

O B S E R V A N C E



**BUXTON
CONTEMP
ORARY**

Karla Dickens
Julie Dowling
Julie Gough
Lisa Hilli
Betty Muffler
Angela Tiatia

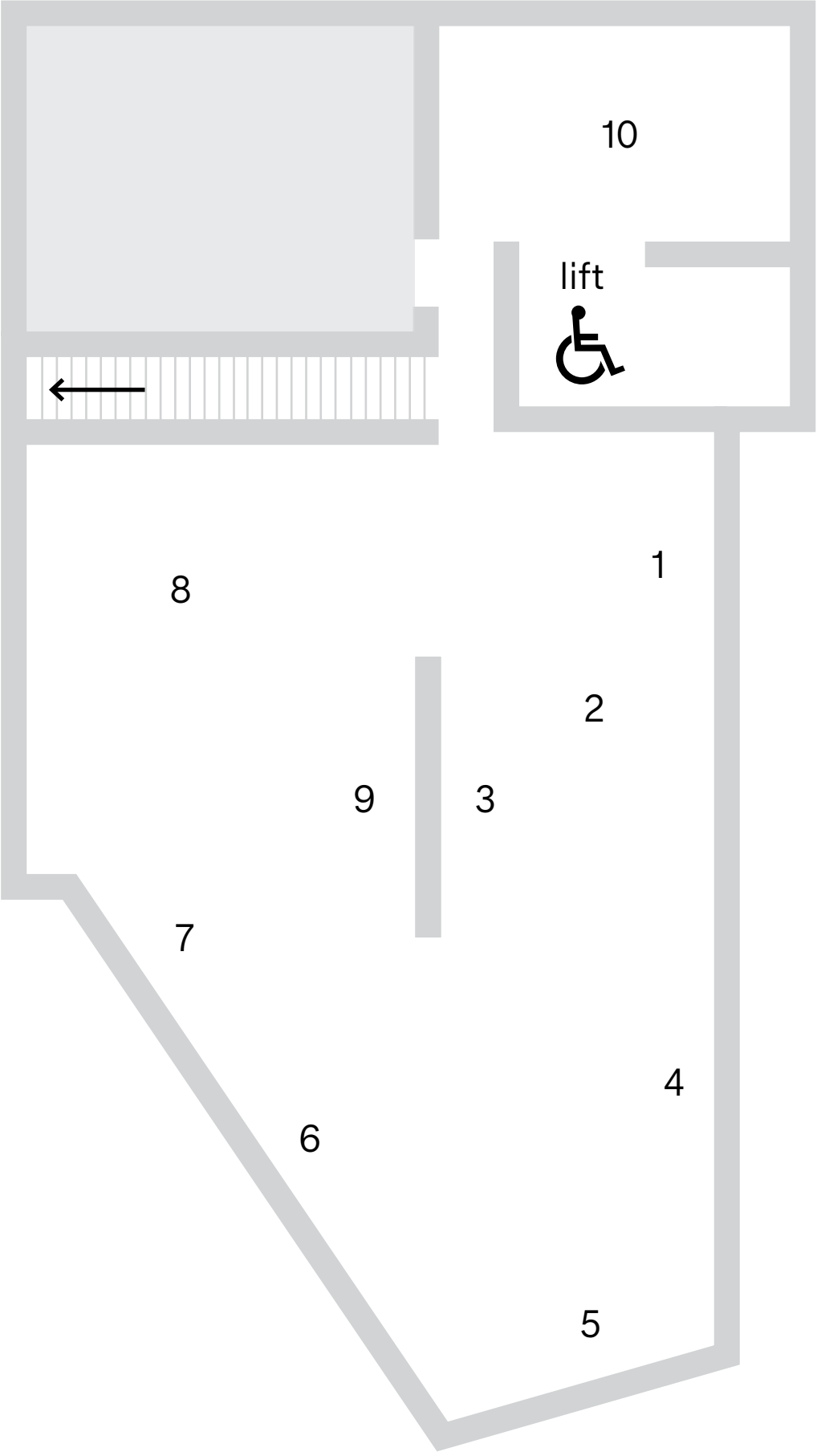
Main exhibition wall text

Observance brings together six First Nations women with strong culturally led practices. Offering a selection of works that delve into the ongoing impacts of colonial violence, artists share their experiences of generational grief for family, language and Country. These challenging narratives, including accounts of slavery and servitude, sit alongside empowering works that reveal living, breathing connections to culture that have been maintained throughout all time.

The act of observing requires a commitment to recognise and honour what is viewed, to look deeply at the works and consider our shared histories and responsibilities. Through videos, paintings, sculptural installations and text-based works, *Observance* directly challenges skewed historical narratives that have endured, asking audiences to acknowledge their own role in these unresolved histories.

Curated by Hannah Presley and Samantha Comte.

First Floor Floorplan



Lisa Hilli

Gunantuna (Tolai) people

born Rabaul 1979; lives and works in Melbourne

Material Histories #1 2015

colour digital video, sound

1 min 47 secs

Collection of the artist, Melbourne

Lisa Hilli is an artist who uses storytelling to explore and interpret Melanesian histories. Her practice focuses on gender and body politics, adornment, matrilineality, and Indigenous and colonial histories. Hilli uses photography, film and installation to focus on interrogating the way Papua Niuginian women are represented in contemporary society.

This multi-layered film work examines the history of trade in Papua New Guinea, revealing the way textiles were used to communicate at the time of first contact between would be trading partners. Hilli references the practice of the first anthropologist to visit PNG, Russian Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay who threw red cloth into the sea to announce his approach. This practice was subsequently adopted by sea merchants and colonists. The conch shell was also used to communicate across distances and the sound of the conch in this work acts as a warning, adding to the sense of foreboding.

Lisa Hilli

Gunantuna (Tolai) people

born Rabaul 1979; lives and works in Melbourne

Value Systems 2018

mixed media installation, glass beads, nylon coated wire, Deutsche mark, British Papua schillings, Papua New Guinea Kina coins, stone crosses, photo locket, archival photographs

Collection of the artist, Melbourne

Through this work, Hilli unpacks the complexities hidden within the trade practices of her homelands. Made up of long strands of hand threaded glass beads, this work references body adornments made by Tolai women. The glass beads were once used for trade with colonisers and sea merchants in the late 1800s, encompassing the colonial and religious histories of her ancestors.

The intricately beaded threads are suspended from a grid that reflects Hilli's ancestral lands, grounding the work as the long wisps of beads speak to the distance goods travelled across the seas via trading routes. The suspended threads also make reference to the red tips that appear on the aerial hanging roots of a plant significant to her matrilineal connection to the lands in Rabaul. Through this work, Hilli explores the transformation of the beads through the hostile era of the 1800s as they took on their own language which was held and understood by all.

Lisa Hilli

Gunantuna (Tolai) people

born Rabaul 1979; lives and works in Melbourne

A Niaring Kai Kada Luluai (The Lord's Prayer) 2018

vinyl text transcribed from photograph by

Reverend R. H. Rickard

Image courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library NSW and Uniting Church in Australia – Assembly (Reference ON 305/552)

Collection of the artist, Melbourne

Through this work, Hilli poses the question, is it even possible to accurately transcribe oral languages, particularly when led by a non-language speaker? Referring directly to the inadequacies of this practice, Hilli shares a translation of the Lord's Prayer, as transcribed by Australian Methodist Missionary Rev. Rickard in the 1880s. Within this lack-lustre translation, Hilli draws attention to the use of the word Luluai, which in her language of Tinata Tuna (the Real Language) means 'fight warrior' or "fight leader'. In this translation of the Lord's Prayer, we see the word Lulai transcribed into the word for 'God'.

Hilli's language was also transcribed with a grammatical lens developed by the Methodist missionaries in Fiji, where they had been previous to their arrival in Papua New Guinea. When first translations were made in many colonial

settlements around the world, the complexities of the regional dialects developed over time were often streamlined to create one language which also reflected the morals and values of the transcribers.

Angela Tiatia

Samoan

born Auckland 1973; lives and works in Sydney

Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis 2010

colour digital video, 16:9, silent

1 min 31 sec

Collection of the artist, Sydney

Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf
Gallery, Sydney

Angela Tiatia explores contemporary culture, drawing attention to its relationship to representation, gender, neo-colonialism and the commodification of the body and place, often through the lenses of history and popular culture. This work was inspired by a sonnet written by Mexican poet Enrique González Martínez in 1911 who implored his readers to reject the objectification of Pacific women in European modernism. In the film, the viewer is led through a lush environment of tropical greenery to find Tiatia, who holds a hibiscus flower in her mouth. The hibiscus is an icon of the Pacific that has been used to perpetuate false narratives about Pacific women. The action of Tiatia eating the hibiscus shows her overtly rejecting these Western constructs, smashing ideas of the exotic and sexualised Polynesian woman. *Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis* is unapologetic and empowering, as Tiatia takes back ownership of her body and the identity of the iconic hibiscus.

Betty Muffler

Pitjantjatjara

born Watarru 1944; lives and works in Indulkana in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands

Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country) 2021

Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country) 2021

synthetic polymer paint on linen

Collection of the artist, Indulkana

Courtesy of the artist, Iwantja Arts, SA and

Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne

Betty Muffler is a respected senior woman and leading artist in her community of Indulkana on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in South Australia. Muffler is also a gifted ngangkari (traditional healer) and it is her story of healing that we see illustrated in this pair of intricately painted canvases. The delicate, labyrinth of lines conceptually maps healing sites and travelling routes across Muffler's ancestral lands.

Muffler is a survivor of the atomic bomb testing by the British at Maralinga and Emu Junction who has experienced loss of family and witnessed the destruction of sites of spiritual power on Country. With a palette that reflects the soft light of Muffler's desert Country, we are offered a glimpse into her complex lived experiences and the cultural knowledge that has been handed down to her through generations.

Julie Dowling

Badimaya

born Subiaco 1969; lives and works in Perth

*The Elements: O-thero (Earth) 2008**The Elements: Windhoo (Air) 2008**The Elements: Ow'wa (Water) 2008**The Elements: Wajjanoo (Fire) 2008*

synthetic polymer paint and ochre on canvas

The University of Melbourne Art Collection

Michael Buxton Collection

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Michael and Janet Buxton 2018

Julie Dowling's practice addresses the complexities of history, memory, politics and trauma. Her paintings acknowledge diverse artistic traditions while bringing her own unique approach to portrait painting, by capturing the hidden and untold stories of injustice and discrimination experienced by this country's First Peoples. Julie Dowling's work is both personal and political and her portraits bear witness to her family's intergenerational experiences of racism and dispossession which extend to First Peoples across Australia.

The four works in this exhibition were made in response to the 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations. Exhibited as part of a solo exhibition titled *Eegarra*

Bearaba (To arise from Sorrow), these portraits of Aboriginal women express profound loss and sadness and celebrate their sense of belonging and resilience. Embodying the classical elements of fire, wind, water and air, each of the women is portrayed with colours and designs that connect them to their Country and share their ancient and ongoing ties to the land and waters.

Karla Dickens

Wiradjuri

born Sydney 1967; lives and works in Lismore

Songs of Sorrow I 2015*Songs of Sorrow II* 2015

mixed media

Collection of the artist, Lismore

Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf
Gallery, Sydney

Songs of Sorrow is part of a body of work that explores domestic violence, which Karla Dickens created during an Asialink Residency between Australia (Alice Springs) and Indonesia (Yogyakarta). As part of the residency, Dickens worked with Tjanpi Desert Weavers, a communal arts enterprise of the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council, as they came together to create *Kungkarangkalpa (Seven Sisters)*, out of tjanpi (spinifex grass). This ancestral story follows the journey of seven sisters as they are pursued across Country by Wati Nyiru/ Yurla, (a lecherous, shape-shifting man), who desires to make the eldest sister his wife, in contravention of Aboriginal law.

In Yogyakarta, Dickens was told a version of this story in which the seven sisters are angels who come to earth to be with one sister who has been abducted by an adoring male. Deeply affected by these stories of

the abuse of women embedded in both cultures and frustrated by the lack of focus on domestic violence, Dickens created a powerful body of work that included *Songs of Sorrow*.

Karla Dickens

Wiradjuri

born Sydney 1967; lives and works in Lismore

Workhorse V 2018*Workhorse IV (No Map of Tassie)* 2018*Workhorse III* 2015

mixed media

Collection of the artist, Lismore

Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf Gallery,
Sydney

Karla Dickens is a fierce advocate for First Peoples whose works are often bold and provocative as she addresses the historical and contemporary injustices suffered by women of colour. The *Workhorse* series is guided by the artist's personal histories, illustrating the transgenerational trauma connected to the many Aboriginal girls stolen from their families and forced into indentured servitude. In most cases, these young girls found themselves working as labourers on stock farms and as domestic servants in colonial households.

Horse harnesses, wooden spikes and forged steel are assembled to evoke the experiences of forced labour and obedience, likening the lived experiences of the Aboriginal girls to those of the stock animals themselves. *Workhorse* is a potent disclosure of the horrors experienced by these young girls and a reminder of their

contribution to the early economy and the wealth accumulated through farming in this country.

Julie Gough

Trawlwoolway

born Melbourne 1965; lives and works in Hobart

OBSERVANCE 2010colour digital video projection, 16:9, sound
edition 3/10

17 min 9 sec

edited by Jemma Rea

The University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Gift of Gabriella Roy donated through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program,
2021

Through the lens of her own ancestral history, Gough encourages non-Indigenous audiences to consider their continuing roles in, and proximity to, unresolved narratives of memory, time, absence, location and representation.

'Observance is about trespass. The film was made over four visits when I camped at Tebrikunna, my maternal Country in north Tasmania. It is a meditation about history, memory and ancestry set amid the ongoing globalisation of my ancestral coastlands. The film is my frustrated response in trying to get back to the essence of things, while being constantly interrupted by groups of intruding eco-tourists. Taking up the region for their continuous walks they remind and re-enact

the original invasion of our Country. Witnessing their arrival, avoiding contact, I feel a multi-generational anxiety of knowing what happens next in the parallel world of that same place not so long ago.'

—Julie Gough, 2012

Julie Gough

Trawlwoolway

born Melbourne 1965; lives and works in Hobart

Missing or Dead 2019–21

2019: 185 printed posters, ink on rag

photographique paper

designed in collaboration with Margaret Woodward

2021: posters with table, glass, pillow, video

edited by Jemma Rea

Courtesy of the artist

Missing or Dead is an ephemeral memorial to one hundred and eighty-five Tasmanian Aboriginal children stolen or lost during the early years of the colony. In this new expanded iteration of the 2019 work of the same title, we again see the posters of the missing children Gough has uncovered in her research. The artist has repositioned the posters from their earlier configuration, tacked to trees throughout the Queens Domain Forest in Hobart and presented them in a stack, atop a pillow that reveals the silhouette of only one child. Placed under a protective layer of glass, Gough references museum practices and the many archives that lay dormant, highlighting the unresolved nature of our history.

Missing or Dead shows Gough's ability to continuously move between the interior and exterior, the present and the past, reflecting Gough's ongoing interest in how we understand what lies hidden in our unsettling history to make sense of the world.