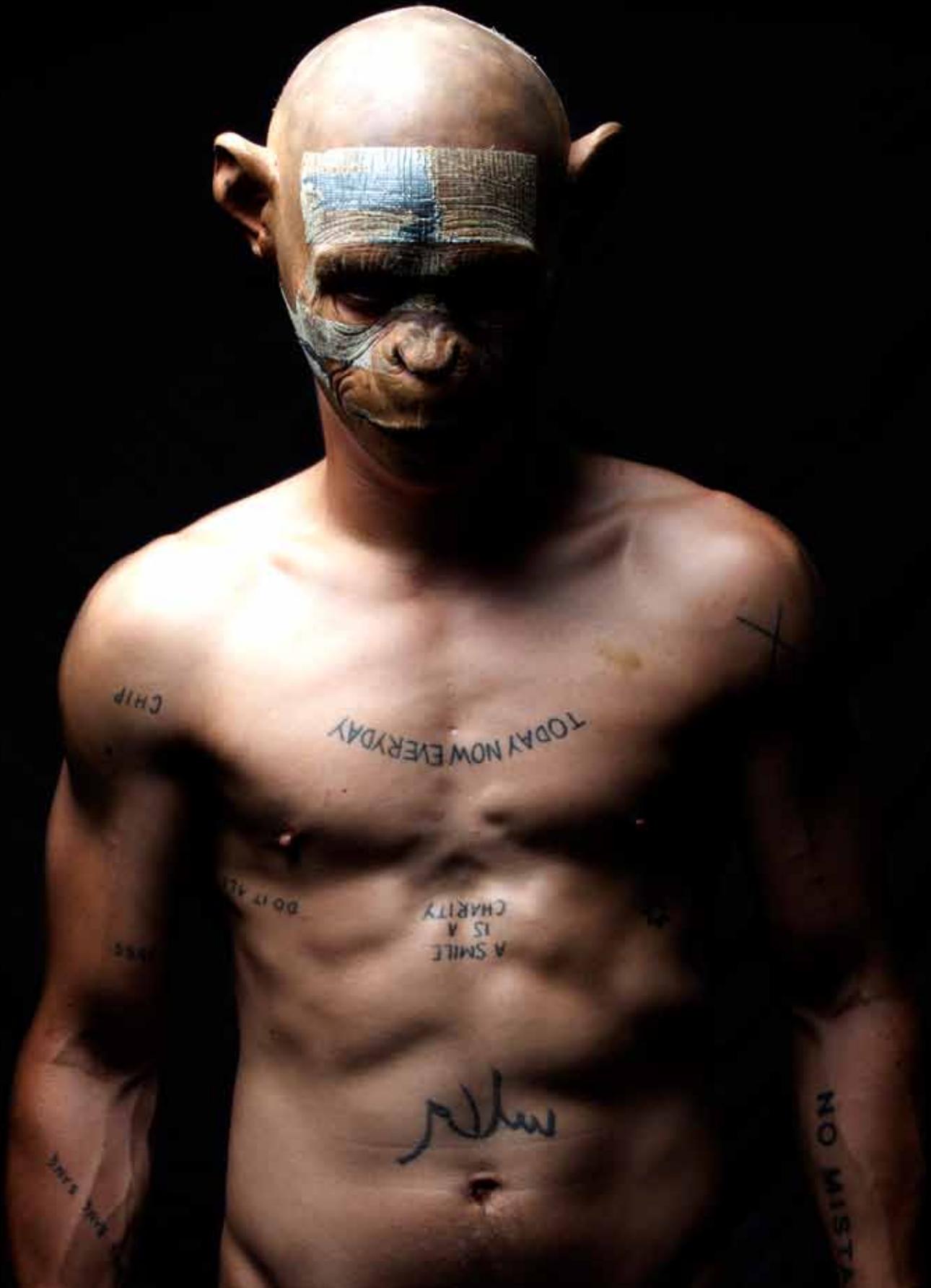


# DEAD CENTRE



## DEAD CENTRE

Curated by Anna Louise Richardson and Abdul-Rahman Abdullah

*Dead Centre* aims to contextualise a group of artistic voices from around the country that explore and celebrate marginalised identities in the broader spectrum of a multicultural society. The exhibition articulates some of the problematic expectations of the individual in finding their place in a social landscape characterised by simplistic and divisive assumptions. Drawing on the experiences of artists connected to different communities including Aboriginal, Polynesian, Persian, Thai, Greek, Italian, Malay, LGBTIQ and Muslim, the exhibition offers a point of access to individual outlooks that contribute to and enrich the Australian social landscape.

**Abdul Abdullah, Tony Albert, Nathan Beard, Olga Cironis, Barbara Cleveland, Liam Colgan, Megan Cope, Thea Costantino, Léuli Eshrāghi, Angela Tiatia**

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## Curatorial Foreword

*"I'm not on the outside looking in, I'm not on the inside looking out  
I'm in the dead fucking centre, looking around"*

Kendrick Lamar, Ab-Soul's Outro, Section.80, 2011

I've often heard the question – *Why is it that we only see work about identity from people of colour, LGBTIQ, Aboriginal peoples or some other minority, why don't the rest of us have a voice in this area?*

The rest of us. Who is that mysterious *rest of us*?

There is an irony in the question that needs to be addressed and I can only speak for myself, but there are clear parallels for everyone who is not the *rest of us*. Because some people never had that magic mirror to tell them who they are. Wait... what?! It's called a television, a big screen, a little screen and every single bit of media in between that has given me an example of every different role, character and aspiration available here in Australia. I've seen every single possibility looking back from cis white faces, every combination of anybody real or imagined has been presented to me as that mysterious *rest of us*. That's a very loud voice.

I've seen me too – I've seen me in angry crowds of bearded men. I've seen me dirty, poor, stupid and threatening. Fiction becomes irrelevant when the voice is that loud. This is just one of the reasons why people of colour, LGBTIQ, Aboriginal peoples and other minorities need to tell you who they are, because nobody else will. I'm fully aware that the constant barrage of media is not an accurate reflection of society. Television should never determine how we see ourselves, but it sure plays a dominant role in how we see others - it's everywhere and it's all the time. This exhibition is about listening to different voices from actual people. That's one of the beauties of art, an artist is not an agenda and the voice you'll hear is their own.

*Dead Centre* is the inverse of the *rest of us*. It takes you into ten different worlds in which the artists' own experiences occupy centre stage. Anna and I have brought together a group of people from around Australia whose artistic practices draw on the physicality of the human body to explore the intersection of individuality and the broader constructs of social and cultural expectations. Exploiting the documentary nature of photography and the moving image, each of these artists has foregrounded the body as protagonist in a personal drama that defines shared experiences of marginalisation, inseparable from them as artists and human beings. *Dead Centre* discusses the problematic expectations of the individual in finding their place in a social landscape characterised by simplistic and divisive assumptions.

Decolonising the liminal spaces of gender, ethnicity, as well as sexual and cultural identity demands access to individual stories that reclaim the power for individuals to define themselves by their own standards. Through acts of obfuscation, resistance, vulnerability, iconoclasm and absurdity, each of these artists reveals a very real, physical stake in claiming visibility against a prescribed idea of who or what is considered Australian, that vast entity that is the rest of us. While the body remains the root vehicle, it is the layering decisions of skin, masking, vestments and actions that take the works in nuanced and specific directions. There is a level of anticipation that binds these works together, an expectation that who they are will determine boundaries and assumptions outside of their control. As artists they have found the agency to move between different worlds, to belong where they choose and decide their own direction starting from the dead centre.

Liam Colgan's *Straight on from here* (2015) is built on pure anticipation, the artist lies in stark profile endlessly throwing and catching an exit sign. The sign in its ubiquity is an emblem of escape, a handy navigation tool that guides us between spaces. In Colgan's work the sign stands in for the idea of 'coming out', an expected rite of passage in the life of a gender queer individual that can be as small as words and as large as life. This is the nexus of private and public space, the point at which a young person's identity is about to challenge the ingrained baggage of a society that will deny them. The link between spaces becomes evident in Léuli Eshrāghi's *Tino Manaia* (2016), produced during a recent residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Canada. Exposing and painting his hips, thighs, crotch and buttocks in luminescent gold inverses the sense of privacy and shame dictated on the exoticised male body. This act of exposure references the pe'a, customary Sāmoan men's tattoo marking responsibility and family honour, enacting a call to collectively consider the Indigenous body rather than cover it up. This has public health implications in diasporic Indigenous communities where evangelised attitudes constrict approaches to genders, bodies, sexual health and spiritual practices. Both Colgan and Eshrāghi question expectations of gendered roles, embracing vulnerability as an act of defiance.

## New Taxonomies

Barbara Cleveland tackle the expectations imposed on the idea of the female protagonist, indulging the absurd logic in which feminine narratives are consistently framed. *Runaway* (2008) focuses on the dramatic trope of a woman fleeing from the scene of her justifiable crime in Aerosmith's music video *Janies got a gun* (1994). The narrative exposes a well-worn assumption that a woman's agency must be defined by male intervention at enormous personal cost. This sense of personal cost carries through Tony Albert's *Brother (Our Present)* (2013), the second in a three part series of photographic works created in collaboration with Kirinari Hostel, Sydney. The target painted on the defiant young man's chest acts as a succinct recognition of the violence, discrimination and mistrust aimed at Aboriginal peoples by a system that routinely regards and treats them as lesser human beings. While Barbara Cleveland expose the absurd patriarchal reduction of agency, Albert defines the bitter cost of such negation on individual human beings.

Megan Cope explores the necessity of proving Aboriginality as a fair-skinned Aboriginal person to the ever-present settler colony-derived cultural authorities of Australia. *The Blaktism* (2014) subverts the idea of supposedly progressive values and the right to self-determination in a country that still clings to problematic modes of racial classification as the basis of cultural identity. The act of proving oneself becomes one of ritualised assimilation, removing the capacity to define identity by a deep-rooted, personal relationship with culture. In *Walking the Wall* (2014), Angela Tiatia explores the problematic relationship between her own unmitigated connection with Indigenous Sāmoan culture while existing in diaspora within a consumer oriented, sexualised Western society. The absurdity of the act, an awkward repetition of walking up the wall in high heels reflects the innate tension of balancing opposing expectations of femininity. Tiatia also confronts a cultural taboo, exposing her sacred tatau tattoos, malu, in defiance of accepted masculine and feminine roles in traditional Sāmoan society. Experienced together, Cope and Tiatia pose the question – How does an individual rationalise a sense of identity that cannot fit neatly into the broader definitions of homogeneous culture?

Thea Costantino's *Ancestor III* and *Ancestor IV* - two works from the eight part series *The Ancestors* (2012) - look to the past, re-casting and satirising signifiers of European colonialism and the advancement of empire. Linking the pageantry of military and religious regalia to the grotesque, Costantino questions the perception of history as a shared Eurocentric obsession with monumental archetypes. Masked in anonymity, these works unpack ideas of history that are as fabricated as they are pervasive. *We are blood and bone* and *We are sweat and tears* pair two works from Abdul Abdullah's ten-part photographic series *Siege* (2014), exploring negative perceptions of Muslims as portrayed by the media. Abdullah uses his own body and that of a female counterpart wearing a prosthetic ape mask from the 2001 film *Planet of the Apes* to make a direct link to the dehumanising nature of portraying the 'other' as something monstrous and uncivilised. While Costantino draws on elements of masking and costume to reconsider archaic notions of history, Abdullah uses the mask to reveal the body of the 'other' as a living costume that is still besieged by the advancement of empire.

Nathan Beard explores an unmediated connection with personal history, focusing on the figure of his mother as a site of exchange between anonymity and individual agency. In *Suburban Eden* (2013) Beard's mother stands naked in the backyard of his childhood home, while *Retirement* (2013) sees her fully clothed in her home town of Nakhon Nayok, Thailand. The pink tracksuit reflects a global reduction of human attire to a fleecy median while her defiant nakedness demands an individual engagement beyond the expectations of acquiescence commonly imposed on older Asian women in Australia. Olga Cironis' *Home Run* (2013) confronts the idea of acquiescence head on, casting herself in the role of a migrant housewife with her lips sewn shut in an act of brutal defiance. Cironis demands a voice in silencing her own, subverting ideas of formal portraiture as well as traditionally hierarchical domestic roles to reveal the potency of a woman who refuses to be diminished by her surroundings. There is a harsh honesty in the way that Beard and Cironis declare the home and it's environs as a maternal space that may confine, as much as define, the voice of the individual.

There is nothing magical in the mirrors being held up by this group of artists. There is an overarching sense of pragmatism in how they anticipate the different ways they will be perceived by the world around them. In articulating an awareness of the inevitable boundaries and expectations that will be encountered there is a resilience that cannot be defined from the outside. These are some of the most potent and necessary voices in the country working to reveal the depth of culture available to those of us who choose to switch off the television, and listen to what actual people have to say.

### *Abdul-Rahman Abdullah*

The body, as a physical entity, is contested ground: it has long been used for ideas of race, gender and sexuality to be both derived from, and justified through. Historical practices of eugenics and 'scientific racism' once drew primarily on traits such as stature, facial features, and the colour of one's skin, eyes and hair to create social classifications. Similarly, the essentialism of reproductive organs significantly underpins constructions of gender, while there have been repeated attempts to trace queerness back to biology through investigations into brain structure, hormone levels, and, perhaps most notably, efforts to locate a 'gay gene' responsible for non-heterosexuality. These histories form an immediate context to *Dead Centre*, shaping the relentless battle between the physical body and the social identities ascribed to it.

This duality of the body as both physical form and sociocultural identity was once described by medical sociologist Arthur Frank as “*a recursive process of inscription and projection,*” where “*social and cultural processes inscribe the body with meanings, and the body, which is always more than these meanings, projects its realities onto social spaces.*”<sup>1</sup> Frank's words serve as a fitting lens through which to view *Dead Centre*, a collection of works which intentionally place the physicality of the body in full view as a vehicle for the discussion of meanings commonly projected onto it.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah's curatorial foreword, in its first two paragraphs, describes what might be considered an authoritative form of the “*social and cultural processes*” delineated by Frank: the immense role of media in defining, and problematising, select bodies. Against a political backdrop of systemic racism, ongoing settler colonialism, increasing hostility toward Muslim communities, rife gender inequality, and queerphobia manifesting through issues both material and symbolic, mainstream depictions of people belonging to minority groups are overwhelmingly reductive, if not wholly negative. The narratives inscribed on certain bodies — queer, Muslim, Indigenous, as well as broadly feminine and non-White — are shaped by a dynamic where inequities in power are central; we are accustomed to seeing these bodies depicted through an oppressive and dominant gaze. As Abdullah notes, he has seen himself, a Muslim man, reflected in popular Australian narratives as “*dirty, poor, stupid and threatening,*” to the exclusion of much else.

While issues of 'diversity' are commonly discussed in quantitative terms — the percentage of non-White bodies on national television in a given year, for example — the frontier has shifted from merely including representations of people from minority backgrounds to the quality of those representations. Who are they constructed by, and what agenda do they serve? Though they may be increasing by number in mass media, most are still created, controlled and deployed in large part by a dominant, exclusionary culture which upholds ethnocentric, patriarchal and heteronormative standards. *Dead Centre* implicitly addresses these ideas: not by responding to them reflexively, but by creating an alternate site of engagement.

By placing ten artists, each from a marginalised background, at the dead centre of their own portrayal, the show creates a unique space for the interrogation and re-negotiation of social identity. The reclamation of the body is overt — placed at the front of each work, it serves as a central thread between a multitude of commentaries. Yet, it is what Abdullah terms in his foreword as “*layering decisions of flesh, masking, vestments, action and language,*” as well as symbols, artefacts and decorative elements — from the black stilettos employed by Angela Tiatia in *Walking the Wall*, to the tattoos made visible in Abdul Abdullah's *We are sweat and tears*, or the gold body paint applied in Léuli Eshrāghi's *Tino Manaia* — which are equally significant in *Dead Centre*: they have been absorbed into the realm of the physical and placed on par with the biology of the body, becoming a non-negotiable aspect of its portrayal.

These visual components, loaded with capacity for new meaning, now act as further “*realities*” of the body, establishing their role in the discursive process Frank articulates. Femininity, for example, is not only dealt with as an idea assigned to Tiatia's body by outside processes; rather, by claiming ownership to its symbols and utilising their material forms (stilettos, malu, leotard) as an extension of her body, she creates full control of the narrative projected back onto the audience, with the power to affirm, negate, or question normative assumptions. Liam Colgan's *Straight on from here* functions in a similar vein, evoking the idea of 'coming out' — a demand ritualistically projected onto queer bodies — through an exit sign. Colgan effectively transmutes the social process into a physical artefact, allowing the artist to manipulate it by throwing it, repeatedly, into the air. By doing this, they invert the traditional dynamic of power in such a narrative: the oppressive expectation to 'come out', an act defined by heteronormativity, is turned into an object for the exertion of Colgan's control.

From the stake in physicality each artist utilises throughout *Dead Centre*, they offer the potential for new inscriptions of the bodies depicted within — potential for new taxonomies, and new modes of understanding. Here, the exercise of autonomous image-making creates room for nuanced commentaries, questions and negotiations framed by no other power than that of the artist. Uniquely pertinent and deeply thoughtful, *Dead Centre* examines conventional representations of people from minority backgrounds, and offers a reimagining: one which is built on intricacy, complexity and viscerality, but most importantly, on their own terms.

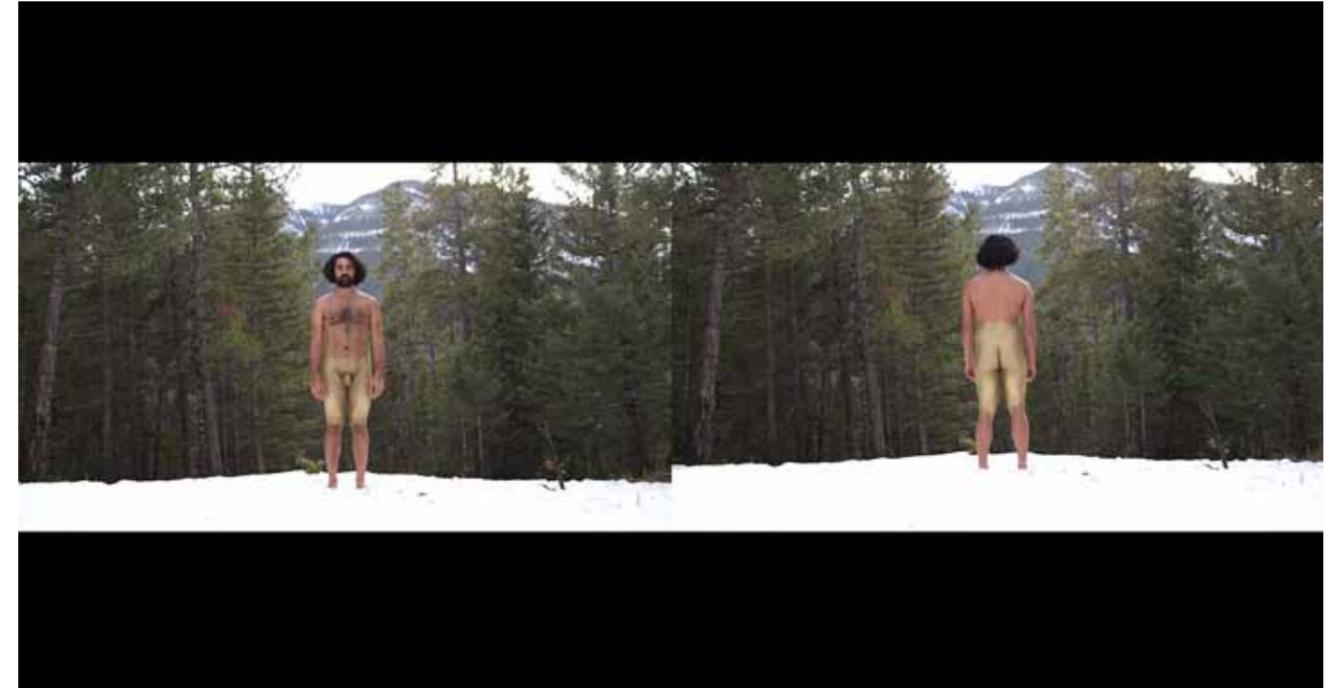
### *Somayra Ismailjee*

1 Frank, Arthur W. (1998). From Disappearance to Hyperappearance: Sliding Boundaries of Illness and Bodies. In Henderikus, Stam J. (Ed.). *The Body and Psychology*, (pp. 205-233). London: SAGE Publications Ltd



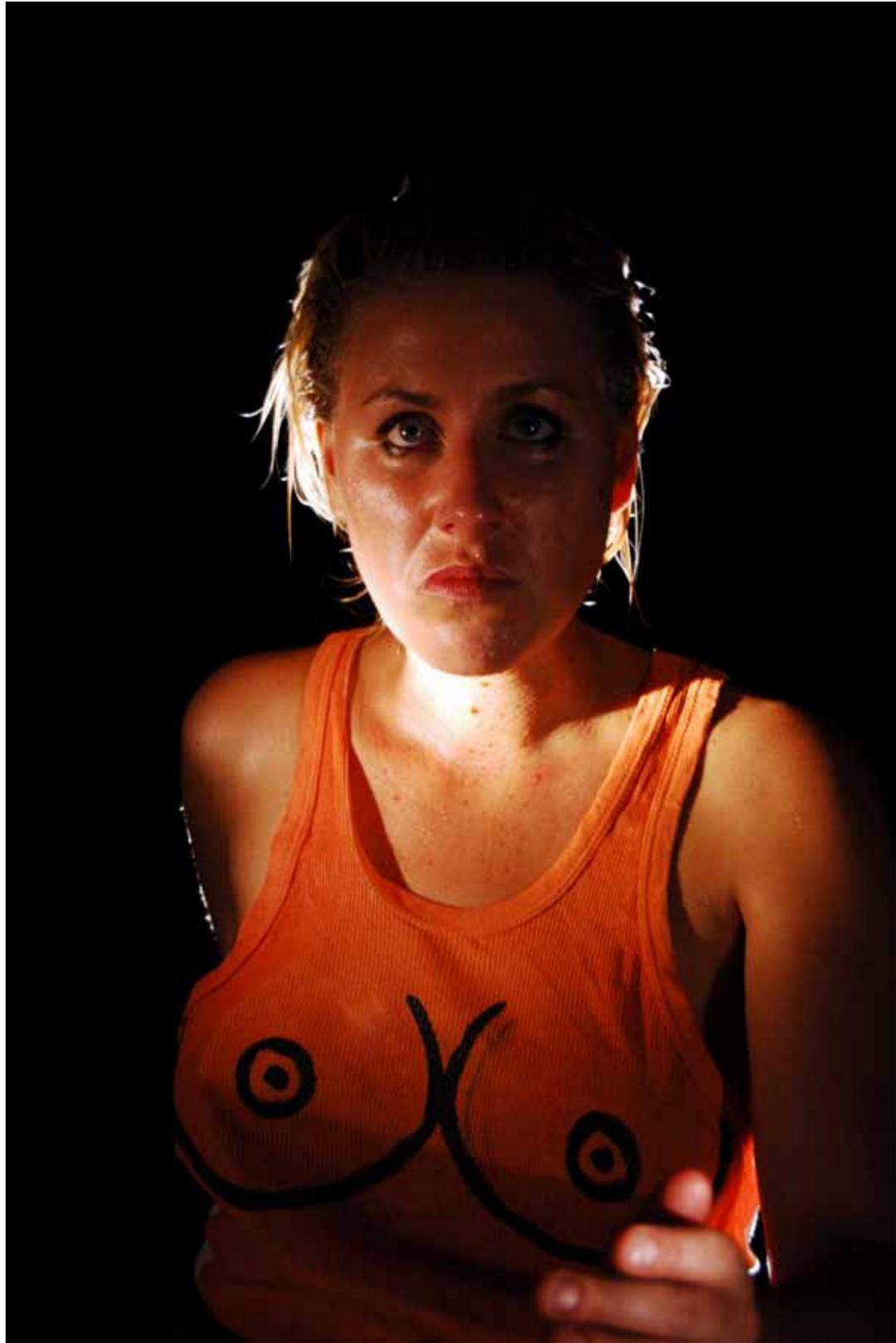
*Straight on from here*, 2015, single-channel high definition video, colour, sound, edition of 3 + 1 AP, 0.23 minutes.  
Still image courtesy of the artist.

**Liam Colgan** (b.1993) is a multi-disciplinary artist and curator based in Perth who broadly investigates the fields of sexuality and queer theory in relation to art practice. Colgan is interested in the latent social structures within everyday life that inform an individual's identity. Their investigations are predominantly spatial, taking the form of video, performance and installation. Through these media, Colgan considers how art making might allow individuals to challenge social power structures and navigate the complexities of identity.



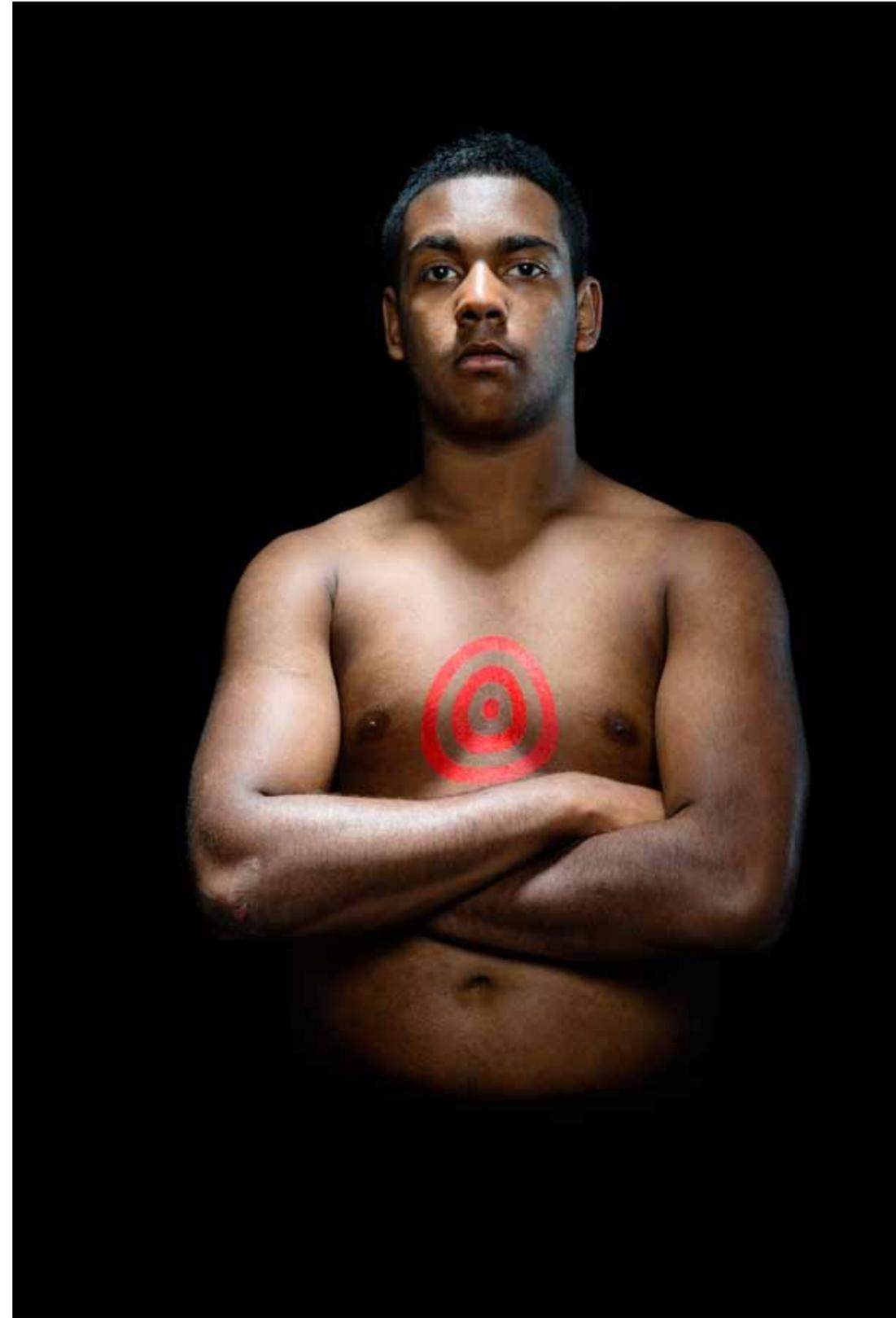
*Tino Manaia*, 2016, two-channel high definition video, colour, sound, edition of 5, 2.17 minutes.  
Still image courtesy of the artist.

**Léuli Eshrāghi** (b.1986) is a Sāmoan and Persian artist, curator, writer, Monash University Art Design Architecture (MADA) PhD candidate, and an uninvited guest in unceded Kulin Nation territory. His work centres on indigeneity, language, the body, and queer futures. Recent residencies include Arts House-Next Wave (Australia), Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (Canada) and Tautai Pacific Arts Trust (Aotearoa New Zealand). Eshrāghi is a member of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective | Collectif des commissaires autochtones board (Canada), Broadsheet's editorial advisory panel, and Melbourne Museum's Pacific Advisory Group.



*Runaway*, 2008, single-channel high definition video, colour, sound, edition of 5, 6.00 minutes.  
Still image courtesy of the artists.

**Barbara Cleveland** is a collaboration between four artists: **Frances Barrett** (b.1983), **Kate Blackmore** (b.1982), **Kelly Doley** (b.1984) and **Diana Smith** (b.1981). Together they make videos and performance works that deliberately blur the distinction between stage and gallery, high and low culture, 'liveness' and its traces. Ranging in tone from biting political satire to slapstick farce, Barbara Cleveland's practice often engages with endurance and spectacle, seeking to dissolve the boundaries between artist and audience in the process.



*Brother (Our present)*, 2013, pigment print on paper, edition of 3 + 2 AP, 1500mm x 1000mm.  
Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf.

**Tony Albert's** (b.1981) art practice interrogates contemporary legacies of colonialism in a way that prompts the audience to contemplate elemental aspects of the human condition. Mining imagery and source material from across the globe and drawing upon personal and collective histories, Albert questions how we understand, imagine and construct difference. Certain political themes and visual motifs resurface across his oeuvre, including thematic representations of the 'outsider' and the target motif of concentric circles. Tony Albert is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf (NSW).



*The Blaktism*, 2014, single-channel high definition video, colour, sound, edition of 6, 8.00 minutes.  
Still image courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY + dianne tanzer gallery.

**Megan Cope** (b.1982) is an artist with a quickly growing profile, attracting attention for her paintings, video work, sculptural installations and site-specific commissions. A Quandamooka woman from North Stradbroke Island, Queensland, her work explores the intricate relationship between environment, geography and identity. Maps feature prominently in Cope's work; she draws on toponymy (the study of place names) to probe myths and methodologies around colonisation. Megan Cope is a member of Aboriginal art collective proppaNOW and is represented by THIS IS NO FANTASY + dianne tanzer gallery (VIC).



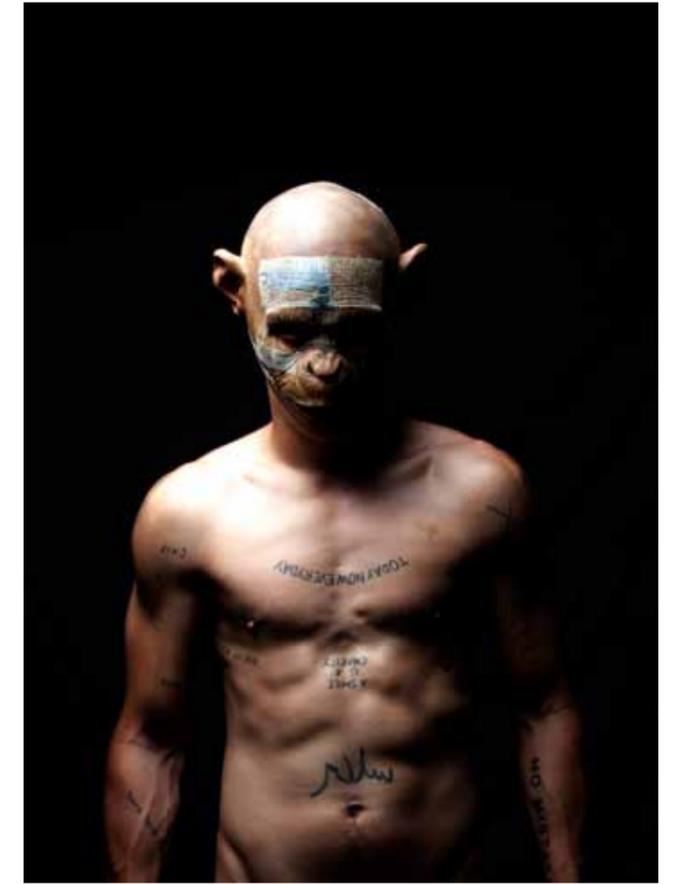
*Walking the Wall*, 2014, single-channel high definition video, colour, sound, edition of 8, 13.04 minutes.  
Still image courtesy of the artist and Alcaston Gallery.

**Angela Tiatia** (b.1973) is of Sāmoan and Australian heritage. Tiatia has a multi-disciplinary art practice working in the mediums of painting, sculpture, photography, video installation and performance. Her personal experiences inform her art practice as she engages with the shift in identity encountered by the Pacific Diaspora. Tiatia's practice explores global contemporary cultures, drawing attention to the relationship between the construction and representation of cultural and sexual identity, confronting the commodification of the body, place and gender. Her video works explore the significant themes of cultural displacement and disturbance due to the effects of economic and social globalisation. Angela Tiatia is represented by Alcaston Gallery (VIC).



*Ancestor III*, 2012, giclée print on paper, edition of 3, 1030mm x 750mm. (left)  
*Ancestor IV*, 2012, giclée print on paper, edition of 3, 1030mm x 750mm. (right)  
Images courtesy of the artist.

**Thea Costantino's** (b.1980) practice includes drawing, sculpture, video, photography, written works, musical libretti, and performance. Broadly, Costantino's work investigates the representation and memorialisation of the past: the use and abuse of history, the continuing influence of the past on the present, and the ways in which repressed or forgotten material can resurface. Histories of modernity and colonialism are of particular interest to the artist, and she frequently employs Gothic and grotesque aesthetics as a means of exploring uncomfortable or marginalized aspects of these narratives.



*We are blood and bone*, 2014, type C print on aluminium, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 1500mm x 1100mm. (left)  
*We are sweat and tears*, 2014, type C print on aluminium, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 1500mm x 1100mm. (right)  
Images courtesy of the artist and Fehily Contemporary.

**Abdul Abdullah** (b.1986) is an artist from Perth, currently based in Sydney, who works across painting, photography, video, installation and performance. As a self described "*outsider amongst outsiders*", his practice is primarily concerned with the experience of the 'other' in society. Abdullah's projects have engaged with different marginalised minority groups and he is particularly interested in the experience of young Muslims in the contemporary multicultural Australian context. Through these processes and explorations Abdullah extrapolates this outlook to an examination of universal aspects of human nature. Abdul Abdullah is represented by Fehily Contemporary (VIC).



*Retirement*, 2013, digital print on Canson Baryta, edition of 5 + 2AP, 900mm x 600mm. (top)

*Suburban Eden*, 2013, digital print on Canson Baryta, edition of 5 + 2AP, 900mm x 600mm. (bottom)

Images courtesy of the artist.

**Nathan Beard** (b.1987) is a Perth based interdisciplinary artist who works across mediums including photography, video and sculpture. His practice is primarily concerned with the influences of culture, memory and biography, in particular through the prism of his Thai-Australian heritage. Beard's work often includes intimate and sincere engagements with family to poignantly explore the complex ways a sense of heritage and identity is negotiated.



*Home Run*, 2013, archival print, edition of 2, 1220mm x 955mm.

Image courtesy of the artist.

**Olga Cironis** (b.1963) is a multidisciplinary artist who explores the murky undertones and impact that history and memory have on personal and shared identity. She examines the notions of belonging in today's cultural globalisation — in particular, appropriated histories and accepted attitudes on belonging in the Australian cultural and social landscape. By engaging viewers to become part of her work, Cironis questions the meaning of public and private space, gender and social norms that permeate our accepted actions. Her artistic investigations are founded upon her Greek, Czech and Australian heritage. These aspects are used to engage people beyond the familiar.

*Dead Centre* and ART ON THE MOVE  
acknowledge the Traditional Owners of country  
throughout Australia and recognise their continuing  
connection to land, waters and community. We  
pay our respects to them and their cultures; and to  
elders both past and present.