

My Blood Sings Old Songs

Atong Atem
Sonja Hodge
Jenna Lee
Tracey Moffatt
Jahkarli Felicitas Romanis
Leyla Stevens
wani toaishara

Curated by Maya Hodge

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Our bodies hold layers of remembrance and what it feels like to be seen. Atong Atem's *DUST* series (2023) focuses on her self-portraiture practice and how it reflects the beliefs and rituals of her Dinka culture. Atem lies on orange-dust earth, representing the deserts of so-called Australia and South Sudan. In *DUST #1*, she is full-term with her baby. She leans over, palms in the sand, in a moment that may be rest or worship. The Christian symbology and iconography of the West makes me think about collective understandings of displacement. In so-called Australia, Christianity drove efforts to remove Aboriginal children from their families and cut them off from identity, Country, and kinship. Atem's work is intimate, drawing on the quiet power of her storytelling, especially when comparing motherhood, religious shadows, and the changing body.

Displacement and isolation play a big part in our ability to connect with ourselves, others, and the world around us. My mother, Sonja Hodge, in her new work *Inbetween* (2026), delves into her journey and childhood. *Inbetween* is a bold step towards embracing vulnerability and experimentation in her practice. Mum's outstretched figures and detailed designs are so iconic across her practice. Here, those same gestures seep into her interest in cyanotyping, which she describes as more accessible than other mediums, and also one of the most magical processes for image-making, harnessing the power of the sun. To create the work, she scattered foliage and invited me, my brother and her daughter-in-law to lie outstretched in the sun. My brother holding his clapsticks and my violin by my side, we all lay together. In her other works, she lies solo surrounded by eucalyptus and grasses, and along the wall her designs are overlaid on fabric, capturing a trajectory from her beginning practice to a new way of working. How we see our own practices is reflected by how we develop the way we weave our stories into the continuum.

Gulumerridjin (Larrakia), Wardaman and KarraJarri artist Jenna Lee's work, *Still light with Larrakia ochre* (2025), sits in conversation with Steven's film. This new photographic series by Lee is a nod to the still-life genre of painting, spinning it towards a perspective as an Aboriginal person. The ochre glows from the light within the basket, awash with darkness surrounding the belongings, the work sings out as living connections to her family and Country. Lee's basket *balarr danala [light dillybag]* (2024) lies on a plinth nearby, soft-looking and beautifully woven together with kozo bark (paper mulberry), yet vibrating with a power passed on from her kin. Her practice is bodily as it is imbued with deep feeling, through transforming the gaze and materials from the archival past into an honouring of cultural strength and care for how we continue to tell the stories that live in our bloodlines.

The artists in this exhibition, Atong Atem, Sonja Hodge, Jenna Lee, Tracey Moffatt, Jahkarli Felicitas Romanis, Leyla Stevens, and wani toaishara, have created captivating works that echo through the space, living and breathing, and are a testament to the strength of cultural storytelling. It is challenging to put a finger on exactly what *My Blood Sings Old Songs* is, but I think this exhibition is about many things tied to intuition and feeling; it is a knowing driven by fierce and rich memory, legacy, and kinship across communities and cultures.

Reading List

Browning, B. In Profile: Some Lads, National Portrait Gallery, 23 January 2025. <https://www.portrait.gov.au/magazines/72/in-profile-some-lads>

Swastika, A. Their Sea is Always Hungry, University of Technology Sydney, exhibition catalogue. <https://www.uts.edu.au/globalassets/sites/default/files/2023-10/UTS-TheirSea-R7-Web.pdf>

The Age, *Message of healing*, 13 June 2005. <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/message-of-healing-20050613-ge0c3o.html>

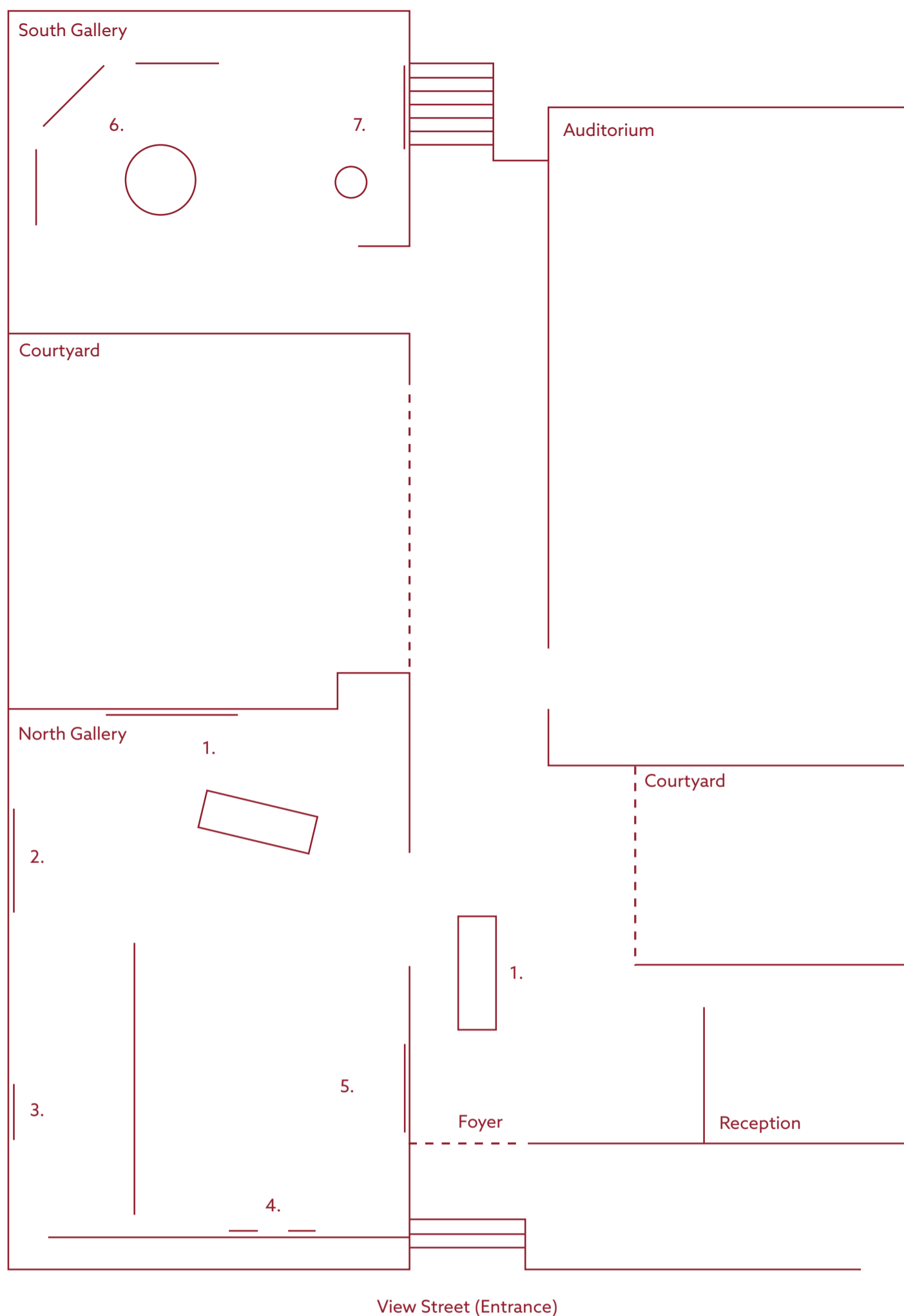
My Blood Sings Old Songs tries to put words to a feeling that I have yet to find the language for. From the beginning, this exhibition has been ever-changing, but at its heart is a question: how do we express the feeling behind the way a photograph or a film can hold such meaning for our families and bloodlines? We feel it when we flick through family photo albums or hear a song we haven't heard in a while.

Aboriginal languages – in fact, many languages around the world – already have words for these feelings, and often they are lying dormant waiting to be spoken once more. The artists in this exhibition bring together how to convey this feeling, through photography, cyanotype, weaving, film, and the experience of remembrance, moving through the world in our bodies – being seen and seeing shadows.

Writing on Tracey Moffatt's series *Some Lads* (1986), for the Portrait Gallery, Bundjalung and Kullilli writer, journalist, and broadcaster Daniel Browning observed that the series was captured during a moment in Australian history in which 'performing and visual arts became our voice – the vehicle, the Trojan horse if you like – that could hold within it our collective, subversive dreams of what the nation could be, if it would exchange denialism, amnesia and wilful blindness to see us as we really are.' This period in so-called Australia is considered a step towards self-determination in First Peoples' arts and culture, and Moffatt's photographs foreground Blackfulla's sovereignty and pride during the conservative political climate of the mid '80s. The two photographs from this series selected for this exhibition are reminiscent of the preciousness of a family photo album and are testimony to Moffatt's early vision as a powerful storyteller. The young men in Moffatt's photographs go on to become some of this country's most trailblazing dancers, yet in *Some Lads*, they are just that; they are our brothers, uncles, nephews, and the carriers of the stories of our people.

Dance is a ceremony and the means by which we can express, through movement, what words cannot fully convey. Congolese artist wani toaishara's new work *Kin* (2026) encompasses a hanging photographic work printed on sheer fabric and a smaller, framed wall work peeking from behind the fabric, depicting a mother and son, gently folded in a frame. The black-and-white photograph floating in the gallery space depicts a '60s family portrait in Bukavu, DRC. toaishara's work is a poignant reflection on the way memory moves unseen through the air and space around us. What is seen is the way our hands leave marks on a photograph, which the artist speaks to as 'carried, tucked away and returned to the photograph across generations.' toaishara purposely lets the fabric on the framed work slip, revealing the wall beneath and reminding us of the oppressive power that colonialism once had over our storytelling and lives. *Kin* is a staunch look at what remains – imprinted in our collective and familial memory, in Black everyday life, and in our continued existence.

Balinese-Australian artist Leyla Stevens' film *Kidung* (2019) is a mesmerising work speaking to the legacy and havoc of political violence during Indonesia's 1965-66 genocide. The film foregrounds poet and performance artist, Cok Sawitri, whose lament echoes through the space; a song for the unacknowledged dead and mass grave sites. The song, written by Stevens, traces the childhood memory of her father as he witnesses the violence inflicted upon people alleged to be members of the Communist Party. Behind Cok stands a banyan tree. This reminds me of Gunditjmarra Elder Uncle Jim Berg's photography, which captures trees as 'silent witnesses' who often watch unspeakable events unfold. Jakarta-based curator, researcher and activist, Alia Swastika, writes, 'in the Balinese context itself, the banyan tree is an important symbol of the relationship between humankind and the cosmos, in which the tree can invite invisible spirits.' Steven's work reminds us that the landscape remembers, and when our bodies are unable to hold the grief, we can rely on our non-human kin to ground us in the darkness.



List of Works

FOYER AND NORTH GALLERY

1. **Sonja Hodge**
Lardil, born Meekatharra, Western Australia, 1969, lives Naarm / Melbourne
Inbetween, 2026
Cyanotype, muslin, mixed media
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist
2. **Atong Atem**
born Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1991, lives Naarm / Melbourne
Dust #1, 2023
Ilford smooth pearl print
150 x 150cm
Courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery
3. **wani toaishara**
born Bukavu, D.R.Congo, 1990, lives Naarm / Melbourne
Kin, 2026
Material
Courtesy of the artist
sheer textile print, silk scarf on a wooden frame, soundscape

4. **Tracey Moffatt**
born Brisbane / Meanjin, 1960, lives Sydney / Gadigal
Some Lads #2, 1986
Silver gelatin photograph
40 x 43 cm
Courtesy of Murray Art Museum Albury
Donated by the Estate of Gary Anderson, 1994
Some Lads #3, 1986
Silver gelatin photograph
40 x 43 cm
Courtesy of Murray Art Museum Albury
Donated by the Estate of Gary Anderson, 1994
5. **Jahkarli Felicitias Romanis**
Pitta Pitta, born Wadawurrung Country / Geelong, 1998, lives Naarm / Melbourne
Flank, 2026
digital video
2 minutes 35 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

SOUTH GALLERY

6. **Leyla Stevens**
born Gubbi Gubbi / Cooroy, 1982, lives Naarm / Melbourne
Kidung, 2019
Three channel film, stereo sound
10:58 mins
Courtesy of the artist
Credits:
Director/Editor: Leyla Stevens
Performer: Cok Sawitri
Production Assistance:Wayan Martino
Camera Operator: Wayan Martino & Leyla Stevens
Camera Assistance: Medy Mahasena
Audio Mastering: Tim Bruniges
7. **Jenna Lee**
Gulumerridjin (Larrakia), Wardaman, and KarraJarri born Canberra / Kanberri, 1992, lives Naarm / Melbourne
Still light with Larrakia ochre, 2025
print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Barty
100x150cm / 150 x 100 cm [check h or w]
Courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery
balarr danala (light dillybag), 2024
Raw kozo bark fibres, kozo lantern washi
Courtesy of the artist and MARS Gallery