

## The Sydney Morning Herald

Morris, Linda. "How Sydney Modern Is Helping Solve Art's Gender Problem." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 Nov. 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/how-sydney-modern-is-helping-solve-art-s-gender-problem-20221128-p5c1za.html>.

### How Sydney Modern is helping solve art's gender problem

When Sydney Modern opens its doors this Saturday it will usher in a new era of gender parity, with the new extension of the Art Gallery of NSW featuring the same number of works by women artists on its walls as those by men.

The new \$344 million wing, built with \$109 million in private donations, nearly doubles the gallery's footprint and its exhibition space. The expansion makes it possible for the gallery to display diverse works by modern and contemporary women artists, including large-scale works for which there had been little room in the existing heritage building.



Samara Golden with her kaleidoscopic work, Guts.  
CREDIT: JANIE BARRETT

Female and Indigenous artists were singled out by the gallery's director of collections, Maud Page, at Tuesday's media preview of the new wing which was attended by some of the 900 local and international creatives represented in the gallery's free-to-the-public opening program.

Fifty-three percent of works on display in Sydney Modern's exhibition spaces, its corridors and terraces are made by women. Five of nine site-specific art commissions funded by private donations are the creations of female artists, including Francis Upritchard's towering fantastical creatures in the Welcome Plaza.

Most symbolic of the push for gender equity inside the gallery is Karla Dickens' glass frieze of six hooded figures installed above the entrance of the heritage building. Dickens' panel sits next to the names Raphael, Rembrandt and Michelangelo inscribed on its sandstone facade.

“The founders of the Art Gallery of NSW named the major male artists to mark their ambition though the gallery did not hold their work,” Page said. “It was a bold, visionary and gutsy statement to make, and we are making it still. The gallery is boldly bringing the stories of women to life for the future.”

A commitment to equal representation is increasingly a minimum objective for any 21st century art museum. The Art Gallery of NSW has been moving towards gender parity for all new acquisitions over the last two decades, formally setting out its policy in 2015.

In the gallery’s refreshed 20th-century and grand heritage courts of the existing building, women’s art and stories have been prioritised. But gender parity among retrospectives will take longer to achieve because of the historic dominance of male artists in the gallery’s \$1.8 billion collection, established more than 150 years ago.

In March, the National Gallery of Australia unveiled a gender equity plan that requires new acquisitions, commissions and exhibitions to represent a split of 40 per cent women artists and 40 per cent men. The remaining 20 per cent is to be shared by both sexes and those identifying outside the gender binary.

Natasha Bullock, Assistant Director, Collections and Exhibitions, said the gallery recognised the “lived realities of exclusions, inequities and histories that have shaped their collections, programs and foundational structures”.

“We are now addressing the significant imbalances that exist. We recognise that to effect societal change, we need to ensure our own workplace culture, policy and artistic programs demonstrate gender equity, inclusivity and respect.”

Page said she was not a fan of targets. “Over the past two decades we have been working with women artists and building our collection to reflect our values, and we will continue to do so. It’s not a recent and short burst.”

Among the female artists to feature prominently in Sydney Modern is Lisa Reihana’s video installation, *Groundloop*, in the central atrium. It charts a futuristic *waka hourua* (twin-hulled ocean-going canoe) travelling an old trade route from Aotearoa, New Zealand, to Australia and asks: “What if Captain Cook had not come?”

South Korean multi-disciplinary artist Kimsooja has set up a 19 metre-long table on which visitors are invited to create pieces of clay and leave their spheres behind for the “cosmos”.

Lorraine Connelly-Nortey’s rustic and rusty *narrbong-galang* (*many bags*), are displayed in the 20 metre-long window of the new Yiribana Gallery, dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

Another work with a public wow factor is a kaleidoscopic architectural illusion by Los Angeles artist Samara Golden. Using mirrors to make an octangular reflection, Golden has created an illusory multi-storey apartment stretching infinitely to the sky above and to the abyss below. She handpainted some of its components - snakes and crabs and intestines and miniature furniture -from expanding foam in the conservation laboratory of the Art Gallery of NSW over the last several weeks.

Golden first created her work for the Night Gallery in Los Angeles last year, knowing it was to be presented at Sydney Modern as part of the opening exhibition *Dreamhome: Stories of Art*

*and Shelter*. The exhibition looks at the hopes and anxieties people share in places across the world.

Golden says the work grew out of the COVID-19 pandemic and chases feelings of disconnection, social isolation and layers of consciousness. In terms of the illusion itself, Golden says it's her biggest work to date and applauded the gallery's push to open Sydney Modern with gender parity.

"It's amazing for any institution to be equal, right?"