

Ramsay Art Prize exhibition takes temperature of top Australian artists under 40

ABC Arts / By arts editor [Dee Jefferson](#)

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Julia Gutman made textile works in her room during lockdown, embroidering images of her friends onto items of clothing they donated. (*ABC Arts: Sia Duff*)

To the extent that an art prize is a litmus test for any given sector, it's fair to say that young Australian artists are — like the rest of us — a bit stressed right now.

Stressed about bushfires, endangered species, climate change, surveillance and state-sanctioned violence — and more mundane things like household grime, child safety, and you know, that whole mortality business.

These anxieties are a dark undertow to this year's Ramsay Art Prize, across 24 finalist works from Australian artists under the age of 40, brought together in an exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia that opened late May.

Canberra artist **Anna Madeleine Raupach** hand-stitched a map of the [Gospers Mountain mega-blaze](#) onto a silver emergency thermal blanket — the darkest colours representing where the most vegetation was lost.

West Australian farmer and artist **Anna Louise Richardson** wallpapered the gallery with everyday dangers of rural life — from snakes and spiders to household hazards like knives and powerboards.



artwork *We Should Be More Afraid of The Sun Than The Moon* by WA artist, farmer and
er Anna Louise Richardson. (Supplied: AGSA/Claire Hodgins)

Tasmanian artist **Tom O'Hern** presented a dense grid of 1,000 cartoon illustrations whose subjects ranged from the banal to the surreal to the catastrophic — laced with comedy and absurdity (and a lot of penises).

"I'm worried about a lot of things. And I guess humour is about saying serious things in a funny way," O'Hern tells ABC Arts.

"But I'm kinda worried that the world's ending? That's a pretty bad one. And whether or not it will end is one thing — but I feel like we're in the process of it ending. And it would be nice if we got off that process.

"I wonder if people will look back at us and wonder why we weren't like [doing anything about it]."



Irish artist Tom O'Hern and his series of 1,000 drawings, titled *Drawings from the
End of the World*. (*ABC Arts: Sia Duff*)

At the same time, there was a celebratory mood at the Ramsay Art Prize media call on Friday: almost all the artists had flown in for the occasion, and the excitement was about more than who would walk away with the \$100,000 prize.

The mere fact of being present in a gallery, to talk to other artists and about their own art, in the wake of a year of lockdowns and delays, was reason enough to feel happy — and perhaps hungrily so, given the spectre of further pandemic-related restrictions.

As it turned out, the winner of this year's Ramsay Art Prize neatly reflected the ambivalence of the moment.

In **Kate Bohunnis's** monumental installation *Edges of Excess*, a steel pendulum swings back and forth over a thick strap of soft pink silicone — a sight that was soothing to some, sinister to others, and both to many.



ges of Excess by Kate Bohunnis, "the axe blade swings precariously over the slumped
' (Supplied: AGSA/Saul Steed)

"It's somewhat alluring and transfixing but also holds the promise of injury — if something were to malfunction," the 30-year-old South Australian artist told ABC Adelaide's David Bevan.

"It's that sort of moment between function and dysfunction."

Inspired by her mother's use of pendulums as a divination tool for the family's decision-making,

Bohunnis's work reflects on the adult legacy of a childhood ritual.

"I sort of realised that I was no longer able to make simple decisions or important decisions for myself and trust my word, and my knowledge and my gut entirely," she tells ABC Arts.

"And that was, I guess, the first practice of that, that I've seen — of handing too much over to something else — and then what that robs you of."



Bohunnis told ABC Arts she'd been "wanting to make a work with the pendulum for a very long time", *Edges of Excess* is her largest work to date. (*ABC Arts: Sia Duff*)

Thriving during COVID

The Ramsay exhibition is not purely angst, however.

Last year's lockdowns produced some incredible work, as artists survived — or even thrived — with smaller spaces, limited choices and fewer distractions.

Nathan Beard, based in Boorloo (Perth), used lockdown to expand his sculpture practice.

He delved deep into YouTube tutorials, learning how to make a hyper-realistic silicon version of his hands performing a gesture from traditional Thai dance — a familiar motif from his recent work.



an Beard says his work *Limp-wristed Gesture (i)* "explore[s] humour through
ature". (*ABC Arts: Sia Duff*)

Once the silicon hands were made, he studied how to achieve the shimmery fleshy tone of the makeup, and perfected a method of customising the nail acrylics.

He says his work, titled *Limp-wristed Gesture (i)*, "speaks to an aesthetic, and a taste, which reminds me very much of my mother and my aunties. And it's sort of embedded in shrines and temples: this aesthetic of excess and ornamentation, and detail — incredible detail."



Beard says *Limp-wristed Gesture* (i) explores "queerness through the ambiguity and the fluidity of these gestures from Thai dance". (*ABC Arts: Dee Jefferson*)

Until recently, Beard was better known for work using archival photos and family portraits.

"This [new] work hints at a sort of like looseness and three-dimensionality that I feel like expands my work in a pretty substantial way," he says of his Ramsay entry.



by Millar Baker and her series *I Will Survive*, which was made during lockdown while her daughter watched the *Trolls* movie on repeat beside her. (ABC Arts: Sia Duff)

For **Hayley Millar Baker**, based in Naarm (Melbourne), 2020 was a year of momentous change in her life and art practice.

"I was turning 30 years old. It was also a brand new decade. I was also going to be in my first art fair — Melbourne Art Fair. I also got asked to be a feature artist in Photo 2020," she tells ABC Arts.

Then COVID happened. The art fair was cancelled, Photo 2020 was put back a year, and Millar Baker spent the year pregnant and with a small toddler, and then caring for both children once her son was born. Her partner was working interstate.

"I was alone for the whole year," she said.

So she worked — while her toddler sat beside her watching the *Trolls* movie on repeat — and made her Ramsay Art Prize entry.

Having made several acclaimed photographic series drawing on her Gunitjmarra cultural heritage and history, some using her late grandfather's photographic slides, Millar Baker has shifted her gaze inwards to her own memories and stories, and put herself in her work for the first time.

Her new series, titled *I Will Survive*, features the artist in various poses — wearing a black dress, and her face obscured by long, dark hair — in the natural landscape, often in multiples of herself.



By Millar Baker inserted herself into her work for the first time with the series *I Will Live*, appearing as an ambiguous figure in the natural landscape. (*Supplied: Vivien Person Gallery*)

It's more personal, but at the same time almost mythological. She's like the witch from a fairy tale, or the lost woman in the bush; a ghost, or a shape-shifting spirit.

The series was inspired by cautionary tales she was told during childhood camping trips with her family — about big cats, mega sharks and net-nets ("really bad little spirit men").

"People at the time, and probably still do now, think that I'm interested in exposing Aboriginal histories — and that's not what my work is about at all. It's about storytelling," she says.

"And so I kind of shifted. And I was like, no, I'm going to put myself in the work, I'm going to tell my stories, and I'm just going to go like balls to the wall about it."



the series *I Will Survive* by Hayley Millar Baker. (Supplied: Vivien Anderson Gallery)

For **Tom Polo**, whose practice stretches back 14 years, lockdown was a time for reflection — which prompted change.

He retained access to his studio but was effectively cloistered along with the other five resident artists of Parramatta Artist Studios' Rydalmere outpost on Gadigal land (Western Sydney).

"They were sort of the only people that I was really seeing outside of my family, and we became each

other's support network in a way — but also a little crit group," says Polo.



work came out of last year, and having a lot more time to think about where I wanted with my practice," Tom Polo told ABC Arts. (*ABC Arts: Sia Duff*)

"But also, there was this sort of immersion or bleeding from one to the other in terms of conversation and ideas."

Polo found a new way of painting, laying his canvases flat on the ground.

"The spatial relationship between my body and the figures that emerged out of the painterly process was really odd because there was like a real distance but a slight power between me and the figures."

This new way of working dovetailed with his interest in erasure and concealment; emergence and revelation.

Painting on the ground allowed him to apply more layers, and thinner layers — which meant there was more room for erasure.

"So the things that are existing now on the surface [of the painting] are the things that haven't been painted out," he explains.

That includes hidden images and lines of text — that he chose to obscure so they remained private, no matter how publicly the work was displayed.

His Ramsay artwork, titled *Guiding Guardians (This Wasn't Yours)*, was the result of this period of experimentation.



says the use of Chroma Key Blue in his work relates to the idea of concealment and use of blue screen or green screen in cinema. *(Supplied: AGSA/Saul Steed)*

"I almost feel like when we look at this work and stand from afar, we could be looking at it from an aerial view, and the figures and all the elements that are emerging are things that are floating to the top," he says.

A warning, a comfort, a ray of hope

Several of the Ramsay finalists turned to slow, labour intensive stitch-work and weaving during lockdown, producing ravishing textile works.

Anna Madeleine Raupach's embroidered map of the Gospers Mountain bushfire of October 2019 — Australia's first recorded mega blaze — represented a shift away from digital and VR works.



Madeleine Raupach's work *Slow Violence (Gospers Mountain)* was handstitched onto an emergency thermal blanket, during lockdown in Canberra. (*ABC Arts: Sia Duff*)

"I'd had the idea for doing an embroidery or stitching work at this scale for a while, but one of the things that actually made me start it was that I was all of a sudden doing all of my day job — teaching and stuff — online," she told ABC Arts.

"And I couldn't do artwork on the screen anymore, because it was just too much screen time ... and that's when I kind of shifted my focus on to this more tactile [art form]."

Raupach found herself glued to the Fires Near Me app during the bushfire season, and noticed with interest that this was a trend.

"[We were] kind of always checking the progress of these fires. I became really interested in the shapes that they were forming and how they were just depicted through those apps as these blobs."



Violence (Gospers Mountain) shows the damage to an area that contains ancient, endangered Wollemi Pines. (Supplied: AGSA)

The effect of the coloured thread on the reflective silver blanket is both alluring and alarming; it draws you in, whilst also triggering that summer's anxiety.

"I think these catastrophic fires and other natural extreme weather events will keep occurring and that's quite scary," says Raupach.

"But the feeling of actually stitching, I really enjoy."



piece shows Gutman having a picnic with her housemate during lockdown. A section of the work had to be redone after their puppy weeded on it. (Supplied: AGSA)

For **Julia Gutman**, embroidery was more explicitly therapeutic during a period of change and grief.

"I moved home [from New York to Gadigal land, Sydney] because my close friend passed away and I had this sort of big reckoning with how I was orienting my life. And I was really lucky that I came home and made those big changes to be sort of closer to my people, right around the time that lockdown happened," she tells ABC Arts.

Her collage-style textile work *No One Told Me the Shadows Could Be So Bright*, which depicts friends in poses that reference classical paintings, was made during lockdown using items of clothing belonging to her and her friends.



ts to the point where the image is like 'You can't change me anymore', because I've layered so much over it that a needle won't go through," says Gutman. (*ABC Arts: Deedson*)

"Clothing is something that I had an abundance [of] around me during lockdown. I was working out of my bedroom ... I started experimenting with my old clothes, because I'm just really sentimental and I don't throw anything away ... And then I had a few things of my friend's who had passed away. And the moment I started interacting with those things, the stories and the images just started coming."

The two large pieces on display as part of the Ramsay Art Prize are composed of smaller pieces stitched together, including densely layered sections of embroidery made on top of line drawings.

"They're really labour intensive. And I think that's the joy of it — it's definitely therapy for me," she said.



Juanella McKenzie made Yurndu (Sun) at her kitchen table in the evenings after work, to maintain her positive attitude and her hope. (*ABC Arts: Sia Duff*)

Juanella McKenzie, an Adnyamathanha and Luritja artist, spent an estimated 110 hours on her work Yurndu (Sun), weaving it from emu feathers (from an emu hunted by her husband for the family to eat), fibre and thread.

There might be a few Barbie hairs in there, she says — from when her daughters helped her.

"When I was a little girl, I used to go and watch the old ladies weaving emu feathers. And so a few years ago, when my daughters were younger, I was concerned about this practice dying, because not many people do it anymore. And so I wanted to share that knowledge with them," she tells ABC Arts.

McKenzie made her Ramsay Art Prize entry during lockdown, as a respite from her day job.

"I work for a government service, which provides service to people all over the country, and so I was dealing with people that were going through issues with the pandemic, like losing work, starting JobKeeper, needing Medicare cards," she says.

She started weaving the piece after she got home from work — "because it has a positive meaning behind it," she explains.

"I like to see the glass half full, rather than half empty. And so I was thinking about the day when the pandemic [was over] — when the sun would shine."

At the edge of her piece is a garland of quandong seeds.

"Each seed represents an opportunity for growth, new beginnings. But also, the emu that eats those seeds helps the seed to grow [and] carries it throughout the country."

"I went through a lot of emotions making this piece, but mostly just holding on to that hope, of the possibilities in the future."

The Ramsay Art Prize exhibition is on until August 22 at the Art Gallery of South Australia. Entry is free.