

Circles of dialogue

Curator: Amelia Wallin

Diana Baker Smith, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Zoë Croggon, Dean Cross, Narelle Desmond, Emily Floyd, Inge King, Sriwhana Spong, Augusta Vinall Richardson

Two vertical poles arise from a body of water; together they uphold large steel circular forms that overlap and radiate outwards. These interlocking geometric shapes are the work of Inge King (1915–2016), commissioned and constructed for La Trobe University's Melbourne Campus in Bundoora in 1976 (fig. 1). *Dialogue of circles* is typical of King's oeuvre, characterised by her interest in form, geometry and landscape. A European postwar migrant, King was a celebrated modernist, renowned and remembered for her formal sculptures across public spaces in Melbourne, in particular.

King remains one of few female artists in an art form dominated by men. She claimed a space for herself in the masculine field of steel sculpture and, for this reason, has come to represent a feminist position for many contemporary artists. A member of the artist group Centre Five and a teacher at RMIT for more than eleven years, King's artistic influence can be traced through the practices of artists including Emily Floyd and Augusta Vinall Richardson, in this exhibition.

This is an exhibition about artistic impact and the different ways it can be felt, as history, memory, transference and affect. Using the aforementioned modernist sculpture as a beginning point, the exhibition

Fig. 1 Inge King, *Dialogue of circles*, La Trobe University, Bundoora, 2017.
Photo: Rita Earll, La Trobe University



radiates outwards, inviting the artistic input of contemporary sculptors, dancers, performance and visual artists, and artists working in the public realm, who each pay particular attention to the thresholds where the body meets the rest of the world. Titled *Circles of dialogue*, in an inversion of the title of King's sculpture, the exhibition opens an exchange on geometric form and grammar to include new positions, conversations and interpretations.

This text, written to accompany the exhibition, traces these influences both directly and indirectly. The first section explores the edges of material, place and history. The second section explores influential encounters with public art, followed by a consideration of the thresholds between architecture and the body. The final section ruminates on the material traces of modernism, as explored through the body.

EDGES

La Trobe's Melbourne Campus is located on Wurundjeri Country, 15 km from the city centre towards the north-eastern edge of Melbourne, an area known for its green spaces and swathes of native bushland. The edge of the city, at Warrandyte, was also where King made her home with Grahame King and their two daughters in the 1950s, in what King playfully referred to as 'suburban pioneering'.¹ When *Dialogue of circles* was first installed, the gum trees that surrounded the site were saplings. Looking forward, King was inspired by the trees' future verticality. She intended her artworks to mediate between the body of the viewer and the surrounding environment. *Dialogue of circles* was conceived to echo the form of the trees not yet grown, to compete with and complicate the landscape.

This is very different from the approach of Lorraine Connelly-Northey (Wiradjuri), whose work also figures in this exhibition and is held in La Trobe's collection. Connelly-Northey uses found metal to make her sculptures, adding nothing and taking only what is needed. She sources discarded scraps of metal and broken equipment from farmland and repurposes them into cultural belongings. In this exhibition, three of Connelly-Northey's narrbong are hung on the wall. Narrbong is a Wiradjuri word that means bag or vessel. It also refers to the pouch of a marsupial, which for Connelly-Northey implies the continuation of life. Whether containing a baby kangaroo or holding the weight of cultural knowledge, a narrbong is a bag, a net, a carrier, a recipient, an essential tool for sustenance and reproduction.

'Artistic terra nullius' is a phrase coined by artist and academic Dr Paola Balla that refers to the violent erasure of First Nations people's – particular Aboriginal women's – artistic contributions.² Modernist works of public art continued the harmful assumption and legacy of terra nullius in their positioning of monumental artworks on supposedly neutral or vacant lands. Unlike the smoothed-over surfaces of works of public art, Connelly-Northey embraces the violent edges of her work in a rejection of terra nullius, artistic or otherwise. She states that 'the bags are purposely designed to continue to cause pain. Any edge in those bags will bite'.³

Connelly-Northey herself bites back at the assumption of artistic terra nullius, instead enacting the continuation of a culture that has been here all along, and First Nations sovereignty.

Notable for its non-urban setting, *Dialogue of circles* was one of Inge King's first large-scale public art commissions, and the first time she had worked with fabricators rather than undertaking the metalwork herself. Earlier works from her oeuvre, such as *Group of boulders* (1970–71), also installed at the Melbourne Campus, bear the marks of the handheld welder she used to finish her metal sculptures. It is this technique that has inspired the work of artist Augusta Vinall Richardson. Vinall Richardson cuts and welds steel to create precarious arrangements and interconnecting shapes, using the same tools and techniques that King developed early in her career. Through handheld welding, the edges are softened, as heat coaxes two pieces of metal to become one. These modular works of stitched-together steel expose the hand of the artist, and evoke the legacy of King's metalwork.

Like the delicate balance at play in *Dialogue of circles*, Vinall Richardson's artworks give the illusion of precarity. In the work *Apexes* (2023), a small sculpture sits atop a plinth of stacked cardboard boxes. Vinall Richardson's commission for this exhibition, and her largest work to date, builds on her master's degree research into King. *In service of, in service to (IK)* (2023) resembles a balancing set of steel blocks. Vinall Richardson manipulates metal into new transfigurations, exploring the presence and movement of the body in relation to industrial materials. This is most apparent in *Connect* (2022), the work suspended in our building's atrium, where intercut pieces of mirrored steel are assembled and linked together. In encountering this work in the gallery, we confront our own fragmented reflection through a puzzle of possible perspectives.

Artist Diana Baker Smith pursues her interest in the edges of art history through research into archives and forgotten histories. Previously, her work has focused on female performance artists whose ephemeral, temporal work is recorded only in archives. With *She speaks in sculpture* (2022), Baker Smith turns her attention to the material and bodily traces of a work of public art.

Framed across dual projections, this video installation follows the life of another modernist sculpture, *Growth forms* by Margel Hinder, first installed on Sydney's Pitt Street in 1959. Hinder and King were contemporaries. As women artists married to male artists (Frank Hinder and Grahame King respectively), they were defined and celebrated on their own merit rather than the artistic output of their husbands. King's daughters, Joanna Tanaka-King and Angela Hey, recall the friendship between the two families as unusual at the time in its make-up of artist-parents and young children (personal communication, 13 July 2023).

Baker Smith's work traces the careful transit of *Growth forms* to its present location at the University of Technology Sydney, employing the ephemerality of dance to speak to the sculpture's present-day absence from Pitt Street. Across the two screens, a choreography occurs, between Baker Smith's archival investigations and dancer Ivey Wawn's movements in communication with the sculpture and the urban landscape where it once stood. Viewed side by side, these encounters suggest two forms of archive, ephemera and the body, both equal containers of memory and experience.

ENCOUNTERS

The integration of art, pedagogy and architecture was central to La Trobe University's very foundation. In particular, the profiling of Australian sculpture through commissions and acquisitions was an integral part of the original design and master plan of the campus. King, along with the other members of Centre 5, advocated for the civic potential of sculpture. The group dominated modernist Australian sculpture in the 1960s and 1970s, winning major prizes and acquisitions. As art historian Anna Parlone has suggested, King's iconic sculpture *Forward surge* in Melbourne's Southbank was for many Victorian artists their first encounter with art.⁴

Tracing the circuits of influence in the art world is familiar terrain for artist Narelle Desmond. One of her first projects was an epistolary exercise in which she wrote, and received replies, from artists such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Frank Auerbach, Sol LeWitt and Louise Bourgeois.

Both furniture and sculpture, Desmond's commissioned work for this exhibition is titled *civic civic (1-4)*. Desmond has translated the circular forms of King's sculptures into modular and movable seating that can be reconfigured throughout the galleries. In an extension of King's vision of the growth of the neighbouring gums as companions to her sculptures, Desmond was inspired by civic seating designed to wrap around trees. Audiences are invited to use these structures, echoing the ways in which public art can be inhabited as seat, shelter or meeting place. In response to *Forward surge* being used by skateboarders, Inge King herself once stated: 'I know it can withstand any ill treatment so why not be part of the community?'⁵

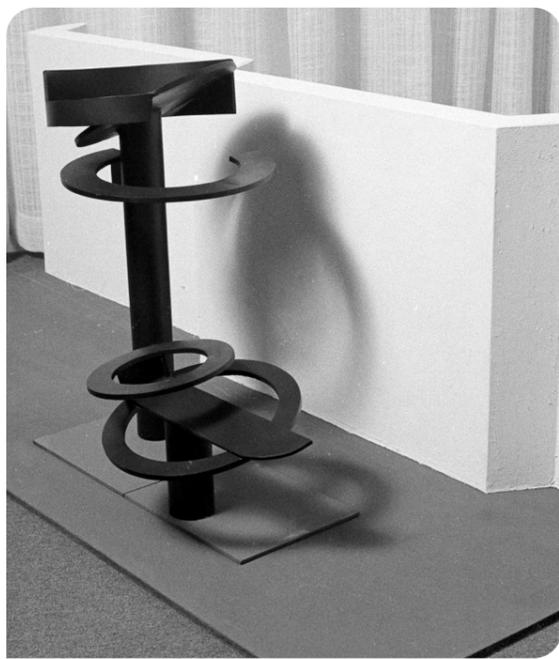
In the surface treatment of these seats, Desmond makes reference to the black-and-white abstract geometric paintings of Cuban American artist Carmen Hererra (1915–2022), for Desmond 'an artist whose work keeps weaving in and out of my practice' (personal communication 10 August 2023). Sharing the same birth year, King and Hererra were pioneers; their practices endured in the typically male-dominated disciplines of minimalist sculpture and abstraction. In tracing the marks of Hererra's work, Desmond enfolds another artist into *Circles of dialogue*, and in doing so pays homage to two of her own artistic influences.

In exploring the advent of the eight-hour workday, and the resource of steam that powered the industrial revolution, Emily Floyd presents *Monument/Memorial to the eight-hour day*, a steam-powered sculptural monument installed in one of our gallery's inner courtyards. Six circles made from hand-beaten copper are clustered together. These forms represent the three figure eights drawn from the now famous union slogan, eight hours' rest, eight hours' labour, eight hours' recreation. However, Floyd's figure eights lie in a heap; here, the intended distinction between sleep, work and recreation has collapsed.

Activated by Floyd at the opening of the exhibition, three separate boilers shoot out steam, complete with whistling sounds. Harnessing the anachronistic power of steam, the work is an engine for speculating on divergent histories of labour. Floyd's jumble of hours represents the unwaged and unaccounted work that refuses to neatly occupy the eight-hour shift.

Monument/Memorial to the eight-hour day characterises a significant material departure for Floyd, who usually finishes her sculptures with glossy epoxy paint. We have come to expect traditional bronze for statues in our public spaces, and in her choice of copper Floyd references the 580 statues across Melbourne, of which fewer than 2% depict women.⁶ When Floyd first began to make public art using metal, she sought out King's guidance as a fellow female artist working in the public sphere. 'Through her work,' Floyd remarked, 'she showed me how to do it' (personal communication, 9 June 2022).

Fig. 2 Inge King, maquette and model for Union Moat Theatre development, La Trobe University, 1976. Photo: La Trobe University



THRESHOLDS

Thresholds refer to the entrance into a building, the space between the architecture and the outside, but also the beginning of something new, or the limit of something already in existence.⁷ Retrieved from a collection store, King's maquette of *Dialogue of circles* is displayed in this exhibition, drawing a thread between the art collections housed at La Trobe's Melbourne Campus and the contemporary art focus of La Trobe Art Institute in Bendigo. A prolific model-maker, King's maquettes were central to her practice (fig. 2).

The walls of her Warrandyte studio remain lined with yet-to-be realised public monuments in miniature form. These maquettes exist at the threshold between the intimacy of her home studio and the public sphere.

Encounters between bodies and their surrounding environments have long been the focus of Zoë Croggon's work. Using her training in dance and drawing, Croggon manipulates and choreographs found images. Her assemblages of gestural lines and fragments of bodies seemingly hum with anticipation and movement. Previously, Croggon has contrasted the bodies of gymnasts against sleek formal architectural façades, but here the hard edges of concrete give way to modernist backdrops of texture, line and form. A sense of dislocation occurs; her figures never quite become fully immersed in the spaces they inhabit. In this exhibition, across four prints displayed in pairs, Croggon explores the fluidity between architecture and bodies. Her work recalls a statement made by London-based New Zealand artist Sriwhana Spong, also in this exhibition: 'There are no full stops to the body, just lines that go on.'⁸

Fig. 3 Reinstallation of Inge King's *Dialogue of circles*, 2011. Photo: Tess Flynn, La Trobe University



TRACES

Like the continual placement and displacement of Margel Hinder's *Growth form* documented by Baker Smith, King's *Dialogue of circles* underwent its own series of revisions. The sculpture was originally conceived to stand on the concrete stage of La Trobe's open-air Moat Theatre, acting as a visible and constant backdrop for performances and speeches. For reasons unknown to me, it was decided that the sculpture would be installed in the water itself, which compromised the intended height. Some thirty years later, in 2011, the sculpture underwent conservation treatment and, under King's instruction, was raised 1.3 m (fig. 3). To encounter *Dialogue of circles* today is to see it at the height King intended, surrounded by gum trees, just behind the Moat Theatre stage.

Theatrical and performative traces compel Sriwhana Spong, who works across media including sculpture, performance and sound. The first work I encountered by Spong featured a 1940 sketch by Sidney Nolan, enlarged and reproduced across an entire wall of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The sketch was a previously unrealised set design for the ballet *Icare*, based on the myth of Icarus. Similar to the way backdrops wear over time, Spong's silk works often take on the properties of the sites in which they are hung. She explains that 'these include torn hems from blowing across the warehouse floor on Cockatoo Island, paint splatters and corners cut out ... mysterious animal prints, wine spills, rips. These traces have become for me a loved part of the work, making them more bodily' (personal communication, 26 June 2023).

The hard edges of orange and purple recall colour field paintings of the 1950s and '60s. Yet these flat shades of colour are achieved by submerging the silk in two kinds of Fanta soft drink (original and grape flavour). This work is part of a larger series of silks dyed with soft drink, inspired in part by the daily offerings of flowers, sweet food and drink that Spong encounters in her ancestral home of Bali, as well as Ian F Svenonius's essay, *The bloody latte: vampirism as a mass movement* (2006), which defines colonisers' appetites for native beverages as an 'act of colonial bloodsucking'.⁹

Dean Cross (Worimi) also traces the legacies of modernism in his practice, confronting its exclusions and erasures. For this exhibition, Cross presents *Prima facie*, as well as two newly commissioned artworks, both of which have been created over a period of several years. In these works, early career self-portraits and other paintings are reconstituted into double-sided kinetic sculptures. Cross's painterly style draws on the principles of modernist abstraction. Certain paintings from this series, with their cut-out eyes and simple forms, recall the mask-like portraits of Sidney Nolan, who remains an important artistic touchstone for Cross. These paintings are collaged with drawings and cultural objects, both traditional and non-traditional, including boomerangs and fly hooks. Further disrupting the myth of artistic terra nullius, Cross positions his practice in a continuum of the world's longest living culture. Densely layered, these works represent a collision of ideas and materials.

Extending from Cross's background in contemporary dance and choreography, these works draw attention to movement across the gallery. Suspended from the ceiling, the traversing of our bodies through the space results in the gentle movement of the artwork. Orbiting their axes, they enact their own subtle choreography.

The artworks in this exhibition respond to the dynamic spirit of King's sculptures from the 1970s, centring the body as a container of memories and experiences in relation to monumental works of public art and their histories. Like King herself, these works are acutely attentive to their surroundings. The oxidised steel of Connelly-Northey's *Narrbong* and the reflective surfaces of Vinall Richardson's sculptures quite literally take in surrounding air and light. Other artworks, such as Spong's textile, accrue traces of the previous sites in which they have been exhibited, and, like Desmond's seating, exist between useable object and artwork. Croggon's careful collages further extend relations between our bodies and the architectural spaces we move through. In response to the dominant narratives of masculine sculpture, Floyd and Baker Smith address the lack of women in public art, either as a subject deserving of memorialising, or as makers themselves. Cross complicates inherited art histories, bringing the 'baggage' of his own artistic practice into play. Together, these works enfold the spheres of King's modernist legacy into a broader dialogue that encompasses First Nations and colonial memory, conservation and bodily archives.

Fig. 4 Inge King at the installation of *Dialogue of circles*, La Trobe University, Bundoora, 1976. Photo: La Trobe University



- Judith Trimble, *Inge King sculptor*, Craftsman House, Melbourne, 1996.
- Paola Balla, 'Disrupting artistic terra nullius: a focus on the processes and places of repair', *Journal of Public Pedagogies*, no. 7, 2023.
- Quoted in Claudia Arozqueta, 'Lorraine Connelly-Northey: sculptures that bite', *Frieze*, 27 March 2019, accessed 30 July 2023.
- Anna Parlane, 'Centre Five: bridging the gap', *Memo*, 25 February 2023, accessed 15 July 2023.
- Parlane, 'Centre Five: bridging the gap'.
- 'Celebrating women in Melbourne's history', City of Melbourne, accessed 30 July 2023.
- Threshold* is also the name of a later work (1983–84) by King.
- 'Sriwhana Spong: Fanta silver and song, 2011', Gertrude Contemporary, accessed 15 July 2023.
- Ian F Svenonius, 'The bloody latte: vampirism as a mass movement,' in *The psychic Soviet*, Drag City, Chicago, 2006.