

**BUXTON
CONTEMP
ORARY**

CARING



FOR

**CONTEMP
ORARY ART**

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE ART COLLECTION
& BUXTON CONTEMPORARY

Part of the University of
Melbourne's Museums
and Collections



ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Caring for Contemporary Art outlines key conservation, curatorial, exhibition design and staffing considerations required to care for and present contemporary artworks from the University of Melbourne Art Collection, including the Michael Buxton Collection, at Buxton Contemporary.

This resource links to the VCE Art Making and Exhibiting Study Design, particularly:

Unit 2: Understand, develop and resolve, Area of Study 1, Outcome 1

Unit 3: Collect, extend and connect, Area of Study 3, Outcome 3

Unit 4: Consolidate, present and conserve, Area of Study 3, Outcome 3

Students and teachers may use this resource in conjunction with a visit to Buxton Contemporary, as well as other exhibition-focussed VCE Art Making and Exhibiting Resources.

Cover page image caption:
Yona Lee
Upper-floor composition,
2024 (detail)
stainless steel, objects
Commissioned by the
University of Melbourne,
2024. Photography by
Christian Capurro.

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MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

The University of Melbourne is home to over 15 museums and galleries and over 30 individual collections, all of which play an intrinsic role in campus life, including teaching and learning, research, and student engagement. These cultural assets provide students, staff, and local and global communities the opportunity to gain knowledge, leading to an understanding of contemporary and traditional cultures, scientific discovery and creative practice.

Fender Katsalidis
Architects Buxton Big
Screen, digital screen,
2018. Featuring: Kate
Mitchell In Time, high
definition digital video,
colour, 16:9, silent, 24
hours, 2015. Photograph:
James Geer.



University Art Collection

The most significant art collection is the University of Melbourne Art Collection, which is the largest University art collection in Australia comprising around 18,000 works. The collection includes major holdings of paintings, prints and drawings, ceramics, and sculpture - including contemporary Australian Art, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art.

Michael Buxton Collection

Within the University Art Collection are a number of significant named collections, including the Michael Buxton Collection. The Buxton Collection consists of 300 works of contemporary Australian art by 53 significant artists. Donated to the University by Michael Buxton, a passionate art collector, the Buxton Collection forms a significant part of the University's Art Collection and since 2018 has been housed in a purpose-built museum. The Collection hones in on individual artists' work in depth, across media, and over time. [Explore the collection database.](#)

The Buxton Contemporary Art Museum was designed by Fender Katsalidis and is located University of Melbourne's art school, the Victorian College of the Arts. The museum is comprised of four public exhibition galleries, teaching facilities, and the largest outdoor screen in Australia dedicated to the display of moving image art.

Nadine Christensen

*Stained glass and
hideouts 2009,*
acrylic on board
The University of
Melbourne Art Collection
Michael Buxton
Collection
Donated through the
Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by
Michael and
Janet Buxton 2018

Teaching and Learning

The University’s significant cultural assets play an intrinsic role in teaching and learning, research and student engagement.

Buxton Contemporary provides staff, students, and the broader community the opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding of contemporary art, culture, and creative practice.

The Academic Engagement team develop and deliver transformative learning and research opportunities for tertiary students.

The Learning Experiences team provide curriculum-aligned Exhibition Visits, Tours, and Workshops to secondary students to spark artistic enquiry and fostering the development of transferable 21st Century skills.

Installation view of Peter Tyndall, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023. Photography by Christian Capurro. Buxton Contemporary, Photography by Christian Capurro



Pathways

The Museums and Collections department at the University of Melbourne is made of multiple teams of staff, some of which are responsible for the presentation and conservation of collections and exhibitions at Buxton Contemporary:

Collections

- Collections Managers
- Registrars
- Conservators

Art Museums

- Curators
- Assistant Curators
- Curatorial Interns

Exhibitions Management

- Exhibition Project Managers,
- Exhibition Designers
- Lighting Technicians
- Artwork Installers

Visitor Services

- Audience Engagement Coordinators
- Gallery Invigilators

Learning Experiences

- Learning and Outreach Manager
- Learning Officer
- Learning Experience Facilitators

Curator Jacqueline Doughty at Susan Jacobs: The Ants are in the Idiom, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 July – 6 November 2022 with Susan Jacobs, Hindsight 20/20 2022, photography Christian Capurro, courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne.

CARING FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

What is Contemporary Art?

Over time, definitions of contemporary art have shifted in response to its complexity and ever-evolving nature. While some define contemporary art as work made by living artists, others have sought to connect a definition to historical events, such as the advent of the World Wide Web in 1989.¹

The scope of contemporary art is boundless, and therefore difficult to categorise and define. As a result, artists, curators, and art institutions are tasked with constantly renegotiating and redefining the attributes that make contemporary art unique and distinguishable.

Contemporary art can be produced in any and all mediums. It may be presented conventionally in galleries and museums, outdoors in public space, or in digital and virtual spaces. It can combine multiple mediums like painting and video (multi-disciplinary) and can be made in collaboration with others from different disciplines, such as musicians or engineers (interdisciplinary). Contemporary artists can work in ways that seamlessly merge ideas and techniques from multiple disciplines, like Artificial Intelligence and poetry with installation (transdisciplinary). Some artists may even reject the idea of disciplines all together (anti-disciplinary), and chose to define their practice on their own terms.

Despite its ability to evade absolute definitions, contemporary art consistently acts as a mirror to reflect current social, political, cultural and artistic issues and events, which can concern not only the present day, but also the past and even the future.

Contemporary art is as rich and varied as the many intersections of society. The work can be concerned with activism, community groups or representing marginalised voices. It can be playful, funny and resourceful, and can help us to find meaning in the world around us.



Contemporary art materials

The twentieth century saw artists stepping away from tradition and experimenting with new and unexpected materials. Everyday objects, textiles, industrial substances, natural phenomena and digital media were incorporated into art. Items such as foams, plastics, adhesives and industrial materials became more widely available and were used by artists as: a cost-effective solution, a source of inspiration, or a product to conceptualise their work with. This advancement with technology and materials has also meant that artists can often work at scale and with ambition to create artworks that traditionally haven't been able to be made.

As these new materials don't have long lifespans, the materiality of contemporary art poses many questions for conservators, collection managers and registrars alike. Our industry has long based its standards around the traditional mediums of works on paper, paintings and objects made of stone, metals and wood, so, what do we do to care for artworks that consist of new materials such as industrial paints, plastics and digital media? Museum professionals take into account scholarly research to utilise tailored approaches to each type of material and its unique applications. Additionally, when possible, museum professionals work with the artist to get to know their art making processes.

Installation view of *nightshifts*, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023. Featuring Lisa Sammut, *Full circle (ii)* 2023 and *How the earth will approach you* 2023. Photography by Christian Capurro.



Inherent Vice

Inherent vice is a term that is often used when considering the conservation of contemporary art. If a work has an 'inherent vice', this means that an artwork is, one day, bound to deteriorate or be defective due to the use of impermanent or incompatible materials, the work's structural failure or the history of the object. This also refers to digital and analogue materials, such as VHS, DVDs and tapes, which have short lifespans.

Most materials will, eventually, deteriorate. Conservation and preservation practices can help to delay and prevent this, such as proper storage and handling.

For digital works, digitisation and documentation are integral to ensuring audio and video components are able to be displayed as the artist intended

Every artwork with 'inherent vice' is treated on a case-by-case basis by Collections staff. At Buxton Contemporary, we work with our colleagues to pack, document, store and, when required, repair the artworks in the collection to ensure they can be viewed and exhibited into the future.



Do you think this work by Constance Zikos has inherent vice? What conservation issues could it face?

Hint: consider the material and support used to make this work, laminex and board.

Constance Zikos

Intercity 4, 2000
laminex on board
Michael Buxton
Collection, the University
of Melbourne Art
Collection. Donated
through the Australian
Government's Cultural
Gifts Program by Michael
and Janet Buxton, 2018



Case Study

At Buxton Contemporary, our Art Collection contains artworks made in the 1980s through to current day. Artworks in our collection are great examples of the complexities of caring for contemporary art, with many artworks made of unique and complicated materials, such as this installation, *Taking a Chance on Love* (2003), by Louise Weaver:

This artwork is made from a variety of natural and synthetic materials and objects, including wood, crocheted cotton and lamb's wool, a designer chair, repurposed materials like "polyester flowers[...] recouped from Issey Miyake evening bag", and immaterial components such as the lighting and sound recording. The physical parts of the artwork are packed with archival materials in travel crates and the sound recording file is stored both in digital format (on a dedicated network server) and in the original form the artist provided it in, ie. USB, hard-drive or a physical disc. There is also an installation manual to show how to put the work together correctly



Louise Weaver

Taking a Chance on Love,
2003
high density foam, hand
crocheted cotton and
lamb's wool, linen, silk,
polyester, glass, rubber,
plastic, acetate, aluminium,
silver leaf, acrylic paint,
wood, stone, polyester
flowers cut and sealed
with high frequency sound
waves (recouped from
Issey Miyake evening bag),
Eclipse lamp designed
by Vico Magistretti, The
Espresso chair designed by
Brian Steendyk, light sound
recording
500 x 365 x 205 cm
Michael Buxton Collection,
the University of Melbourne
Art Collection. Donated
through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts
Program by Michael and
Janet Buxton, 2018



Do you remember seeing an artwork that was made of an interesting material? How do you think the material was sourced and cared for? Did the material contribute to the way you understood the artwork?



Yona Lee
Upper-floor composition,
 2024 (detail)
 stainless steel, objects
 Commissioned by the
 University of Melbourne,
 2024. Photography by
 Christian Capurro.

Site specificity, time-based media and complex installations

Contemporary artworks that include video, film, slide, audio, performance or computer technologies are referred to as time-based media works because they have duration as a dimension and unfold to the viewer over time. Collecting, preserving, and exhibiting these artworks poses complex technical and ethical challenges to conservators. Instability and change are inherent to these artworks, since the original artist-selected equipment and technologies may fail and become obsolete.

Digital works are assessed and stored in multiple different formats and locations to safe-proof them against digital file corruption. Certain technologies important to the functioning of an artwork, such as specific screens or projectors, are often sourced in multiples as backups or descriptions of alternative items are given by the artist (such as screen size, output resolution, aesthetic characteristics).

Installation works are also complex to care for in Collections as they frequently combine a variety of materials, digital media and are often large in scale. Moreover, installation works are often designed for a specific space, gallery type or environment. To make sure these artworks can be cared for and exhibited in the future, Collections staff and Conservators work to create installation plans, inventories, iteration reports and condition assessments of these works.



Imagine a large installation artwork you have seen recently. How will this be shown in 25 years? Will they use the same technology? How will the gallery staff know how to install the artwork?

CARING FOR THE COLLECTION

Conservation Principles

Conservation standards are set by international conservation principles and professional organisations, such as the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM). The AICCM's 'Best practice' standards include information on 'preventative conservation', the '10 agents of deterioration' and 'conservation treatments'.²

Preventative conservation

Preventative conservation is the practice of safeguarding the items you have in your care against damage and deterioration, and planning the future safekeeping of the artworks. It begins the moment you accept an object into your collection. It is achieved by practicing effective control of your building's environment (both storage and display), and safe handling and display techniques.

Our considerations include:

- Environmental control and monitoring: Relative Humidity, Temperature, Pest Control, Managing light and UV exposure
- Safe storage: permanent and temporary
- Disaster preparedness: floods and fire, and theft
- Packing and transport

The 10 agents of deterioration

There are ten main risks to the change in artwork condition or damage: temperature, humidity, pests, light, fire, water, security, loss, physical forces, disassociation (data management).

For exhibitions, we work with a team to prepare gallery spaces with appropriate environmental and safety measures for art display (temperature, humidity, pests, light, fire, water, security/loss).

For installation, we utilise mounts, cases, plinths for security (physical forces/loss). We also practice good record management (disassociation).

For both collections and exhibition displays, we aim for the condition of the work not to change through preventative measures. We record the work's condition through a Condition Report and use appropriate handling, storage, installation and staff training to prevent changes in artwork condition while handling and installing artworks.



Collections staff conduct a condition report of paintings by Tony Clark. The works are placed on foam blocks on an A-frame trolley, and an iPad is used to take photographs for the report.

Condition Reports

A condition report documents the details of the work, and the location of any deterioration, damage or previous repairs. Photographs are an important accompaniment to condition reporting and should include close ups, all sides, and detailed records of any damage.

To achieve this, condition reports and inventories are completed by the Collection Managers and Conservators to ensure the artworks are recorded accurately before they are displayed.

If damage is found, a Conservator is consulted about treatment and repair.



To glove or not to glove? [Watch this video by The British Museum](#) to learn more about conservation and object handling.

“There are actually no set rules [...] The conservator makes a decision about when to wear gloves depending on the nature of the task and the nature and fragility of the object” - Dr Duygu Camurcuoglu, Conservator, The British Museum³



Conservation treatments

If a work is damaged, we will assess the damage and ask a conservation lab to assist with repairing the artwork. Conservators work in conservation labs to clean, document, restore and repair artworks. The process to repair a damage will vary depending on the condition and materiality of the work, as well as the artist's intent. Conservators will prepare a lot of research on the artwork's materials to plan the best approach before beginning a treatment. There are different types of conservators for different material specialities. Most commonly, paper, paintings, objects, textiles, and frames/furniture. In recent years, time-based media conservators have become a new stream of conservation practice.

Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, street view, located on the University of Melbourne Parkville campus.



Did you know that the University of Melbourne is home to the [Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation](#)? It is the only centre of its kind in Australia, and is renowned for combining the theory and practice of cultural materials conservation to deliver conservation research, education, and services.



Permanent Storage

Artworks acquired into the University Art Collection are stored in dedicated artwork storage facilities that have climate-control, air locks and high security measures.

Collection items are stored 18-21 Celsius with a relative humidity of 45-55%. Air locks are areas that protect the climate-controlled area from the external environment. High security measures include ensuring locations of collection storage are classified, entrance and sensory alarms, and limited staff access.

Storage types include painting racks, floor storage for crates, large racking for medium sized objects, trolleys for small 2D works, plan drawers for works on paper.

The specific location of each stored item is kept on our Collection Management System, a process that ensures artworks can be found again.

Collections use specific archival materials that are chemically 'inert' (definition: chemically inactive) when storing artworks. Objects are packed in a bespoke manner, with packing solutions designed for each object's shapes, requirements and condition concerns.

Image taken inside one of the University of Melbourne's collection stores. Artworks are kept in crates, stillages (open-formed crates), and 2D racks. The store is fitted with pest monitoring equipment.



Temporary Storage

Exhibitions at Buxton Contemporary often include artworks from the broader University Art Collection, other institutions, private lenders or directly from artists. We store these artworks temporarily on-site at the gallery in a purpose-built storage area, which has climate-control and high security measures. Works are often packed in bubble-wrap, archival materials, transit tubs, and specialty crates, depending on the method of travel to the gallery.

Images taken inside the Buxton Contemporary collection store. Artworks are unpacked and transported using: tables, A-frame trolleys, plastic tubs, and small object trolleys.



Transport

Collections Managers and Registrars oversee the freight of artworks for acquisition and exhibitions. While digital artworks can be sent via secure transfer services, specialised art freight logistic companies are contracted to help us collect and move physical works from all over the world to the gallery in a safe manner. Depending on the size and situation, we either use crates, stillages (structures used for separating artworks), or soft packing to move the works safely and protect it from damage.

Large works are often transported in parts by truck, plane and by sea, and must be reassembled once at the gallery. Sometimes, very specific transport methods are required for large works, such as specific truck types and handling equipment. In Collections, we consider the entire movement of the work from the moment it's removed from its original location through to its final placement in the store/gallery. For extra-large works, such as Nadine Christensen's yellow car sculpture titled *Do We Go Around Houses or Do Houses Go Around Us* (2021-2023), additional logistical planning is involved, including checking weights and measuring lifts, doorways, corridors and ceilings before we can confirm the trip is safe and possible.



Installation view of Nadine Christensen: *Around*, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023. Featuring Nadine Christensen, *Do We Go Around Houses or Do Houses Go Around Us* (2021-2023). Photography by Christian Capurro.

The Collections Manager coordinated the logistics of transporting this work from the artist's studio to Buxton Contemporary by liaising with the transport company and arranging a special transport vehicle.



Art handling staff transport a painting by Nadine Christensen during exhibition installation. The staff use an A-frame trolley to move the work from the store. They use gloves to handle the work, and place it onto foam blocks positioned where the artwork is to be hung.

Handling and installation

Specialist staff and equipment are used to transport and install artworks.

Collection Managers and Registrars are responsible for assessing and mitigating possible risks to artworks and people when handling the artworks. Before moving artworks, they coordinate a plan to ensure the right number of trained staff are present and that risk mitigation strategies are implemented, such as planning walking routes without obstacles such as stairs, or using trolleys to move fragile objects.

Collections Managers oversee the installation process to ensure artworks are installed safely and that safe conditions don't change.

Collections staff also prepare condition reports before transportation and after receiving the works on-site at the gallery. Up to date condition reports are essential for insurance purposes.

Art handlers are trained to work with all types of artworks, and while some have specialties, they all aim to carefully move artwork from one place to another without causing damage.

Art handlers require skills such as: communication and teamwork, focus, manual dexterity, spatial reasoning, and basic math skills.⁴

Depending on the object, Art Handlers utilise a variety of equipment to move, handle and install artworks, including: four-wheeled dolly trolley, pallet jacks, flatbed trolleys, A-frame trolleys, small-object carts, ladders, elevated work platforms (scissor lifts), levels, tape measures, hammers, screwdrivers, box cutters, pliers, socket wrenches, drills, gloves, and foam blocks.



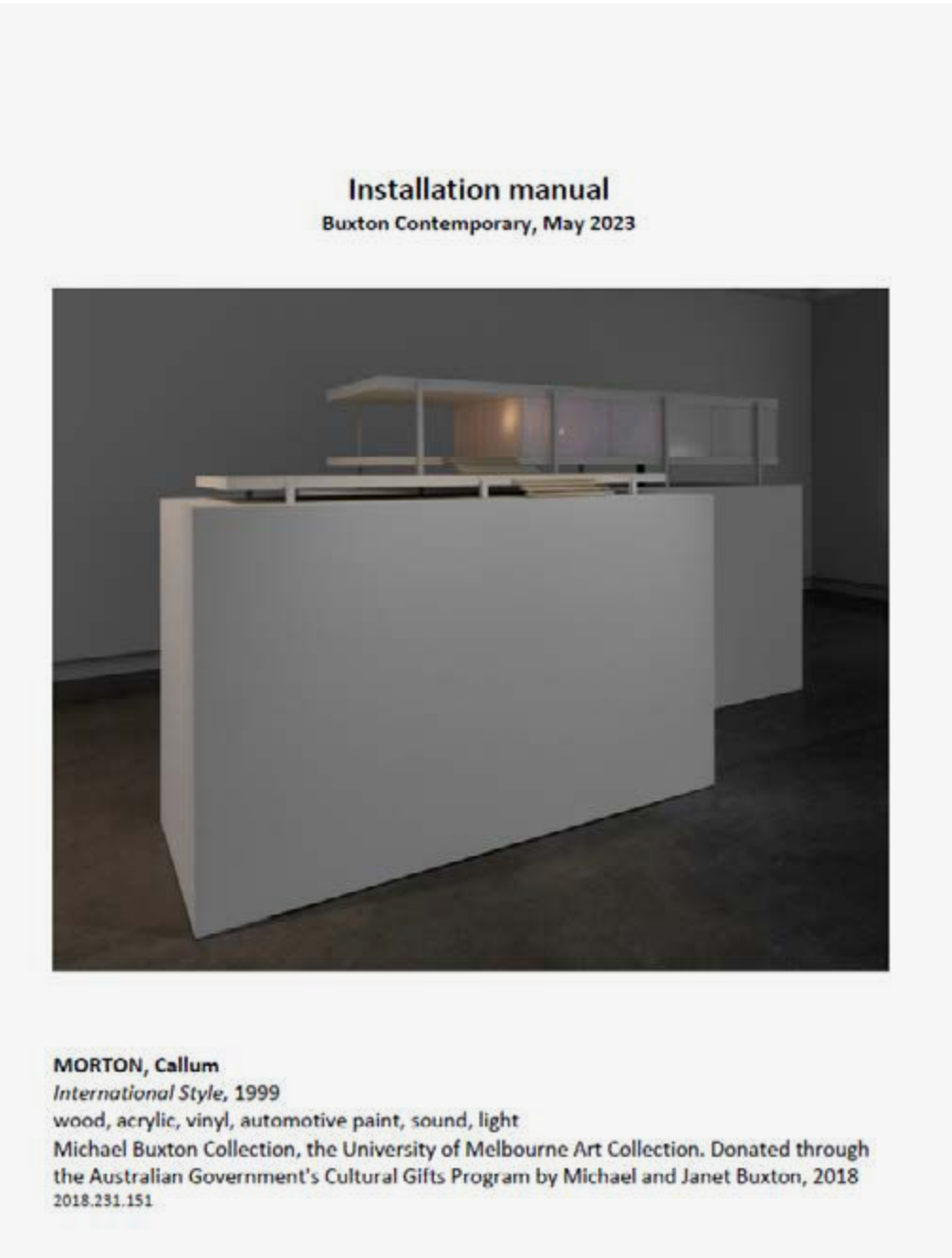
[Learn more about Art Handling](#) by downloading this resource created by The Broad, a contemporary art gallery in Los Angeles (USA).

Documentation for complex artworks

Collection Managers and Conservators, in combination with the Artist Questionnaire (see next page), create specific documentation for future displays of the artwork. These documents explain how the artwork should look, the requirements of the gallery space, what materials or technology would be needed for installation, how to complete an installation step-by-step and consider the future planning for the long-term care of the work.

These documents are referred to as:

- Identity report: What is the work?
- Installation manual: How is the work installed and what is required?
- Iteration report: Specific to a unique presentation of the artwork. What happened, what worked, what changed?



Installation manual for Callum Morton, *International Style*, 1999 wood, acrylic, vinyl, automotive paint, sound, light Michael Buxton Collection, the University of Melbourne Art Collection. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Michael and Janet Buxton, 2018 2018.231.151



Artistic intent and artist interviews

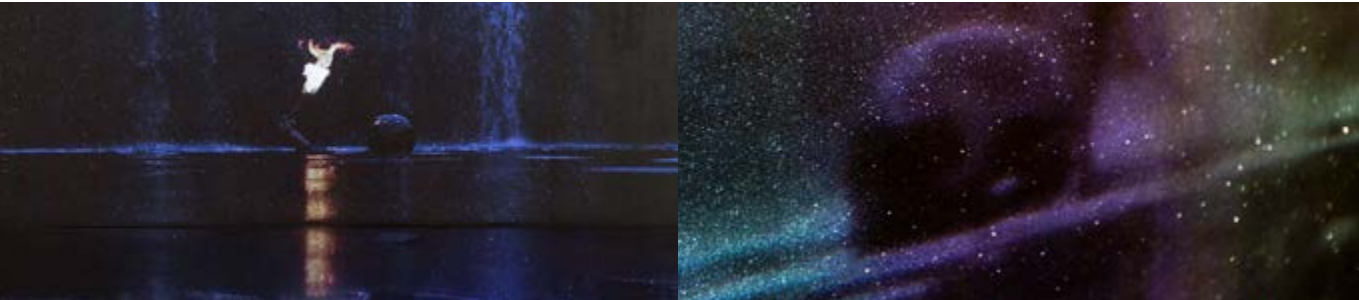
One of the many benefits of working with contemporary artists is that exhibition and collection teams are able to learn directly from the artist about their intentions for the display and care of their work.

The best conservation outcomes are achieved when we work with artists directly and learn about their practice; it is our best method of documenting and preserving complex contemporary art for the future.

Collections Managers and Time-Based Media Conservators conduct thorough interviews with the artists to discuss the details of the work and its future care.

During the interview process, the team documents the artist's intent and plans for the work's future displays, long term preservation and recording of the work's concept. This is especially important when there are particular display methods and technologies, such as TV screens, projectors or exhibition furnitures.

The unique display requirements for *Shaun Gladwell's Maximus Swept out to Sea* (Wattamolla) 2013, for *nightshifts*, provide an example of how artistic intent is carried forward for video works in exhibitions. This video work is displayed on a large temporary screen made of wood, covered in multiple layers of glitter paint. Gladwell's instruction for this artwork is that the glitter should be so thick that it almost crumbles off the screen, to ensure the video projection glimmers and sparkles, an effect that can be seen reflected on the polished concrete of the gallery. Gladwell also stipulated the intended volume, and how the work should be lit for the exhibition.



Top left: **Shaun Gladwell** *Maximus Swept out to Sea* (Wattamolla) 2013 digital video, colour, silent 12:33 minutes Michael Buxton Collection, the University of Melbourne Art Collection Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Michael and Janet Buxton, 2018

Top right and below: Details of 'Maximus Swept out to Sea' (Wattamolla) 2013, highlighting the projection screen covered in glitter paint. Exhibited in *nightshifts* at Buxton Contemporary, 2023.

Artist Questionnaire

What is the artwork?	<p>Please provide a detailed list of all elements that make up the artwork.</p> <p>What elements of the work will be provided by the artist?</p> <p>What elements of the work will the Gallery need to fabricate or source? Please provide a detailed description, including material, brand, make and model, where necessary.</p> <p>Are any of elements intended or able to be fabricated or sourced with each iteration?</p> <p>If the artwork consists of multiple parts, must the parts always be displayed together as a whole or may they be exhibited separately?</p> <p>Please provide a list of all equipment needed to display this work, including preferred make/model or any other specifications, where necessary.</p> <p>Please provide a list of materials, fabricators or individuals involved in the creation of the work, including brand names and contact details, where possible.</p> <p>If any element of the work has been customised, including equipment, please specify how and by whom.</p>
Long-term conservation of material and concept	<p>Is there an expected lifespan of the work?</p> <p>Are there desired or acceptable changes in appearance of the work that will occur over time?</p> <p>Are there are any fragile or vulnerable areas in the work that the gallery should be aware of?</p> <p>Are there regular maintenance activities that should ideally occur while the work is on display?</p> <p>Is the role of equipment in this work purely functional, or does it have conceptual or aesthetic significance?</p> <p>What important features or qualities have led to the choice of equipment?</p> <p>In case of equipment obsolescence, is it acceptable for the gallery to replace vintage equipment with newer components?</p> <p>Are any other elements of the work considered replaceable? What approach to replacement would be acceptable to the artist? e.g. identical or similar in nature</p> <p>If the work becomes inoperable, can it still be displayed?</p> <p>Are there any past iterations that the artist considers were particularly well executed? Which one(s) and why?</p>

Installation and exhibition environment	<p>Please describe any qualities of the exhibition environment that are essential to the display of this work, and any that are optional but desirable. (The artist may like to consider wall and ceiling colour or treatments, lighting, flooring, sound control, projection surfaces and room size.)</p> <p>Should the audience approach the installation from a specific direction or in a specific order?</p> <p>Should the audience interact with the artwork in any way? If so, please explain.</p> <p>Is there any furniture that should be included as part of the work’s display? e.g. seating, plinths, pedestals, stands.</p> <p>Are there specifications for the position and mounting of artwork components and/or audio-visual equipment?</p> <p>Is it acceptable for any of the equipment to be visible to the public or should it be out of sight?</p> <p>Does the artwork require a network connection for display?</p> <p>Can the artwork be displayed in the same exhibition space as other artworks?</p> <p>If the work has been installed before, how long did it take the artist to install the work? Was specialist technical expertise required?</p> <p>Could the artwork be reinterpreted or presented differently in the future?</p>
If video is present	<p>How many channels of video does the work include?</p> <p>How may the video(s) be displayed? You may select more than one option.</p> <p>As a projection / On a flat-screen monitor /On a television monitor</p> <p>What is the minimum and maximum image size?</p>
If audio is present	<p>How many channels of audio does the work include?</p> <p>How may the audio be presented? You may select more than one option.</p> <p>Through speakers / Through headphones / Through a directional audio device such as a sound shower</p> <p>What is the desired sound level?</p>
If software is present	<p>How may the software be displayed? You may select more than one option.</p> <p>As a projection / On a flat-screen monitor / On a computer monitor / Other, please specify</p>



EXHIBITION MAKING

Curation

The word 'curate' stems from the latin word 'curare', meaning 'to take care of'. The role of Ancient Roman 'curatores', or caretakers of the Empire's public spaces, morphed into the definition of modern curators as custodians of objects within a museum.⁵ Twentieth and Twenty-first century perceptions of curating have expanded beyond the care of objects to include 'storytelling', through the selection and arrangement of objects. Despite these shifts, contemporary exhibition making retains the original idea of care for objects through conservation and presentation.⁶

A curator traditionally oversees the selection and framing of objects, which shape the histories, narratives, and values of culture. By shaping the interpretation of objects through curatorial framing, the curator influences the legacy and ongoing value of an object. However, the evolution of contemporary art, with a bold engagement with current issues and new forms, has seen a parallel shift in curatorial practice. Today, curators of contemporary art experiment with innovative formats that often seek to disrupt or rewrite previous narratives and activate objects and collections in unexpected ways.⁷

Buxton Contemporary hosts a dynamic program of three exhibitions per year, offering a combination of solo and group exhibitions. The exhibitions at Buxton Contemporary are constructed to activate an aspect of the Buxton Collection – whether it is a solo exhibition of an artist in the collection or a group exhibition that includes an artwork or artist represented in the collection. By introducing new artists to the gallery while remaining anchored to the collection, exhibitions at Buxton Contemporary represent diverse contemporary art practices. Buxton's rotating exhibition program continually introduces different artworks of mediums and materials into the gallery and therefore poses new technical challenges.

As the gallery is based within the University context, Curators at Buxton aim to prioritise student engagement by framing exhibitions around an overarching theme or context that encourages critical thought.

Left:

Installation view of *The same crowd never gathers twice*, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2024. Featuring Angela Goh, *Body Loss* (2017-). University of Melbourne Art Collection, 2024. Photography by Gregory Lorenzutti. Courtesy the artist and Fine Arts, Sydney.



Thematic Exhibitions

Visit the exhibition pages to read about the curatorial rationale, see images of artworks, and download the exhibition labels.

[The same crowd never gathers twice](#)

Spanning moving image, sound, sculptural intervention and performance, *The same crowd never gathers twice* tests the limits of the arena. The artists consider the social and structural architectures that define these spaces, and by extension, the elastic relationship between performance and reality, audience and participant, public and private.

[nightshifts](#)

nightshifts considers the importance of solitude through contemporary arts practice. Shifting in and out of focus like a dreamscape, the exhibition looks to the shadows and 'after hours' as metaphors for the work and thinking that happens beneath the surface, away from the public gaze: time alone in the studio, during the quiet of the night and while asleep.

Installation view of *nightshifts*, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023. Featuring: Lisa Sammut, *Full circle (ii)* 2023 and *How the earth will approach you* 2023; Tracey Moffat, Photography by Christian Capurro.



[Still Life](#)

Exquisite drawings and models from the University of Melbourne's Herbarium Collection represent artistic and scientific traditions in which natural organisms are depicted in isolation from their environment. These teaching tools contrast with contemporary artworks by eleven artists that celebrate the complexities of nature, emphasising interdependence and shifting states of being.

[Observance](#)

Observance brought together six First Nations women with strong culturally led practices. Offering a selection of works that delved into the ongoing impacts of colonial violence, artists share their experiences of generational grief for family, language and Country.

Installation view of *Still Life*, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2022. Featuring: drawings and models from the University of Melbourne's Herbarium Collection Photography by Christian Capurro.

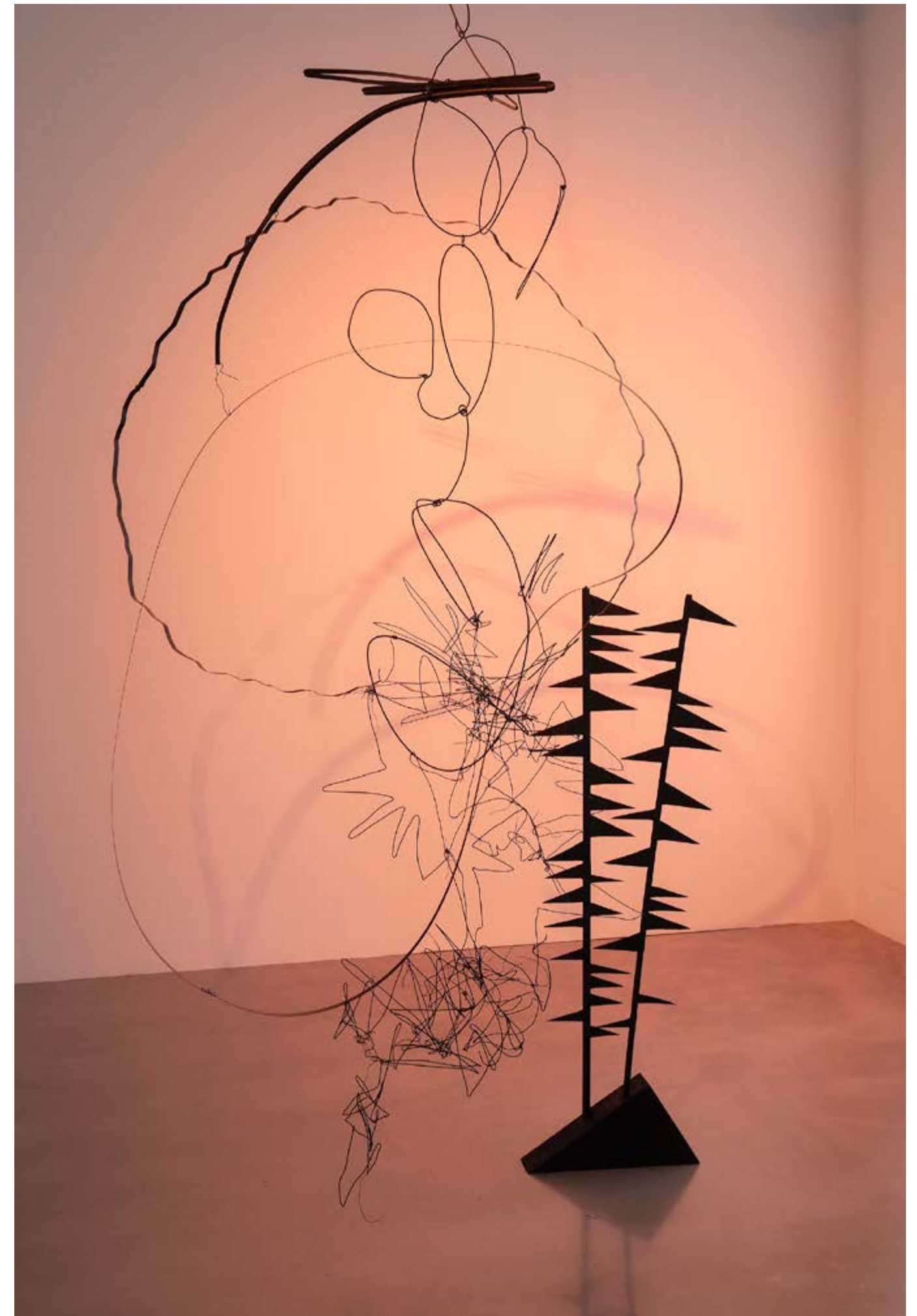
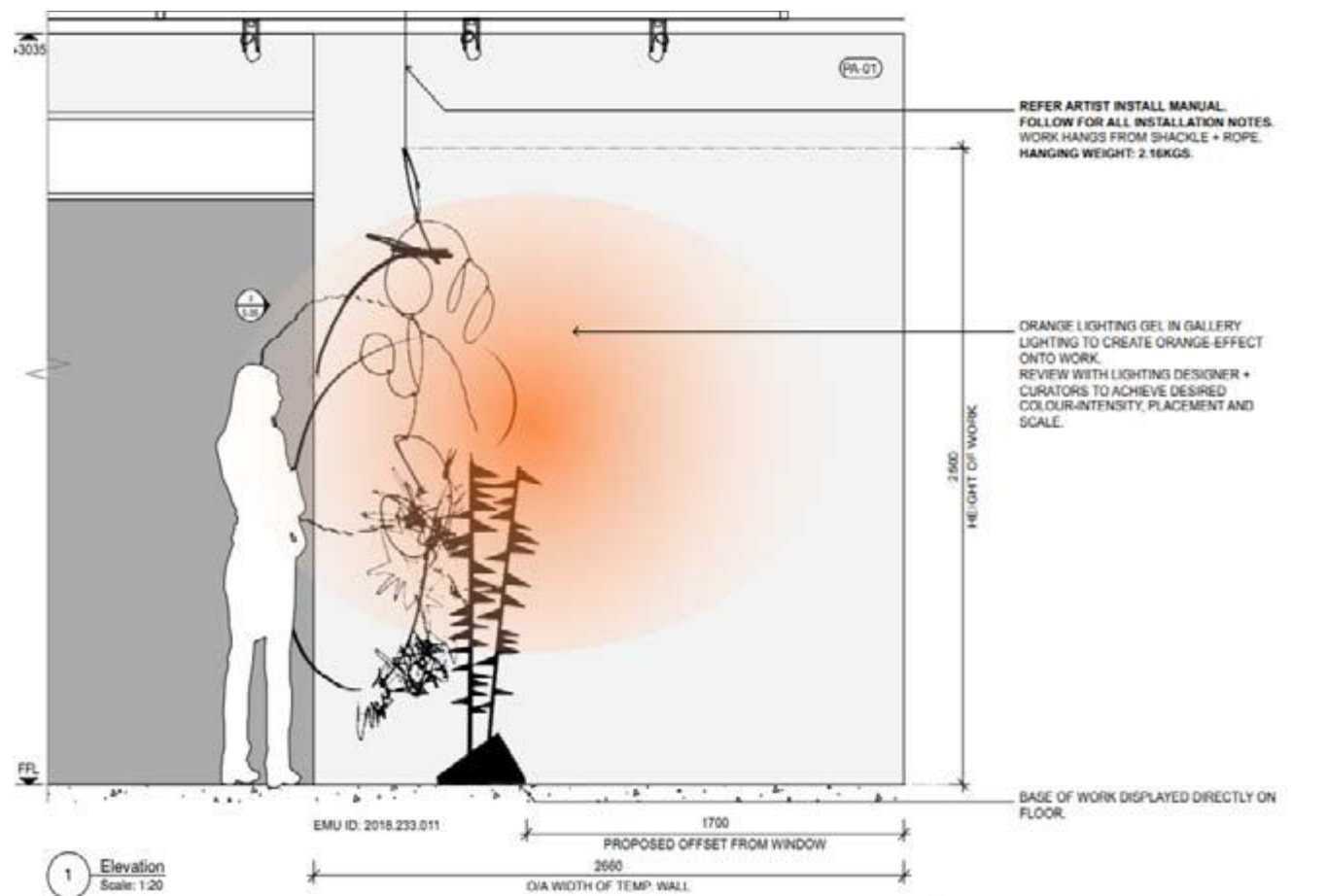
Exhibition Design

Curators and external exhibition designers work closely together to determine both practical and conceptual aspects of an exhibition space. This includes the optimal pathways a visitor might take through the gallery space or how the 'story' of an exhibition unfolds, emphasising important works or defining themes or 'chapters'.

Exhibition designers are responsible for creating construction drawings for exhibition builds, such as walls, plinths and display cases. This is critical for both visitor and artwork safety, to ensure that pieces are securely installed. The designers can also help curators make key decisions relating to wall colours and other design elements such as exhibition texts. Thoughtful exhibition design will ensure that the safety of the artworks is a top priority. For instance, a particularly fragile work might be placed in a more secure location within the gallery and protected from unwanted physical interaction. Lighting design is another key consideration when ensuring artworks are looked after when on display in an exhibition. There is a careful balance to be achieved between lighting that allows works to be viewable and presented in optimal conditions, and lighting that won't harm an artwork in the long term, especially in exhibitions that run for an extended period. Signage and labels within the gallery, which provide a line of communication to visitors and are critical to ensuring artwork safety, are created by a 2D design team, usually graphic designers.

Right: Installation view of *nightshifts*, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023. Featuring Mira Gojak, Prop for instabilities 2, 2013.

Below: Exhibition design 3D render of Mira Gojak, Prop for instabilities 2, 2013, for *nightshifts* at Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023.



Commissioning

An artwork commission involves approaching an artist to create a new artwork, rather than borrowing or purchasing an existing artwork. Curators will often commission new artworks for exhibitions to support an artist’s practice and present an unseen work of art. Commissions can involve a collaborative process between the curator and the artist to develop the ideas of the artwork, especially when it is being created for a specific context or function.

At Buxton Contemporary, commissions are either acquisitive – meaning the artwork is produced and then purchased for the collection – or, more often, non-acquisitive – where artwork is returned to the artist after the exhibition.

There are several logistical considerations at play when commissioning a new artwork. Curators and Collection Managers work with the artist to plan the production, transport, installation and display of the commissioned artwork safely.



Yona Lee
Upper-floor composition,
2024 (detail)
stainless steel, objects
Commissioned by the
University of Melbourne,
2024. Photography by
Christian Capurro.



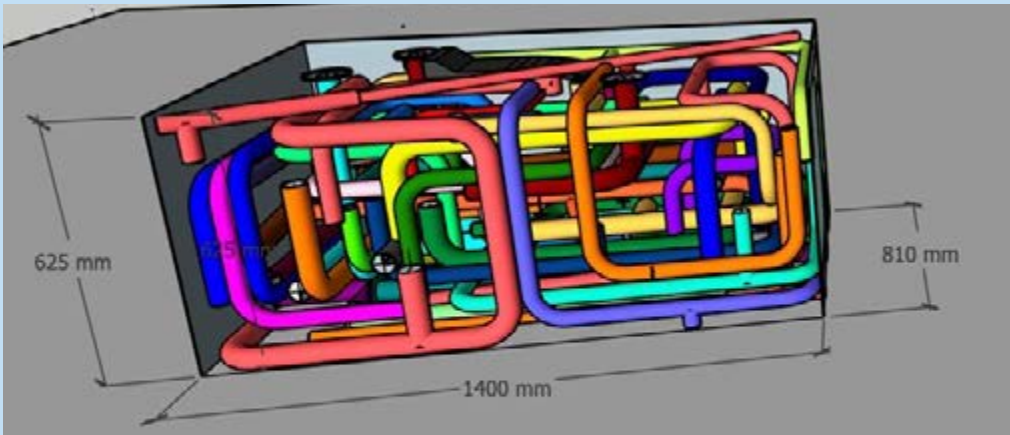
Case Study

Yona Lee’s *Upper-floor composition*, 2024, is one of Buxton Contemporary’s most recent commissions to be exhibited in *The same crowd never gathers twice*, curated by Annika Aitken.

The work is site-specific, responding to the heritage architecture and beams in Buxton Contemporary’s Heritage Galleries. The work features everyday objects such as an outdoor bench, a street lamp, a balcony table setting, a clock and mirror, a bed with pillows and a doona, a moving ceiling fan, festoon lights, and in the centre of the space, a bath containing running water from three shower-heads. These everyday objects are physically and conceptually connected by one primary material: metal tubing.

During only two site visits to the gallery, Lee was able to conceptualise the work and take precise measurements of the architecture and space. Back in her studio, Lee designed the bending and linear metal tubing forms using 3D computer aided design (CAD) software, and had the pieces fabricated. The pieces were pre-cut and welded by the fabricator, and assembled on-site at Buxton Contemporary.

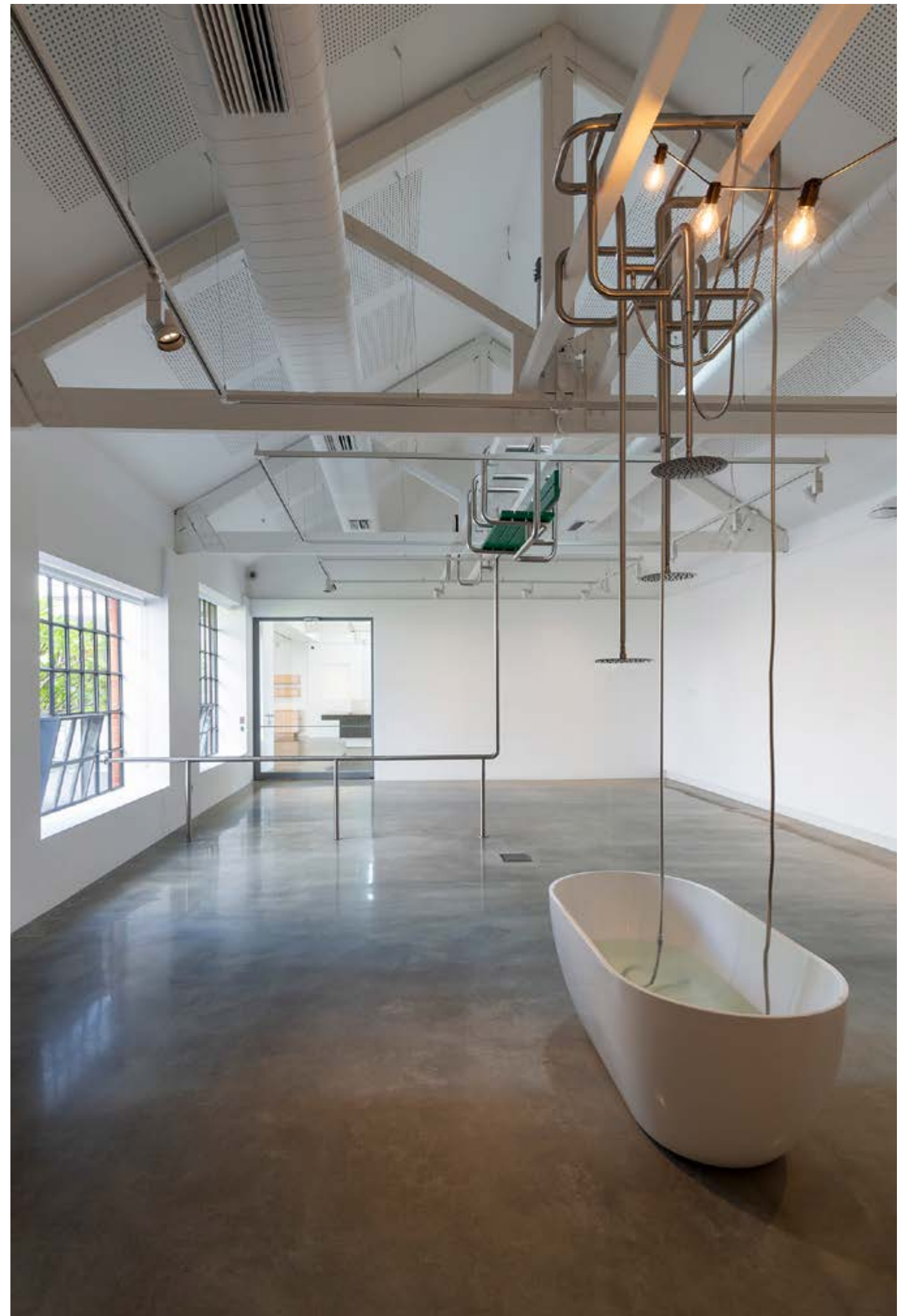
The main metal tubing elements of the work were transported by air freight in a single crate.



Top:
Yona Lee
Upper-floor composition,
2024 (detail)
stainless steel, objects
Commissioned by the
University of Melbourne,
2024. Photography by
Christian Capurro.

Below:
3D digital render of the
packing plan for *Upper-floor
composition*, 2024.

Pages 32-33:
Yona Lee
Upper-floor composition,
2024 (detail)
stainless steel, objects
Commissioned by the
University of Melbourne,
2024. Photography by
Christian Capurro.





Interpretive Materials

Labels

Artwork labels are prepared by the curator to identify the artwork, including title, creation date, artist name, and materials. Exhibitions will also include exhibition texts, which introduce visitors to the exhibition content, and extended labels, which enhance the interpretation of the artwork using accessible language. For all exhibitions, portable large format labels are available for visitors with visual impairments. Signage is often used around the gallery space to indicate what visitors can and can't interact with. This protects the condition of the artworks while they are on display to the public. Some past exhibitions have provided QR codes to access audio versions of wall texts.

Publication

Each exhibition is accompanied by a publication, which includes images of the exhibition's artworks and essays by the curator and guest contributors. The publication is sold in the foyer of Buxton Contemporary and allows visitors to learn more about the artists and the concepts behind the exhibition after visiting the gallery. After the exhibition's conclusion, publications become a main source of documentation and make up a key part of the gallery's archives, which are used as a point of reference for research and teaching programs. The publication often contains images of the artworks installed within the gallery space, which allows audiences to view the works presented in-situ long after the exhibition closes.

Installation view of *nightshifts*, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023.

University Student Collaborations

Some exhibitions have drawn on the creative output of university students, resulting in the creation of supplementary materials. A recent example was the 'Surface Library' project for Nadine Christensen's solo survey exhibition *Around* (2023-2024), created by students from the Bachelor of Graphic Design. For this project, students selected materials that appear on objects and places in Christensen's paintings and then located and photographed the surface material in real life. The students wrote a small text about the material's quality and presented it alongside the image on a card available in the foyer of Buxton Contemporary. The cards were presented as free supplementary material that visitors could take home to learn more about the details of the objects in Christensen's paintings.

Installation view of *The Surface Library* by Graphic Design Students in the University of Melbourne's Bachelor of Design program for Nadine Christensen: *Around*, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023.



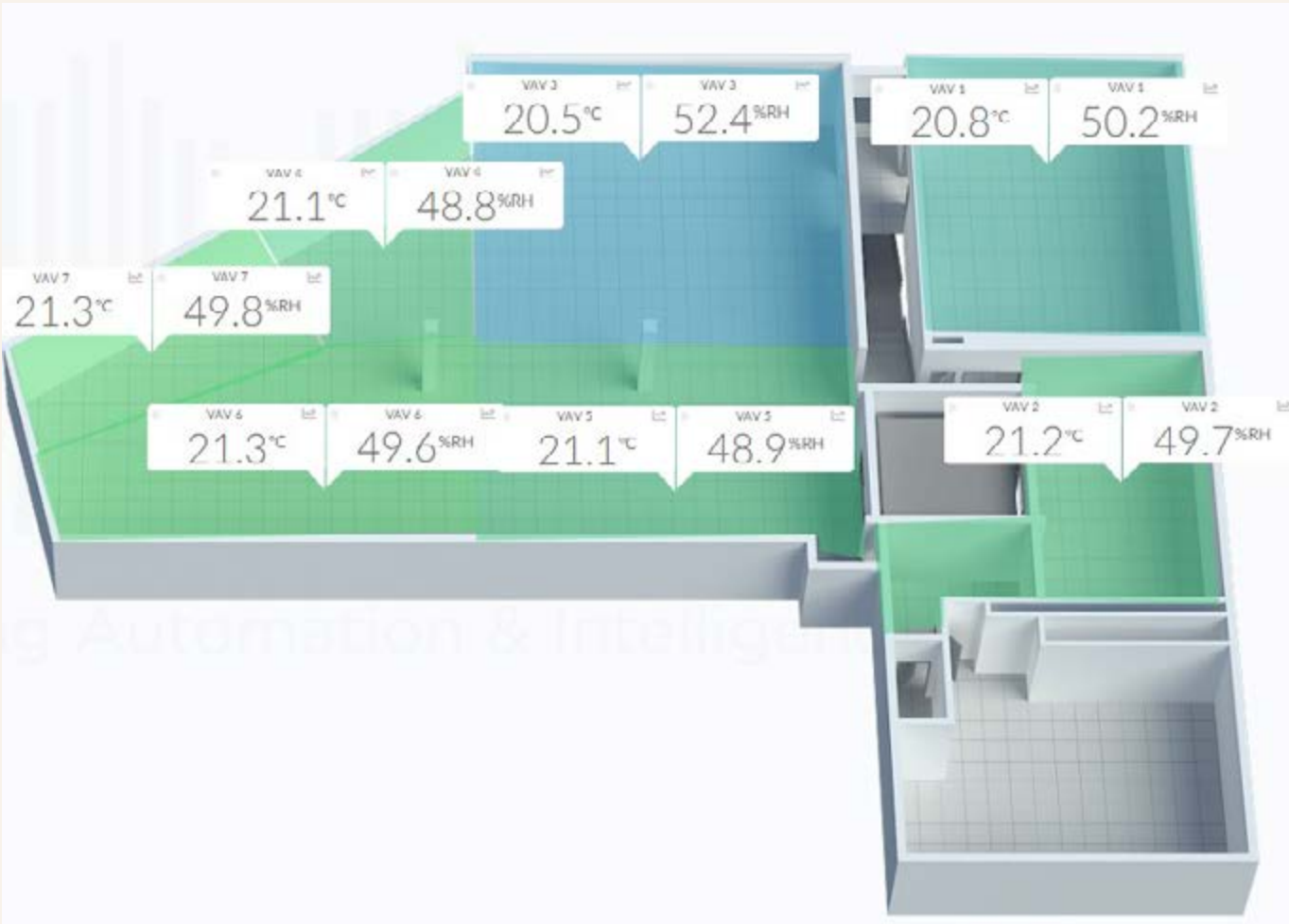
CARING FOR EXHIBITIONS

Exhibition spaces

Buxton Contemporary’s gallery spaces are fitted with systems and devices that control and measure relative humidity and temperature. The gauges are connected to an online portal that staff can monitor from any location. Staff monitor the portal to ensure temperature readings remain between 18-21 Celsius with a relative humidity of 45-55%. These are ‘industry standard’ temp and humidity controls which means most museums will be these settings for artwork protection.

To protect the climate-controlled area from the environment external to the gallery building, there are two automatic sliding doors at the entrance to the building and to the gallery spaces. Like collection storage spaces, the gallery is fitted also with entrance and sensory alarms, and limited staff access.

Screenshot of the online portal used to monitor the temperature and relative humidity of the gallery spaces at Buxton Contemporary.



Invigilation

The Visitor Services and Learning Experiences teams contribute to protecting the artworks in the gallery and together support audiences to interpret our exhibitions.

Buxton Contemporary’s Gallery Attendants are not just simple invigilators – they are the living spark that links our visitors to the intention of the curators and artists. Their multifaceted role includes, but is not limited to, welcoming and informing visitors on the venue and the exhibition, guiding visitors on how to interact with artworks, maintaining safety requirements for artworks through friendly invigilation, sparking discussions with visitors about the art, and recording key data and feedback from visitors. In these ways, the Gallery Attendants shape and direct the experience of every visitor, and in turn, they share the visitor experience back to key stakeholders during the development of the next exhibition.

Logistically and behind the scenes, they are also responsible for maintaining building security by arming and disarming the alarm system, and for occupational health and safety of staff and the public. Each day one staff member acts as the Gallery Supervisor, and this person is responsible for acting as fire warden in case of emergency, and preparing incident reports if an artwork or visitor’s safety has been compromised.

Gallery Invigilator in action during the opening of Peter Tyndal at Buxton Contemporary, in 2022.



School Learning Experiences

Additionally, the Learning Experiences team continue the work of the Visitor Services team by looking after school groups visiting the gallery. The Learning and Outreach Manager is responsible for assessing the exhibition to create Risk Assessments which outline the location of fragile artworks, content and sensory warnings, and any accessibility considerations. Learning Experience Facilitators are the friendly staff that welcome and guide school groups through the exhibition. These staff support the Gallery Attendants in invigilating the exhibition for large groups. Our facilitators are usually recruited from the Visitor Services team and are practicing artists, emerging curators and arts workers. Sometimes our staff are alumni of the visual arts programs at the Victorian College of the Art, University of Melbourne, and they bring a wealth of knowledge and practical experience to share with school students during their visits.

Facilitated tour for school students in Nadine Christensen: Around, Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, 2023.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Time-Based Media - The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation](#)
- [Audiovisual and digital - Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material](#)
- [Preventative Conservation - Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material](#)
- [Condition Reporting - Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials, University of Melbourne](#)
- [Storage Basics - Western Australian Museum](#)
- [Why aren't you wearing gloves? The conservators' guide to object handling in the British Museum - The British Museum](#)
- [A Brief Guide to Handling Art - The Broad \(Los Angeles\)](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Art Gallery of South Australia, 'What is Contemporary Art?', AGSA, <https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/education/resources-educators/agasa-art-school-online/what-contemporary-art/>, accessed June 4 2024.
- 2 Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material, 'Preventative Conservation', A/CCM, <https://aiccm.org.au/wiki/preventive-conservation/>, accessed 4 June 2024.
- 3 Diversity Apprenticeship Program Toolbox, 'A Brief Guide to Handling Art', 2021, *The Broad*, https://www.thebroad.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/DAP_toolbox_section_3.pdf, accessed 10 June 2024.
- 4 The British Museum, 'Why aren't you wearing gloves? The conservators' guide to object handling in the British Museum', The British Museum, www.youtube.com/@britishmuseum, accessed 4 June 2024.
- 5 Tom Morton 'A brief history of the word 'curator'', 2011, *Phaidon*, <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2011/september/09/a-brief-history-of-the-word-curator/>, accessed 4 June 2024.
- 6 Tate, 'Curator', *Tate*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/curator>, accessed 4 June 2024.
- 7 Lou Stoppard, 'Everyone's a Curator Now: When everything is "curated," what does the word even mean?', 2020, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/style/curate-buzzword.html>, accessed 4 June 2024.