



Gäna (Self), 2009-2018 by Nyapanyapa Yunupingu.

NEW HORIZONS

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

The largest exhibition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art ever to be presented internationally marks an inflection point for First Nations art on the global stage

Photography: Tom Ross, courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria.

In July 2021, Beyoncé shared a photo of herself in a white tie-waisted top, floral flared trousers and oversized sunglasses to her then 193 million-strong Instagram base. But art connoisseurs were principally interested in the shot's background: namely, an expansive orange painting, threaded with wave-like orange lines. It was quickly attributed to Yukultji Napangati, a Pintupi artist and member of the prolific Papunya Tula art cooperative, whose artworks have brought renown to the group since its inception in 1972 and to Australian First Nations art more broadly, both domestically and internationally.

And in North America, a major milestone for Indigenous art is currently taking place. First opening at Washington's National Gallery of Art, before moving to museums in Colorado, Oregon, Massachusetts and Toronto, *The Stars We Do Not See: Australian*

Indigenous Art is the biggest exhibition of Australian Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander art in history.

External validation has zero bearing on art's intrinsic worth, of course. But patronage from megastar celebrities and prestigious global art institutions has an undeniable role to play in redressing historical underrepresentation for First Nations art and introducing audiences from the world over to the talented artists who create it and the millennia of culture from which it springs.

"It felt like such a unique opportunity to share such significant works, especially considering how rare it is to showcase any Australian art internationally," reflects the exhibition's curator, Myles Russell-Cook, artistic director and CEO of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and former senior curator at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). The exhibition brings together nearly 200 works and will tour North America until January 2028.



Photography: Samantha Lynch (this page); Eugene Hyland (opposite), both courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria.

OA WARRIOR I (blue), 2020 by Reko Rennie. OPPOSITE Reko Rennie with REMEMBER ME 2020 inside 2024/25's REKOSPECTIVE: The Art of Reko Rennie at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia.



Many of the pieces displayed, which date from the 19th century to today, have never left Australian shores until now. The exhibition spans genres and media, from Central and Western Deserts conceptual map paintings and sculpture to 21st-century sound installations, like Christian Thompson's 2021 work *Burdi Burdi (Fire Fire)*, a meditation on the loss of First Nations languages.

"I chose some of the most ambitious and powerful works in the [NGV] collection, aiming to tell a story as vast and impactful as the artists themselves," notes Russell-Cook. Works, created by more than 130 artists, are drawn from the length and breadth of the country, from the Kimberley to Far North Queensland and the Central Desert. "The show is a kaleidoscope of emotion, story, place, spirit, ancestral and cosmic realms and both history and activism. It is ancient and new at the same time and just a huge celebration of culture and art."

Kamilaroi artist Reko Rennie, whose oeuvre was the focus of solo exhibition REKOSPECTIVE at the NGV from October 2024 to January 2025, has two works displayed in the exhibition. *OA WARRIOR I (pink)* and *OA WARRIOR I (blue)*, both created in 2020, are life-size neon profiles of a man inspired by a 19th-century photograph of a Kamilaroi warrior.

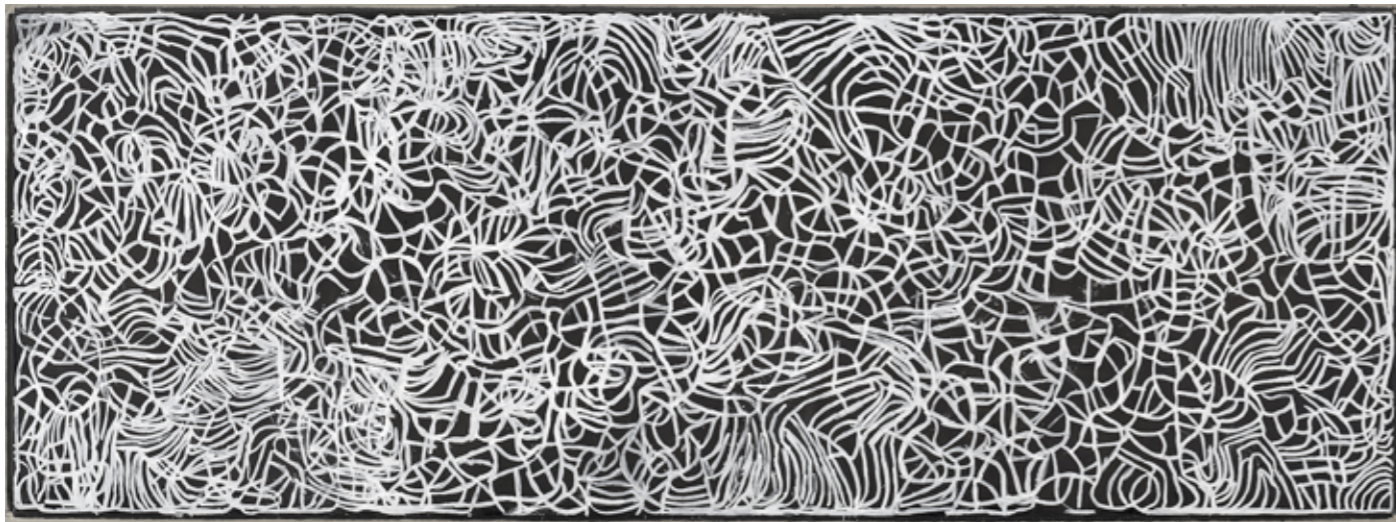
"I believe it is very important for international audiences to see the amazing diversity of First Nations art," says Rennie. "Too often our work is either validated only by outdated romanticised stereotypes, notions of authenticity in relation to tradition or particular art forms such as dot paintings," he continues, "when our works are a lot more than just a mono-cultured representation of identity. This exhibition

highlights the diversity of contemporary art from Australia and provokes discussion around the oldest continual living culture in the world."

Other standouts include Emily Kam Ngwarray's *Anwerlarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)* (1995). "Its stark minimalism – a continuous white line on a black background – creates a magnetic presence," shares Russell-Cook. "It embodies Ngwarray's deep connection to her Country, Alhalker [in the Northern Territory], and reflects the cultural narratives that shape her identity and storytelling. It serves as a powerful exploration of community and culture, highlighting the profound relationship between art and the land."

"Nyapanyapa Yunupingu's *Gāna (Self)* is also a huge highlight," he continues. "An incredibly important artist, her installation features irregularly shaped bark paintings and memorial poles, transforming simple lines into bold expressions that resonate deeply with viewers. It is also such a complex thing to transport that I think this is one of the few chances there will ever be to see this work outside of Australia. It is about the self, measuring the value and influence of a person's life through the most incredible and hypnotic abstract forms."

2025 has been "particularly huge" for Indigenous art, notes Russell-Cook. Touring exhibition *Ever Present* enjoyed its final showing at Canberra's National Gallery of Australia (NGA) after stints in Perth, Singapore and Auckland. Also significant is the Ngwarray retrospective at London's Tate Modern, presented from July 2025 until January 2026, composed of 80 of the late artist's pieces.



FROM TOP Emily Kam Ngwarray near Mparntwe, Alice Springs in 1980; Anwerlarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming), 1995 by Emily Kam Ngwarray.

Photography: © Toly Sawenko (top); Christian Markel / NGV (bottom and opposite), all courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria.

“We’re delighted to have worked with the [NGA] to stage Europe’s first exhibition dedicated to Emily Kam Ngwarray, offering our audiences the chance to experience her compelling works at scale for the very first time,” says Catherine Wood, director of curatorial and chief curator at Tate Modern.

“Based on the NGA’s Ngwarray exhibition held in 2023 [and] 2024, curated by Kelli Cole and Hetti Perkins, the show presents her work through the lens of her own world, showcasing Ngwarray as a matriarch of her community, storyteller, singer, visual artist and custodian of Country,” Wood explains.

“Ngwarray’s work encourages us to see the world from a new perspective and it’s been incredibly rewarding to see our visitors engaging so deeply with her captivating paintings and powerful storytelling.”

“Despite Australia’s distance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art has always interested international audiences, but there is an energy at the moment,” says Russell-Cook. It’s worth noting, too, that the market is booming. Annual sales of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts

reached at least \$250 million in 2019-20, according to the Australian Productivity Commission, of which \$35 million represents artwork sales through art centres.

“We are made up of over 250 language groups, so even the term ‘Indigenous art’ is not without its problems,” says Russell-Cook. “The works in [The Stars We Do Not See] encompass such a rich diversity that I think it can be challenging to convey just how diverse Indigenous art is in a single narrative. Which is perhaps why this hasn’t happened before.”

Russell-Cook describes the exhibition’s artworks as “ambassadors”, representing Indigenous peoples to audiences around the globe.

“[They share] profound stories of place, identity, culture, Country, politics and activism,” he reflects. “Many of these stories feel more important than ever, especially in the current geopolitical landscape.”

“Ultimately, I want people to see that art has the power to bridge gaps and reveal the shared humanity that exists across cultures.” HB



*“Too often our [First Nations] work is either validated only by outdated romanticised stereotypes, notions of authenticity in relation to tradition or particular art forms such as dot paintings”
– Reko Rennie*

Ghost Gum, MacDonnell Ranges, Central Australia, c. 1945 by Albert Namatjira.