intimidating. She came across to me as a hardworking, powerful professional and a strong manager. That's the look I was after in the painting."

Once he blocked the background in, he realised the background was competing too vividly with the portrait. So he searched for a traditional Hindu designed tapestry pattern which could connect with Priya's family origins. Then he realised this would add another 3 or 4 months to painting time. As he stencilled in the colours, he found the purples really bounced well off the orange tones he used to achieve Priya's complexion. "It was a multistep trial and error approach until the background was formed. But then it was competing too much with Priya's face. So I thinned the layers and knocked the background back until the rug had a kind of cloudiness, with scratched markings, and that's how I arrived at that well-used-rug type of effect. I added a thin single strip of Australia's flag throughout which I thought worked in well with Priya's cultural struggle as a first generation Australian Sri Lankan Hindu and the way she integrates her Australian life with her parents' culture. Her mannerisms, her social life, her clothes, her accent is so Australian. But as soon as her family have a traditional





celebration, she becomes a part of that culture as well.' The 120cm x120cm acrylic on canvas is being gifted to Priya's family.

In another instance of artists supporting artists, Rose Wilson was selected as one of 35 finalists from over 1200 entrants

This page: Finalist Mel Taylor with her portrait of Owen
Opposite:
Rose Wilson and her portrait from the *Disappearing Farm* series.



in the 2019 Doug Moran Portrait Prize. She began her portrait of silversmiths the Flynn Brothers but a house fire prevented her from finishing the work. Rediscovering the work stored on her racks a decade later, Rose decided to ask fellow portrait artist Daniel Butterworth whether she should abandon or complete it. His response was to finish it. Without that prompt, the work would never have been shortlisted by the prestigious Moran prize.

Wilson describes herself as being very tactile, using her hands quite a lot with paint straight from the tube. But during the Covid pandemic, she felt something shift. Like many artists, she says, the break away from all of life's usual

outings to galleries, visiting people and places seemed to promise a great moment for creative endeavour. Instead, the angst of the moment made it harder than ever to create. So she turned her attention to changing her technique, coming up with a portrait of *The Stonemason*. This painting of her friend Tom uses a lot more colour than her often darker, more subdued palette, and less direct application of paint. The result is a shift in direction that has produced a portrait that is refreshingly animated and captures Tom's lively personality, a sharp departure from the dystopian images in her earlier *Disappearing Farm* series, which depict life and hard times in rural Australia.

Elizabeth Walton



Njindiwaan. Ngayaga bundj nguumbun muladha gumara muruul yuwinj wanggan njin dhugandha.

We recognise Aboriginal peoples as the first people and custodians of Country where this exhibition is held, and acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters - the people of the Yuin Nation - and pay respect to Elders past present and emerging, of the lands.

**Bega Valley Regional Gallery Monday to Friday 10-4 Free entry
Exhibition to 11 September 2020.**

