

# Metropolis

22 March – 26 April 2025  
Arts Project Australia Gallery

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# **Call a Skyscraper a Skyscraper**

**by Amelia Winata**

In 1938, Le Corbusier proposed the Cartesian Skyscraper, a cruciform tower that would supposedly receive greater sunlight than a regular tower. But Le Corbusier was not a realist, but a dreamer. Upon closer inspection, it was revealed that the tower would not receive any sunlight on its northern sides. The conflicting logic of fantasy and rationality that Le Corbusier represented was typical of twentieth century urban design, focused as it was upon an idealistic concept of the future city, supposedly science-based and intended to remedy the problem of increasing urban density. In this imagined future, we would have flying cars, all of our needs (school, gardens, supermarkets) would be contained in our apartment block, and we would know our neighbours. Life would be good. *Metropolis* is about the fallout from twentieth century idealism, a theme that has been popularised in film, video games, comics and beyond, but which continues to capture the imagination of creatives—many of whom find themselves torn between the metropolis's constant allure and the knowledge that the window for seeing it come to life has since long closed.

*Metropolis* begins with Samraing Chea's *Modern American Skyscrapers* series (2017) which represents hundreds of high-rise buildings built in the USA in the

twentieth century across twenty drawings. The work is reminiscent of Bernd and Hilla Becher's taxonomies of defunct industrial buildings and structures, which the couple photographed as a form of preservation when certain industries were dying out after World War II. In a similar vein, Chea has recorded the skyscrapers with a kind of fervour that renders each one more or less equal—perhaps harking back to the modernist logic of total objectivity—while also memorialising a kind of golden era of construction that pointed to a certain optimism. Meanwhile, Matthew Harris' gridded paintings present a counter to Chea's skyscrapers. Harris' works suggest the built systems common in the urban landscape—the city grid, skyscraper windows and even more nefarious structures such as the fenced-in enclosures of penitentiaries. Painted with ochre, these paintings remind the viewer of the unnaturalness of systems that we tend to take as a given.

Other works in *Metropolis* tap into the abstraction explored by proponents of the future city in the first half of the twentieth century. Diena Georgetti's *Plein Air* and *Bad Gateway* (both 2024) are reminiscent of De Stijl or Russian Constructivism inasmuch as they combine line, flat planes and primary colours to generate a sense of movement. Here, however, Georgetti has warped these formal elements, producing a bleeding effect between areas of the frame and image. This effect suggests a distortion of the rigid modernist framework and, therefore, a kind of rupture in the system.

Indeed, in contrast to the optimism to the Corbusian model, the twentieth century was also

witness to a simultaneous scepticism of the city. German Expressionists, for example, painted countless images of isolation experienced in the modern city. Furthermore, at the onset of World War I, artists such as Otto Dix and Georg Gross expressed the psychological horrors of the war, characterised by grotesque figures said to represent the artists' inner psyches. The work of Michael Camakaris operates within this framework. Camakaris presents unsettling line drawings of two entities fitted with breathing apparatuses, which he says they wear as the result of the climate emergency. Sammi-Jo Matta's female subjects, rendered in grey and white, also tap into the discomfiting imagery of 1920s German Expressionism. Only here we are reminded of cinema rather than painting. Her female subjects evoke the mood of characters in early modern films, such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, whose roles were often to represent class division and unrest.

The dystopian fallout from the metropolis continues more explicitly in the work of Mia Boe, Lei Lei Kung and Steven Perrette. In these works, we are presented with the drudgery of time, characterised as the continual progression of existence marked by boredom and the commodification of life itself. In these artists' works, the metropolis of speed and convenience has been replaced with cities marked by pollution, tedium and servitude. The high rises, cars and empiricism are there but the result is not the same as the utopian prototype. Mia Boe's paintings embody the privatisation and commodification of basic human functions, while

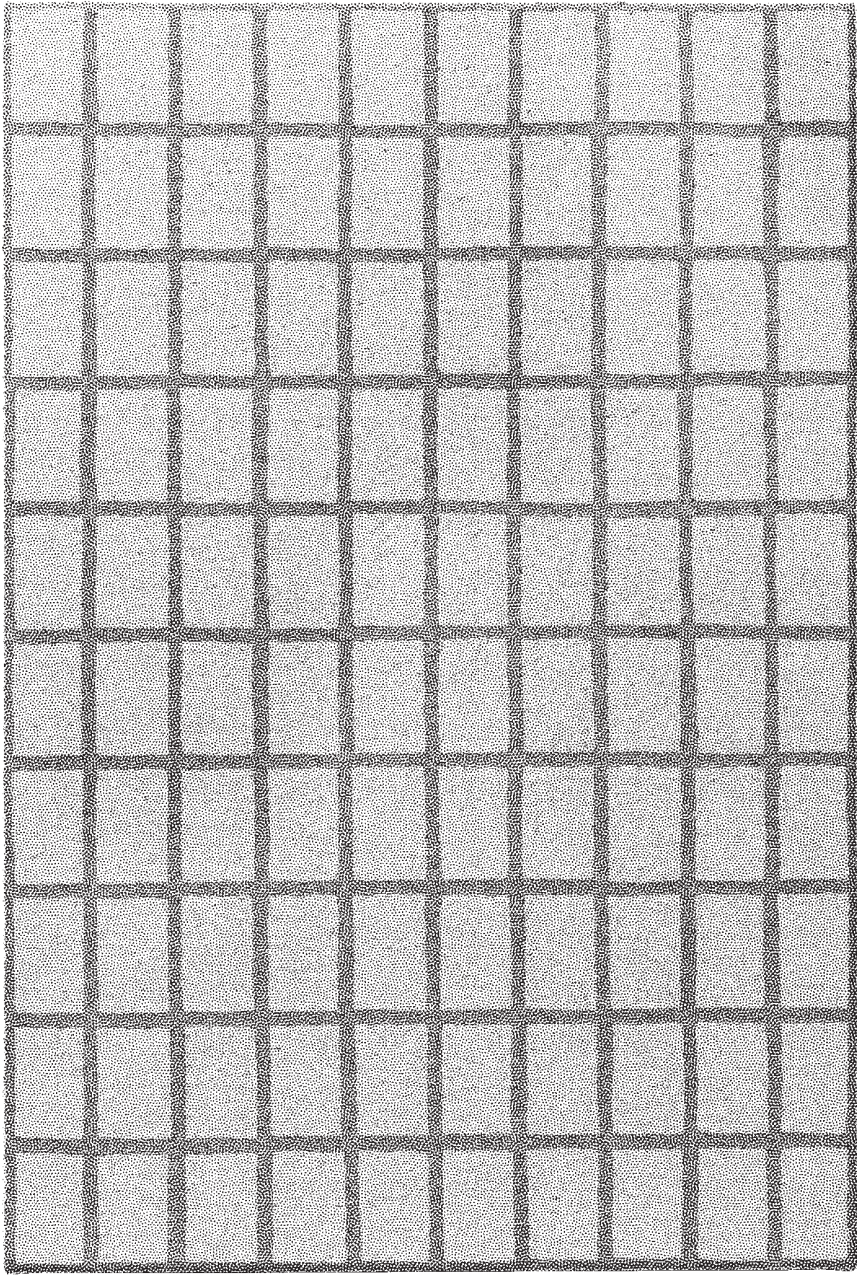
Lei Lei Kung demonstrates the dreariness of a life divided into work and play. Finally, Steven Perette represents a disquieting image of the repetition and toil that the motorised vehicle—lauded as an icon of modernity—actually embodies.

After the idea of the metropolis proved itself to be a bit of a fizzer, science fiction became a genre through which many artists expressed their disappointment. For Gavin Porter, this comes in the form of fan art based upon comics and video games. In Porter's drawings, female superheroes and spies show up in the face of dystopian disaster. Meanwhile, other artists consider space as the site of salvation from the city gone to waste. Space has long been fertile ground in popular culture for thinking through the dangers of the disappointing metropolis, as demonstrated in films such as *Gattaca*, *The Fifth Element*, and *Wall-E*. Darren Sylvester takes this idea literally—suggesting a stairway into space, a fantastical escape from earth's problems. Titled *Star Machine* (2023), Sylvester's large-format photograph contains the industrial language of modernity that extends beyond the bounds of earth. And yet, nowhere is sacred. We see this in Cathy Staughton and Terry Williams' mutant creatures, which suggest the impossibility of treating space as an alternative site of utopian potential.

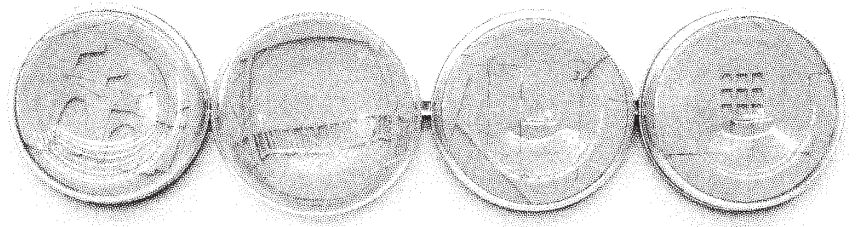
As a modernist framework, the mega city had two sides—one of systematic expansion towards collective living and one where the city had already revealed itself to be a site of repression and societal break down. In *Metropolis*, the rationality of idealistic future thinkers

rubs up against the messy visual language and thinking connected to societal breakdown. But, as we have seen, these conflicting frameworks have carried over well into the twenty-first century. This is perhaps best encapsulated by Jordan Halsall's *Green Over Grey (Constellation)* (2025). The sculpture represents four structures—Arcosanti, Earthship, Biosphere 2 and Elsworth's Kelly's Cathedral, built as microcosms closed off to the world at large. Insulated from the rest of society, these projects invariably failed. However, they also demonstrate the enduring desire for alternative modes of living that the metropolis is the quintessential symbol of.



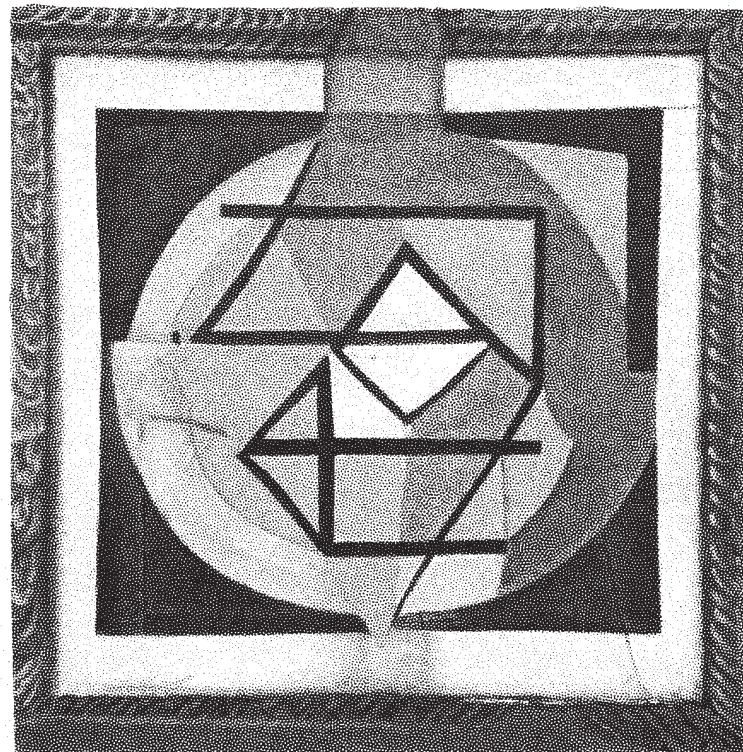
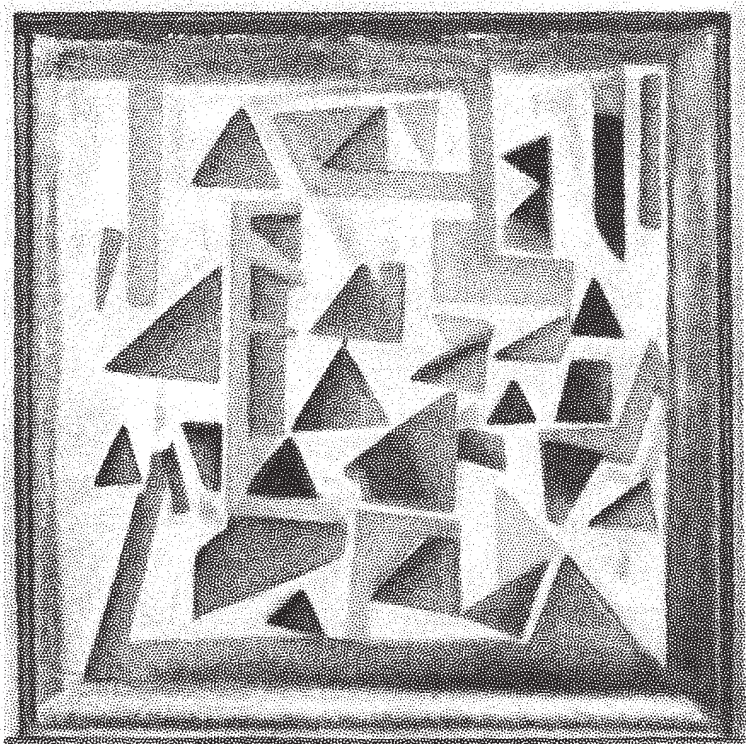


Matthew Harris



Jordan Halsall

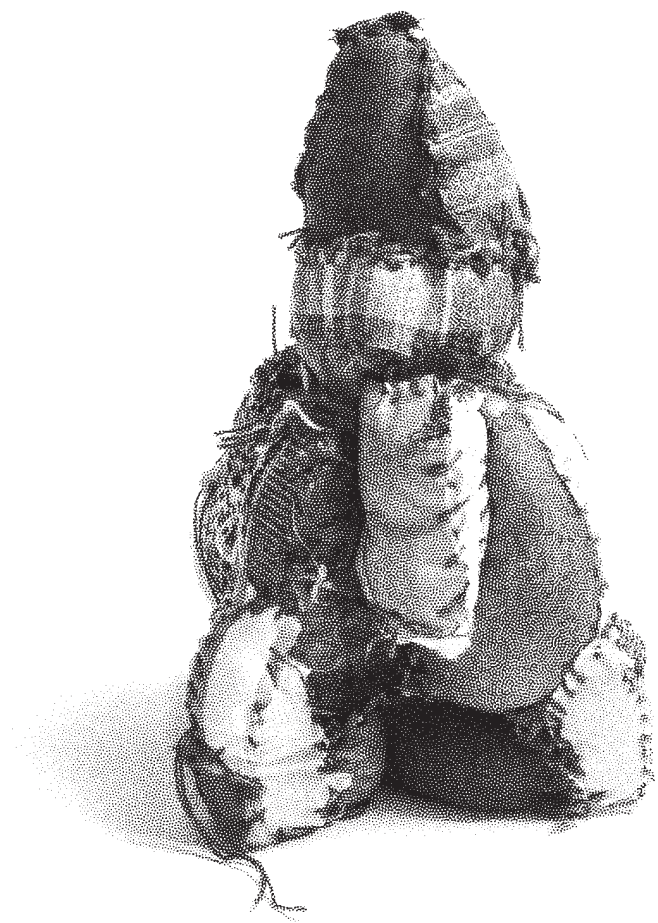








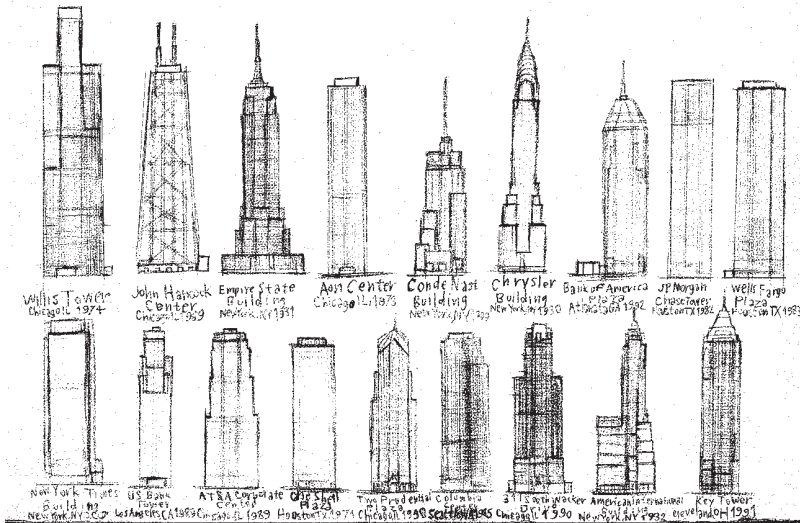




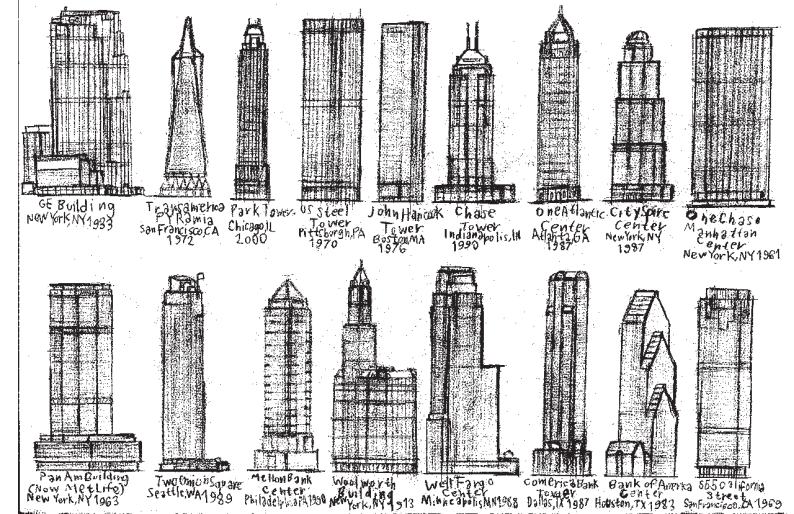




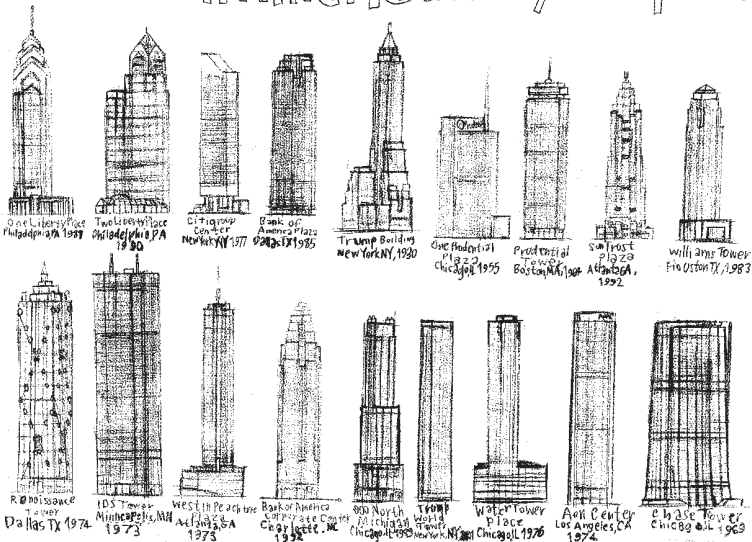
## Modern American Skyscrapers 1



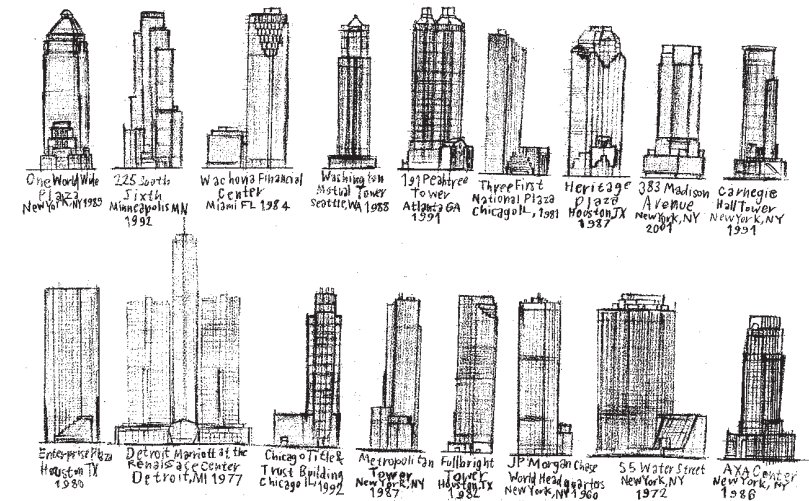
## Modern American Skyscrapers 3



## Modern American Skyscrapers 2



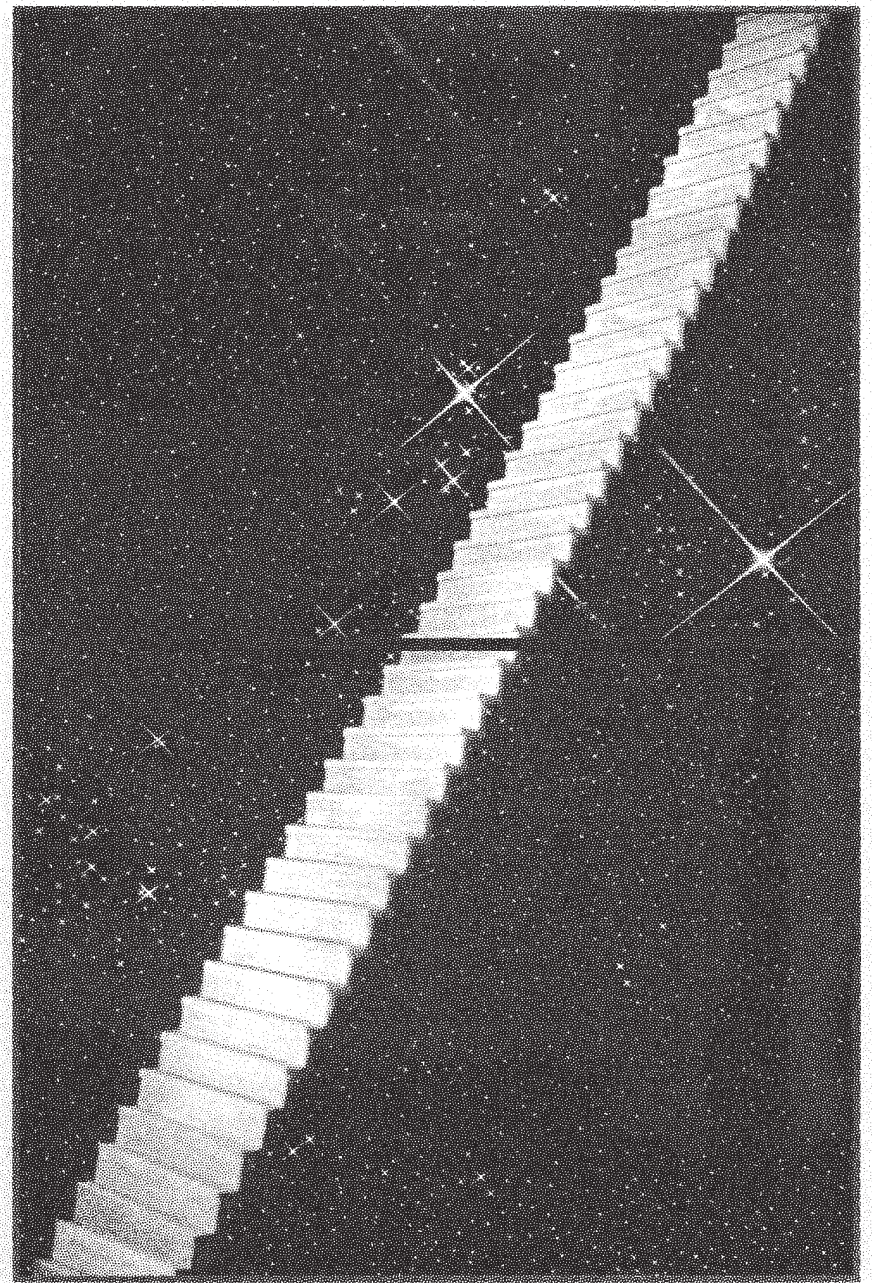
## Modern American Skyscrapers 4







Sammi-Jo Matta

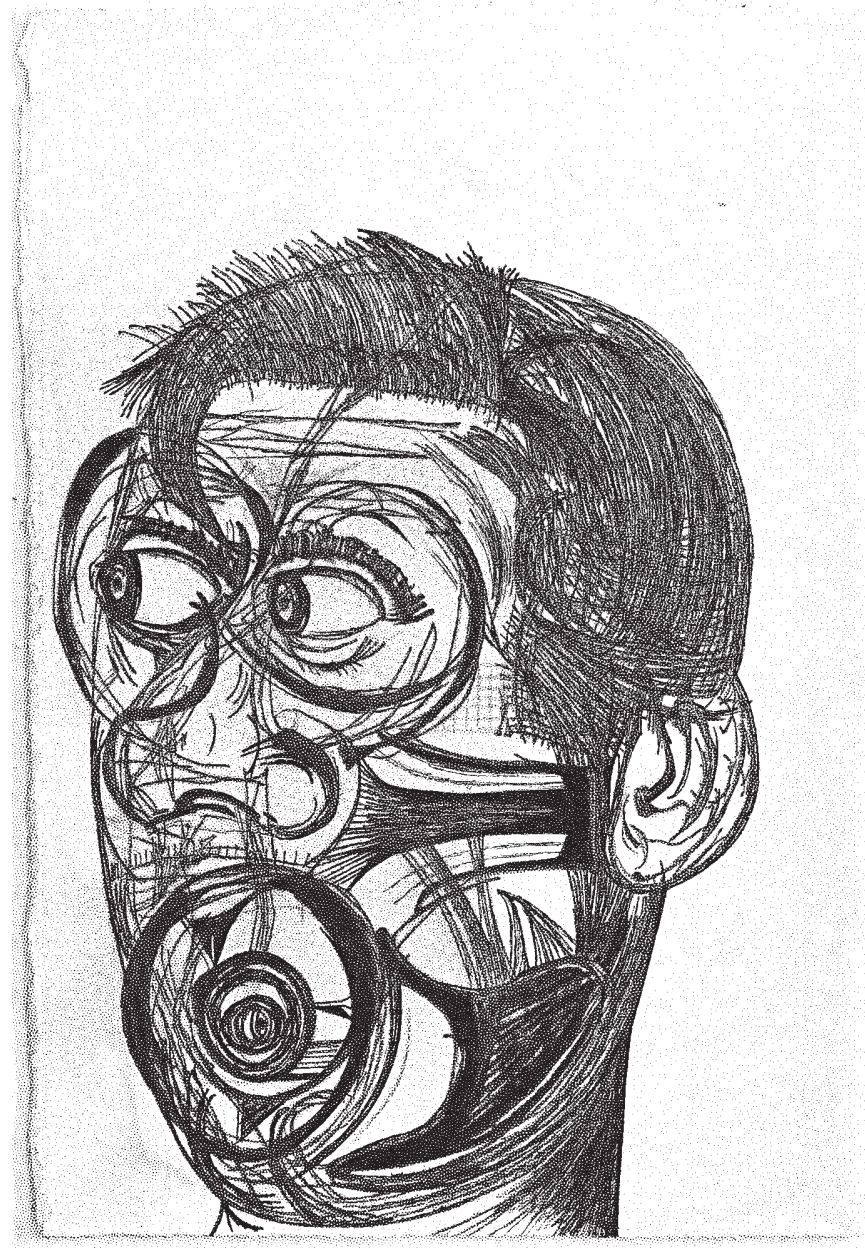


Darren Sylvester





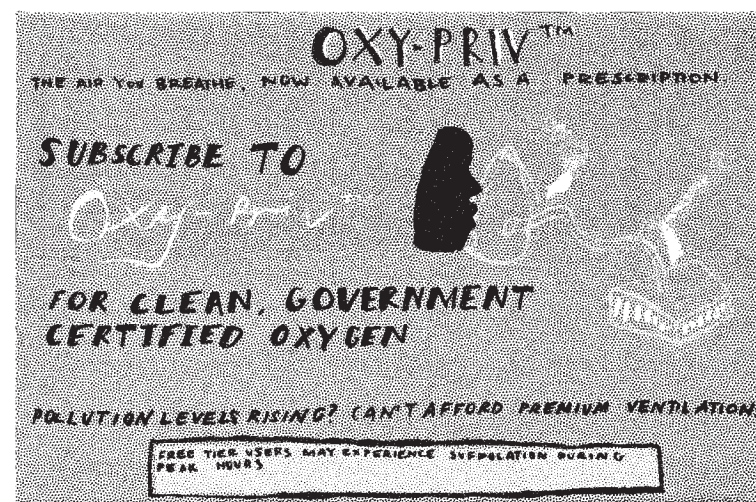
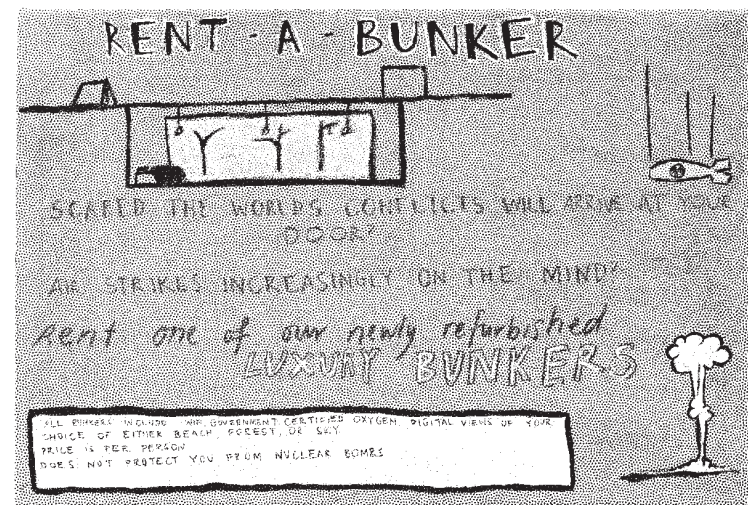
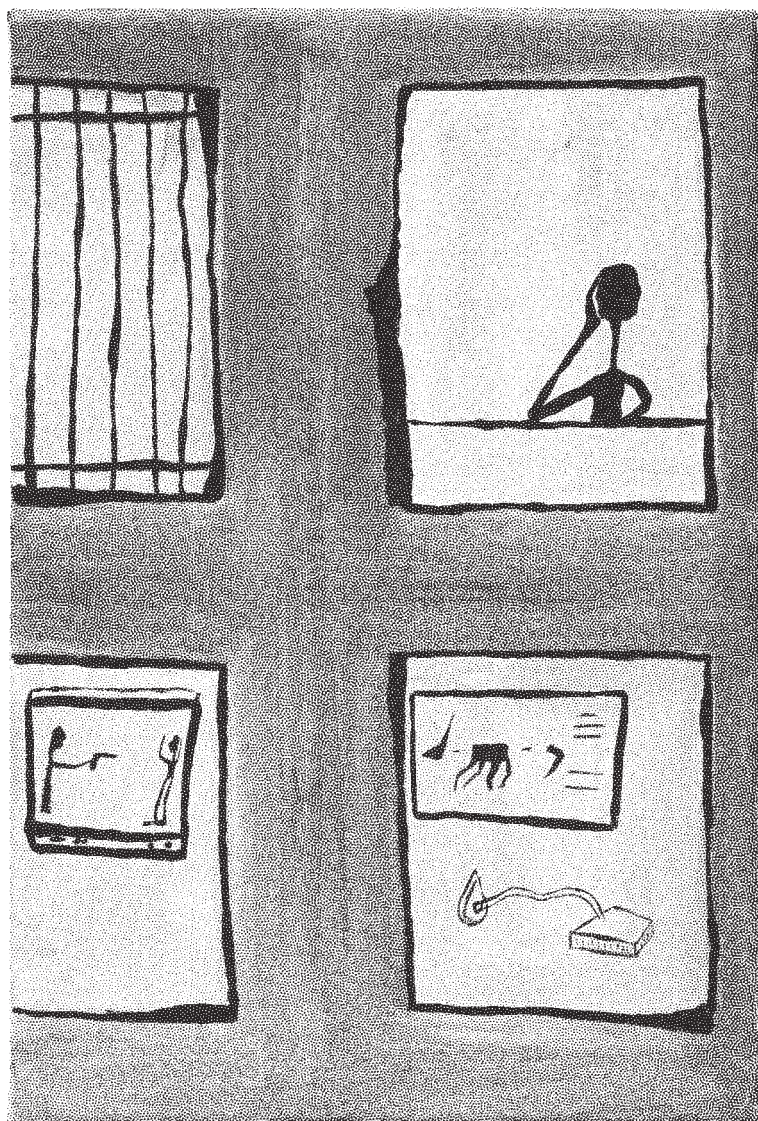
Michael Camakaris



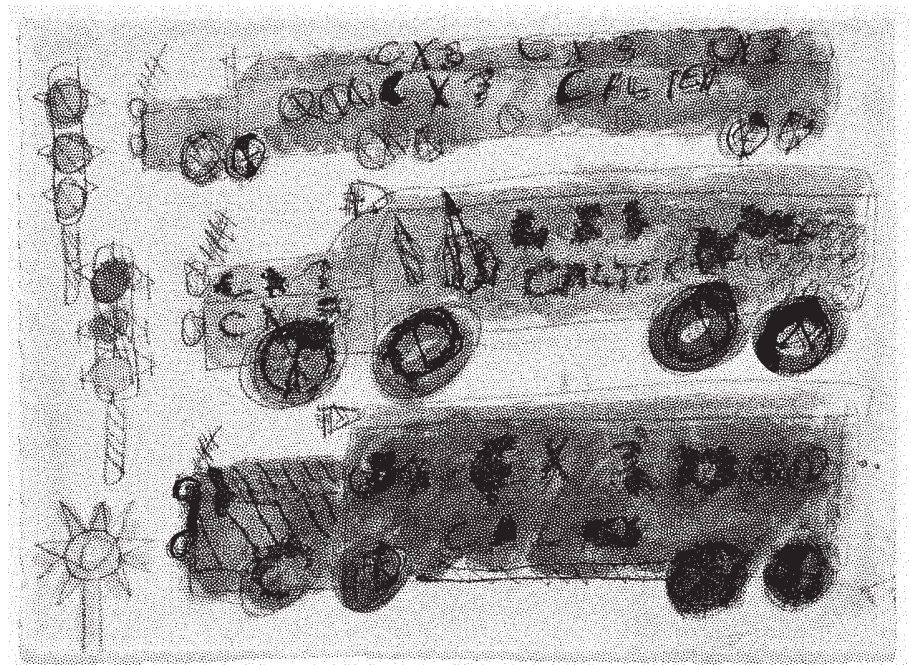
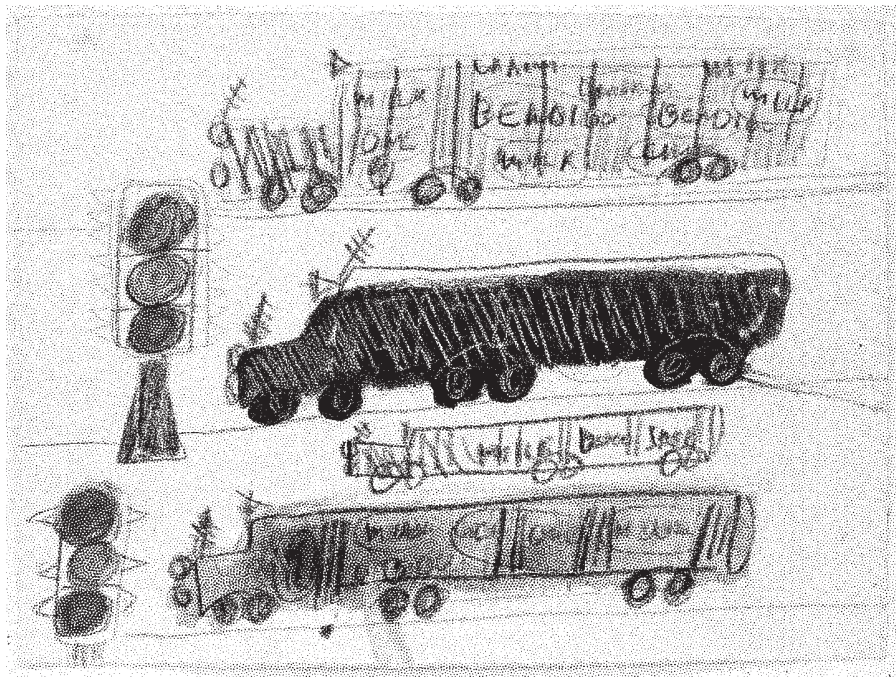






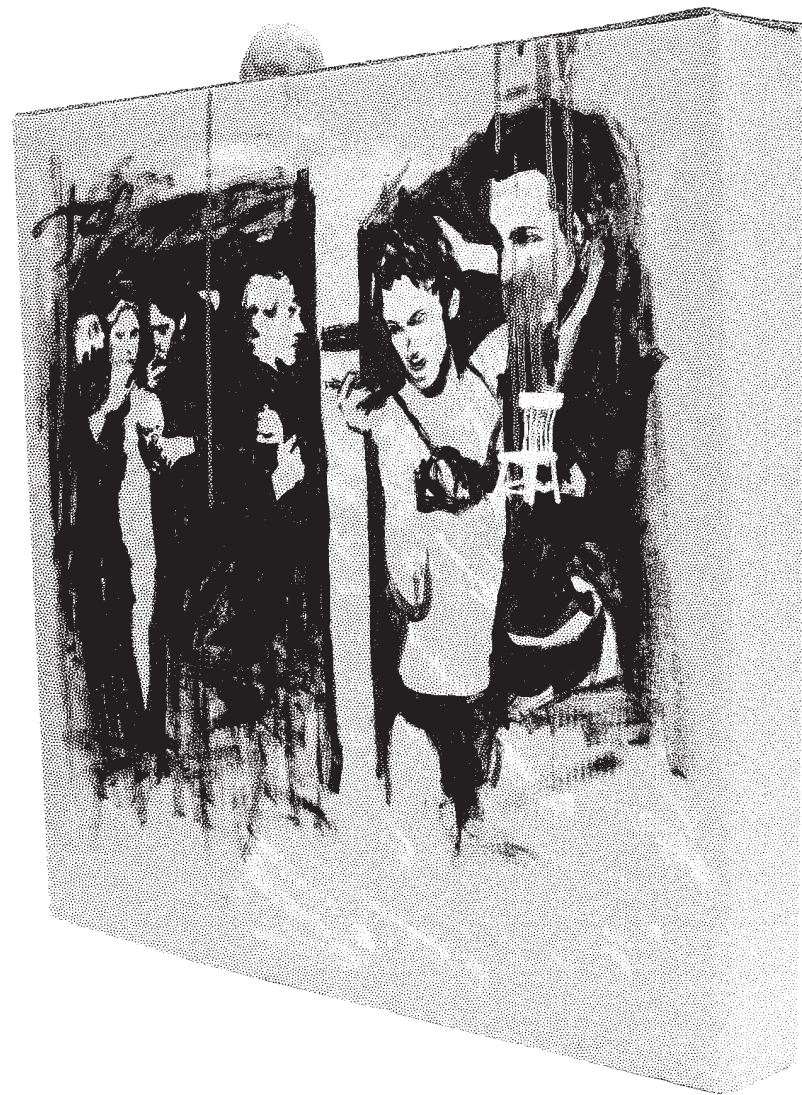
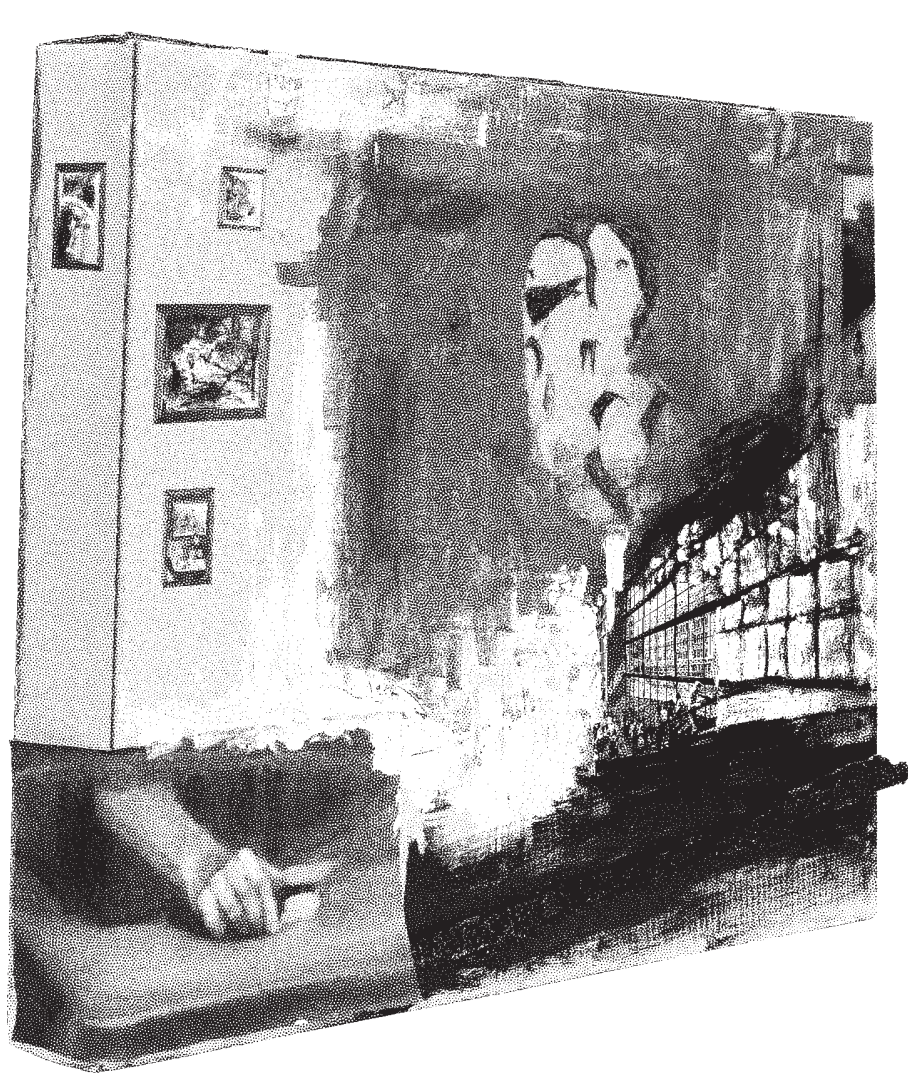












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## Biographies

**Michael Camakaris'** practice spans drawing, painting, printmaking, ceramics, and new media. Drawing on classical mythology—particularly Greek stories and symbols—Camakaris explores enduring themes of power, identity, and transformation. Selected solo exhibitions include *Five Bulls, No Bull*; Shepparton Art Museum Drawing Wall, 2013; *It's Very Nearly All Greek To Me...*; Leonard Joel, Melbourne, 2023; and *The Fall of Icarus*; Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 2025. Group exhibitions include *Symbiosis*; Buxton Contemporary, as part of the Miegunyah Creative Fellowship, Melbourne, 2024. His work is held in the University of Melbourne Collection and in private collections throughout Australia and internationally. He joined Arts Project Australia in 2010.

**Samraing Chea's** artwork, primarily created with graphite and coloured pencils, offers nuanced commentary on commerce, politics, and urban social environments. His work skilfully combines humour with social critique, using both historical and contemporary imagery to expose the ironies and idiosyncrasies of everyday life. This juxtaposition creates a vivid portrayal of modern complexities, often exploring the tensions inherent in urban landscapes and inviting

viewers to reflect on the absurdities and intricacies of society. He joined Arts Project Australia in 2011.

Since the late 1980s, **Diena Georgetti** has developed a distinct and conceptually rich painting practice focused on collecting and recontextualising the aesthetics and ideologies of 20th century Modernism. Utilising images, patterns, language and motifs, Georgetti creates connections via combinations; maps of mycelium threading the initial disparity of some compilations, now holistically ignited by their associations. Her diverse visual references explore fashion, architecture, design and advertising in collaboration with the canon of art, extending this coupling of conceptual and physically idiosyncratic approach of compiling, editing, exploring, questioning and rearranging to create masterfully alluring abstract paintings. Georgetti is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne and 1301SW, Sydney.

**Jordan Halsall** uses art's ability to represent dissonant ideologies in order to critically address progress and growth. This investigation is shaped by an interest in practices of optimisation, vitality and notions of exit. These areas feed into approaching projects by thinking about the contemporary



artist as prosumer—a concept in which the progression of new technologies predicted an increasing crossover between the roles of producer and the consumer. He was previously a co-director of gallery Savage Garden and board member of TCB Art inc. Selected solo exhibitions include *Terrarium*, Neo Gracie, Auckland (2023); *Flatways*, ReadingRoom, Melbourne (2022); *Walkaway*, Haydens, Melbourne (2021); *Fertilizer*, Conners Conners, Melbourne (2020); and *Task Executor*, MUMA Science Gallery, Melbourne (2020).

**Matthew Harris's** practice often debases dominant hierarchies through socially critical and conceptual painting and sculpture. A queer sensibility and rhythmic seriality runs throughout his practice, with earlier works challenging conventions of taste and class, riffing on historical imagery with abject figuration in lurid colour palettes. More recently, Matthew collides materials, traditional First Nations techniques and minimal abstraction in new ways. Born in Wangaratta in 1991, Matthew is of mixed European and Koorie descent. He has exhibited widely in Australia as well as internationally. Select solo and duo shows include *Sky without Starts*, The Commercial, Sydney, 2024; *The British Museum*, FUTURES, Melbourne 2023; *Panopticon*, Conners Connors, Melbourne, 2022; *Spiritual Poverty*, Gertrude Glasshouse, Melbourne, 2022; *Doom*, Melbourne Art Fair, Melbourne 2022; *Goo*, FUTURES, Melbourne, 2021; *The Simple Life*, Galerie Pompom, Sydney, 2021; and *Hell*, Neon Parc, Melbourne, 2018.

Select group exhibitions include 8th *8th Yokohama Triennale*, Yokohama Museum of Art, 2024; *Between Waves*, Australia Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2023 and *Choose Happiness*, Murray Art Museum, Albury, 2021. He was a Gertrude Contemporary Studio artist between 2020–2023. His work is held in public and private collections, including the National Gallery of Victoria.

**Lei Lei Kung** lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne. Her practice employs modes of narrative making and self-mythology through scrutinising history and relationships, collecting and restating images from life and mind, over and over again. These manifest through devotion and obsession, in the form of paintings, sculptures and sound. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Conformist*, Animal House Fine Arts, Melbourne, 2025; *Autumnal City II*, Conners Conners, Melbourne, 2024; and *Make Life Beautiful*, Asbestos, Melbourne, 2022.

**Sammi-Jo Matta** is an emerging artist working in acrylic and compressed charcoal. Referencing advertising, pop culture, and everyday life, she employs fluid linework and bold colour to create stylised figures. Her forms are often elongated, stretching to fill the composition and drawing attention to proportion and scale. Matta has exhibited in numerous group exhibitions. She joined Arts Project Australia in 2016.

**Steven Perrette** is a mid-career artist whose works on paper frequently depict the frenetic workings of the Western world. Throughout his career, he has maintained a fascination with industrial and vintage ships, sailing boats, and the country roads and highways he travelled as a child with his father. He held his first solo exhibition in 2011 and has exhibited in numerous group shows. His work is held in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, City of Moreland, and V/Line. He joined Arts Project Australia in 2000.

**Gavin Porter** is an emerging artist whose graphic drawing practice centres on zines, narrative illustration, and mythically driven map-making. Combining a satirical sense of humour and meticulous planning, his works feature recurring characters engaged in epic struggles between good and evil, survival and collapse, often set in post-apocalyptic worlds. Working primarily with fine liner, marker, and ink on paper, Porter produces bold, colourful illustrations as well as stark black-and-white compositions. His practice explores social and political dichotomies through storytelling and visual invention. Porter presented his first solo exhibition in Melbourne in 2016, and his work has been included in numerous group exhibitions and is held in private collections across Australia. He joined Arts Project Australia in 2007.

**Cathy Staughton** is an established artist celebrated for her autobiographical work. Drawing on lived experience, Staughton explores themes of memory, identity, and imagination. Her paintings often feature recurring figures—robots, winged angels, and hybrid beings—inhabiting layered, symbolic worlds. Humorous, nostalgic, and vividly expressive, her practice offers a deeply personal lens on the complexities of self and story. She has exhibited widely, including *Intimate Imaginaries*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2024; *Mona Foma* in Tasmania, 2024; *Portrait23: Identity*, National Portrait Gallery in Canberra, 2023; *Dog Robot Space Star*, Gertrude Glasshouse in Melbourne, 2023; *The Museum of Everything: London*, 2011; and *MADMusée*, Belgium, 2002. She joined Arts Project Australia in 1989.

**Darren Sylvester** is a multi-disciplinary artist who works across photography, sculpture, video, music and performance. Through research, Sylvester uncovers connections and clues between cultural moments and artefacts, investigating the language between high and low culture and the nature of authenticity, desirability and mortality. His works present themselves much like a pop song with a polished universal story, direct and to the point however inherent with levels of complexity. He is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne.

**Mia Boe** is a painter from Brisbane with Butchulla and Burmese ancestry. The inheritance and disinheritance of both cultures is the focus of her practice. Boe's paintings respond, sometimes obliquely, to historical and contemporary acts of violence perpetrated on the people and lands of Burma and Australia. She is represented by Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

**Terry Williams** is an established artist who has a career spanning more than three decades. He has developed a distinctive soft sculpture practice, creating tactile, pillow-like forms with bold, exaggerated stitching. Drawing on themes of space, flight, and the everyday, his work often features helmets, astronauts, rockets, and bicycles—blending real and imagined elements. Materiality is central to his process, with fabrics stitched, stuffed, and layered into expressive, physically charged forms. Williams has held solo exhibitions including *Terry Williams: Soft Sculptures*, White Columns, New York, 2015, curated by Ricky Swallow; and featured in major group shows including *Intimate Imaginaries*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2024; and *The Museum of Everything*, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, 2017. He joined Arts Project Australia in 1989.

**Amelia Winata** is a curator and writer based in Naarm Melbourne. She is a founding editor of Memo Review and Index Journal, and was previously Curator at Gertrude Contemporary. She holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Melbourne.

## Acknowledgements

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