

**ARTS  
PROJECT  
AUSTRALIA**

Collingwood  
Yards gallery



# **TONES OF HOME**

**21 October – 25 November 2023**

**Steven Ajzenberg • Atong Atem • Susie Buykx • Cooper+Spowart  
Erub Arts Torres Strait and Ghost Net Collective • Miles Howard-Wilks  
Aishah Kenton • Chris Mason • Ron McBurnie • Chris O'Brien  
Lisa Reid • Anthony Romagnano • Georgia Szmerling • Amani Tia**

Curated by Eric Nash, Director Benalla Art Gallery

# TONES OF HOME

The seeds of this exhibition were truly sewn at home. As my wife and I awaited the arrival of our second child, I found myself considering a work by Mini Graff that hangs above our bed. It is a street art poster in a vintage drawing style. Text on the work reads 'Today is my lucky washing day', and a woman hangs washing on a clothesline while an atomic bomb appears to have gone off in the background. It seemed to resonate with my experience of our domestic bubble of safety, and, when at home, perhaps even my ignorance to the outside world.

This caused me to ponder what 'home' felt like, and indeed meant, to others? It had to mean more than just somewhere we reside. I couldn't help but imagine my favourite fictional retired barrister, Lawrence Hammill QC, declaring, "You can acquire a house, but you can't acquire a home".<sup>1</sup>

I owe a debt of gratitude to the Arts Project Australia team and artists who kicked this project off by sharing their thoughts on the topic of home. A number of responses stuck with me and have framed the exhibition. Home, in their words, could be "where the most important people in your life are"... "where you feel safe"... "a base where you start from"... "a place that fits your ideas of design, location, and convenience." Common themes emerged, specifically 'Personal histories'; 'Love and family'; 'Community and connection'; and 'Belonging, comfort and safety'.

'Personal histories' was the logical leaping off point. How can we know we are home, that we are where we belong, without truly knowing ourselves? Photographs from

Aishah Kenton's most recent series, *Orchid*, take viewers on an intimate journey of self discovery. As she explains;

"Four years ago I found out I had a different name at birth. I was getting married and I read my name on my birth certificate and discovered previously unknown details of my origins. I was in shock.

Photography has always been my craft and medium to process life experiences so this was no exception. How has being adopted at birth influenced me, how has finding out these details changed my perception of myself and my family?

As this series developed I found it became an exploration of how family history influenced my upbringing and cultural identity."<sup>2</sup>

Lisa Reid's paintings are similarly autobiographical. The paintings are of staged family portraits, including at a family wedding, and conjure thoughts of the sepia toned family photos that adorn many of our homes. Moreover, they allude to foundational family events, often experienced during childhood, that can shape our personal identities.

Atong Atem's *Henna 1* is a still taken from the spectacular video artwork, *Banksia*. For the artist, the setting and décor in this particular shot stirred memories of family and friends' houses from her younger years. *Banksia* more broadly examines migrant stories from a non-colonial perspective – "interrogating the shaping of national policy throughout the centuries, which has directly influenced who is determined to be Australian and non-Australian."<sup>3</sup> That is, who was historically made welcome to call Australia 'home', and who was not.

The second evident theme was 'Love and family.' I write this essay now during paternity leave. This is the longest time I have spent consistently at home in years. This break and time with Tegan and our children brought something into clear focus: while Tegan and I have moved cities several times in the last ten years, I have



always felt 'at home' as we have been together.

Cooper and Spowart (Victoria Cooper and Doug Spowart) exemplify this through their extensive photography, photobook and artists book practices, which are maintained both as individual practitioners, and as life collaborators. For these artists, 'home' "was an idealised state of being in Place, which offered a sanctuary and a garden. More than architecture, 'home' is also a psychological and sensorial place for the safe shelter of memories and experiences." <sup>4</sup>

Cooper and Spowart's recent *Desire Paths* books resonate with their shared life and artistic journey, explaining "Our artistic process is also defined by the desire to discover new paths around the traditional norms. Over time these new paths become alternative solutions to the ultimate desired outcome. All these paths or lines are the existential experience and representation of desire." <sup>5</sup>

Chris Mason's works similarly celebrate important relationships in his life. The first shows the artist with his own partner, Monica. The intimate and joyous shot personifies Mason's personal experience of 'home' as somewhere that "feels nice and safe and feels like well-living." <sup>6</sup> Mason's second work is a fun-filled portrait of Arts Project Australia artists and staff, providing a bridge to the third theme of the exhibition, 'Community and connection.'

For some, a home is not necessarily where we reside, but where we most feel like we belong. It is evident that many Arts Project Australia artists have formed a tight-knit community, discovered a passion or purpose, and even found a 'home' away from home in the Northcote studio. This is celebrated not only in the work of Chris Mason, but also in the incredibly sensitive watercolours of Amani Tia, an artist who feels at home when he experiences "tranquility, peacefulness, sensation, and sensibility." <sup>7</sup>

A series of works by artists from Erub Arts Torres Strait and Ghost Net Collective also speak to notions of 'Community and connection.' Central to the installation is the

work *At Home Together*, the result of a nationwide collaboration during COVID-19. The work weaves together contributions from across the country to reflect the universal practice of coming together for a meal. The artists explain, "The ocean is a huge food bowl that we all share in together, we must keep this food bowl healthy. Whatever happens on land, let us hope that we can preserve our oceans and the life within. [This was] a special project during a very difficult time, an artwork that brought people together while apart." <sup>8</sup>

*At Home Together* is surrounded by a selection of rays by Erub and Ghost Net Collective artists. Erub Arts describe the rays as "the carriers of family and personal histories and connections. Each animal carrying all the different aspects that makes a place, a home. Gathering them into the bowl that is *At Home Together*." <sup>9</sup>

There is a strong aesthetic and conceptual relationship between these and the beautiful *Underwater Dining Set* by Georgia Szmeling. Beyond the coral reef relationship, Szmeling's work also highlights the importance of gathering in our home environments, often for a meal. Further, it alludes to the ways in which we fill our homes with decorative and functional objects which reflect the places and things we love.

Ron McBurnie's immaculate etching, *The Story Teller*, also celebrates those moments of coming together. McBurnie explains, "Nestled deep in the rainforest of the highest part of the Atherton Tablelands in Queensland is the home of my good friends the Bentrupperbaumers. Surrounding the house and winding down the hill are sumptuous gardens intricately designed and tended by Joan.

In front of the house is an open courtyard of compacted cracker dust bordered by tree sculptures behind low stone walls. On one side is a circular fire ring made of bricks. Often when I visit, Ben carefully stacks wood in the fire ring and cooks our meal in it. On other occasions when it is cold we put larger logs in the ring and enjoy the warmth of the



TOP: Anthony Romagnano *Untitled* 2022  
Acrylic, paint pen on paper 49 x 38 cm.

BOTTOM: Aishah Kenton *Untitled 3* 2022  
From the series *Orchid*

Archival pigment print 70 x 55 cm.

OPPOSITE TOP: Steven Ajzenberg *Untitled* 2018  
Pencil on paper 19 x 56 cm.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Atong Atem *Henna 1* 2021  
C type digital print 116 x 159 cm, edition of 3 + 2 AP.

blaze. The wood or logs are always specially chosen and arranged so the fire will burn to its best advantage. As the night deepens and the fire begins to illuminate the edges of the forest, Ben often remembers some of the milestones of his and Joan's interesting life and tells the stories of them while we each stare into the embers of the fire."<sup>10</sup>

Also stoked in the fires of a regional Australian home are the beautiful ceramic forms of Susie Buykx, works which speak to the final theme of the exhibition, 'Belonging, comfort and safety.'

Whilst she was introduced to pottery decades ago, Buykx is largely self taught, and her works are inextricable from her home. They are inspired by the natural colours and lines of the country of north east Victoria, together with the changing hues of the grazing country and bush land. They are fired in hand built teepees at her son's property in the Warrenbayne hills, with final control of the colouration of the works handed over to the environment.

In viewing Buykx's works, one can almost hear the sounds of the country – the whistling wind, the crackle of fire, and the call of the birds. Miles Howard-Wilks is an artist who is similarly inspired by nature, celebrating the birdlife that also calls our suburban landscape home. Magpies perch and dart through and around gardens, roads, cars and trains.

For artist Anthony Romagnano, home is a space of comfort and creativity, somewhere "the iPad is where I draw."<sup>11</sup> His depictions of home are vibrant in colour, but exude an assuring stillness. A companion cat; a place to relax and create; a lounge room and TV to unwind. Steven Ajzenberg's artist book brings to pictorial life the common activities within the home – sleeping, eating, and bathing – all activities which align with his concept of home as somewhere "I am comfortable, where I can relax the toes and everything else."<sup>12</sup>

Chris O'Brien's soft sculptures most directly examine the structure of the home. For O'Brien, "Home is what I live in." The

architectural bent of his work may be a pointer to his "want to renovate it like on 'The Block'."<sup>13</sup> Despite the structural formality of these works, they remain informed by personal memories. Works such as *My Nan's Holiday House* underscore the fact that homes are much more than just a structure, they are containers of personal histories, love and family; spaces to form community and connections; and to feel a sense of belonging, comfort and safety.

*Tones of Home* is intended as a sprawling exhibition, drawing together over 50 works by artists from across the country, in media spanning photography, ceramics, textiles, painting, drawing, artist books, and print-making. The exhibition is not intended as an academic exploration of the topic, but rather an experience that feels somewhat as full, rich and varied in content and concept as are the many places and communities we each choose to call home.

## ERIC NASH | 2023

1. *The Castle* (1997) Directed by Rob Sitch. [Feature film]. Sydney, NSW, Australia: Roadshow Entertainment.
2. Kenton, A (2022), Orchid, Aishah Kenton | Photographer, accessed 24 August 2023, <<https://www.aishahkenton.com/projects/orchid>>
3. MARS Gallery 2022, Atong Atem: Banksia, Art Collector, accessed 26 August 2023, <<https://artcollector.net.au/gallery-event/atong-atem-banksia/>>
4. Coope, V and Spowart, D (2023) Email to Eric Nash, 27 August.
5. Coope, V and Spowart, D (2023) Email to Eric Nash, 27 August.
6. Mason, C (2023) Artist interview. Email from Jo Salt to Eric Nash, 28 August.
7. Aishah, A (2023) Artist interview. Email from Jo Salt to Eric Nash, 9 July.
8. Erub Arts Torres Strait (2023) Artwork statement. Email to Eric Nash, 8 February
9. Erub Arts Torres Strait (2023) Email to Eric Nash, 26 July.
10. McBurnie, Ron (2023). Artwork statement. Email to Eric Nash, 24 July
11. Romagnano, A (2023) Artist interview. Email from Jo Salt to Eric Nash, 28 August.
12. Ajzenberg, S (2023) Artist interview. Email from Jo Salt to Eric Nash, 28 August.
13. O'Brien, C (2023) Artist interview. Email from Jo Salt to Eric Nash, 28 August.



TOP: Lisa Reid *Mum and Dad's wedding 2002*. Linocut on paper 50 x 70 cm.  
BOTTOM: Ron McBurnie *The Storyteller 2009*. Hard ground etching on paper 59 x 89.5 cm, edition of 30.



PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY

**LEONARD JOEL**  
Est 1919

**art  
guide**  
AUSTRALIA

**CREATIVE VICTORIA**

  
Australian Government

**Australia  
Council  
for the Arts** 

FRONT: Chris O'Brien  
*My Nan's Holiday House* 2018  
ABOVE: Georgia Szmerling  
*Underwater Dinner Set* 2023 (partial)

OPENING HOURS  
Wed – Fri 11am – 5pm  
Sat 12 – 4pm  
or by appointment

Level 1, Perry Street building  
Collingwood Yards  
Enter via 35 Johnston St or  
30 Perry St, Collingwood

T+ 61 3 9482 4484  
  @artsprojectaust  
gallery@artsproject.org.au  
[www.artsproject.org.au](http://www.artsproject.org.au)