

I SEE YOU



The largest ever cultural exchange between Australia and the UK asks some uncomfortable questions about national identity, writes **Jane Cornwell**

Who are we, Australia, in relation to the United Kingdom? Who is the United Kingdom with regard to us? Our relationship used to be convivial enough. But we've changed. We've shifted priorities. Pursued other bilateral interests. We're not the same countries that we were when we met.

So it's high time, probably, that we reassessed our connection. Examined our past; reconsidered our future. Pondered on who are we now. And from next month, for the next few months and beyond – Australia until March 2022, and the UK until December 2022 – such musings will be the stuff of a major cultural exchange between our two nations: the UK/Australia Season 2021-22.

For who better to reconfigure our rapport,

sharpen our ways of seeing, than our finest artists, academics and thinkers?

"The idea is to take a fresh, honest look at our shared history on both sides and add value and impact to that conversation," says Helen Salmon, the London-raised, Sydney-based director of the UK Season in Australia. Salmon heads up the British Council in Australia, which has programmed the season in collaboration with the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, under the patronage of the Queen.

Forget any Commonwealth-style flag waving. There's a sharp knowingness to most of the 200-plus events taking place, live and online, in both countries. A readiness by practitioners and organisations (among dozens, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the British Film Institute, the National Gallery of Australia and Sydney Opera House) to harness the zeitgeist and give credit where credit is (over) due. To celebrate the diversity of cultures and languages in Australia and the UK, and the immense contributions made by migration.

"When we began preparations in 2018 we noted that work around First Nations and decolonisation, coming up to the Black Lives Matter period, were subjects of interest and concern to artists and academics," says Salmon. "As was our connection to the environment, and technology. It gave us our theme of identity."

Highlights abound. In the UK, the Indigenous-led immersive exhibition *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters*, wildly acclaimed when it ran at the National Museum in Canberra during 2017-18, makes its European premiere at prestigious new gallery and museum The Box in Plymouth, southwest England. Which happens to be the port city from where James Cook and *The Endeavour* set sail in 1768, en route to the South Pacific and what would later be named Australia.

It's a symbolism relished by Margo Neale, the NMA's lead Indigenous curator.

"It depends on how you want to look at it," she says. "But if you're coming at *Songlines* from a colonialist perspective and think Abor-

iginal people are just sitting in the desert doing dot paintings then you will totally fall off your stool. This is visceral. It gets under your skin in the way good art should. You get an injection of culture without even knowing you've been vaccinated."

The exhibition's power is intensified by the quality of the journey preceding it, she adds: "A mob of Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjara elders came to us, wanting to preserve and share their story. After seven years of planning and travelling across black country we have a deeply human multimedia experience that integrates the art, song, music, dance and stories of performance art, which is the primary mode of transmission of knowledge in Indigenous culture."

"You can't do ceremony on canvas," says Neale. "Performance is everything, and it will always be super contemporary."

Songlines comes accompanied by a sub-season of talks and seminars hosted by venues including the Box and the Menzies Australia Institute at Kings College London. The majority will be streamed online. Engaging audiences on a regional as well as international level via screens has been prioritised across the Season: the Sydney Opera House will stream a program of UK work. *Renaissance One*, a culturally diverse UK-Australian collective of women artists and producers, will host a six-month digital micro-festival of mentoring sessions and workshops.

It's a focus that takes advantage of the new willingness to embrace technology, including AI and gaming, previously deemed problematic. And another factor is what Salmon calls "the deep yearning for connection" stoked by the past 18 months of Covid-led isolation.

"We've been on a huge learning curve in the arts, and learned what has added value and what is lost in the digital realm," she says. "It's a fantastic time to be doing this because it means we can capitalise on what works digitally in a way the sector would not have been interested before."

SHAPIRO

Aboriginal Art
20.21C Design

TIMED ONLINE AUCTIONS

ABORIGINAL ART

Slow Close Wed 25 August from 6pm

20.21C DESIGN

Slow Close Wed 31 August from 5pm

ENQUIRIES

(02) 9326 1588 | info@shapiro.com.au

CATALOGUE

shapiro.com.au



Walter Furlan, 'Omaggio a Picasso' Sculpture
c.1990, Est. \$7,000–9,000



Clockwise from facing page: Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters, performance of the Kungkarangkalpa: Seven Sisters songline inma (ceremony) at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2013; Salota Tawale, *I Don't See Colour*, video still, 2021, Made in Birmingham/ Made in Sydney; artist Tawale surrounded by her paintings, Made in Birmingham/ Made in Sydney; Travis Alabanza in *Burgerz*; and the exterior of Circa's Bounce



Duncan Wright



Travis Alabanza

Take Made in Birmingham/Made in Sydney, a digital joint project between the IKON Gallery in Birmingham in England's Midlands and the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Sydney that features two video artworks by British-Afghan/Pakistani artist Osman Yousefzada and Fijian-Australian artist Salote Tawale. Both have multidisciplinary practices that variously explore the migrant experience, identity and outsider culture.

As a fashion designer, the Birmingham-born Yousefzada has dressed Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, as an installationist his first piece of public art is the current Infinity Pattern 1, which sees Birmingham's Selfridges department store covered in a 10,000sq m canvas featuring the tessellated mathematical patterns used in Islamic decoration.

"I'll be connecting with Osman on our experience of living in the diaspora, and making a video that muses on distance and the ways memory brings people closer to you," says Tawale, who was born in Fiji and raised in suburban Mount Waverley in Melbourne, and often self-performs in her work.

In the single-channel video work Super she uses her own body to portray all the characters within a superhero narrative that subverts gender stereotypes and the "normal" Australian body image. More recently she's been juxtaposing the food and land of Fiji and Australia in a YouTube-style cooking show.

"I started making art because I didn't see myself reflected in the dominant culture, in a colonial Australian society," she continues. "But histories are finally being heard by institutions, which is great. It gives artists something to look to."

Inevitably, the season's rollout has been shaped by the pandemic: the Australia in the UK season is extended to accommodate governmental permission for international travel. From next month, the first three months of UK in Australia will largely take place online, after which it is hoped that people movement can begin in earnest. 2022 will see the Adelaide Festival

collaborate on a project with Chinee!k, Europe's first majority-Black and ethnically diverse orchestra. English performance artists Travis Alabanza will take their award-winning, transphobia-confronting show Burgerz on an Australian tour.

The Melbourne-based ACMI Australia's national museum of screen culture, will present a bums on seats (and online) program of UK work to be curated by the British Film Institute in London – and ACMI will present a season of Australian films, short film and moving images at the BFI.

"We want to explode stereotypes," says BFI programme head Stuart Brown. "For Australia we will be programming films such as Mark Jenkin's *Bait*, which tells of tourists ruining it for locals in Cornwall. There's also Ken Loach's *I Am Daniel Blake*, about people living on the edge of society, dependent on food banks. Brexit has meant that conversations about identity and class divisions are more relevant than ever in Britain right now."

"Also probable are films about the British Muslim experience, and the UK's Jewish heritage. We may do a package of grime videos," he continues, referencing the electronic music genre favoured by such black British artists as Stormzy and Skepta. "If you're in London, grime is more representative than Downton Abbey."

Just as collaboration was a key criteria when the British Council issued a 2020 open call to organisations and individuals to submit project proposals under the theme of "Who are we now?", so too was creating a Covid mitigation plan. The Season's practitioners have duly been rehearsing, designing and choreographing from afar, online, often with a view to flying down (and quarantining) later. Among them, British theatre maker Javaad Alipoor, whose installation project *Pop Icons* will run at Riverside's National Theatre of Parramatta. A collaboration with minority communities in Sydney, *Pop Icons* comprises cassette tapes popular among migrants in the '70s, from Ethiopian jazz to Turkish psychedelia. It's a reclaiming of cul-

ture, a sort of who were we then?, that adds texture and context to the Season's central proposition.

Events are still being added to the program, and artists are responsible for doing their own press and publicity. In a sprawling program that spans genres from theatre, film and visual art to literature, design and architecture – along with collaborations between UK and Australian universities – the Season's central proposition isn't always obvious.

Take *Silver City*, a circus staged inside a giant inflatable bouncy chrome castle. A joint project between Brisbane's Circa Contemporary Circus and Amanda Levete Architects in London, the work invites socially-distanced groups into podrooms to watch (and wobble) as acrobats tumble around them. Having fixed the Covid-safety problems that saw the project (then titled *Bounce*) cancelled at this month's Dusseldorf Festival in Germany, *Silver City* will tour the UK in 2022.

"Silver City was created through Zoom meetings," says Michael Naphthali, the Sydney-raised, London-based arts adviser (to figures including controversial former arts minister George Brandis) who is leading the Australia in the UK season. "Who are we now? Well, we're a nation of innovators and creative thinkers who find solutions. And we want to bring a bit of fun to the UK."

Let's just pause for a moment. Before we start having fun, shouldn't we deal with our underlying issues? Acknowledge the flipside of who are we now? We're both dealing with some pretty heavy stuff.

In Australia, our passports are gathering dust and our citizens overseas can't get back in. We've kept asylum seekers locked up for years, have a pandemic of Indigenous deaths in custody and have moved to remove critical race theory – a vital conduit for "who are we now?"-type discussion – from the Australian curriculum. Many of our artists, deprived of their livelihoods, are in crisis.

In the UK, which left the European Union,

its biggest trading partner, on January 31, 2020, memories of the Windrush scandal and the Grenfell Tower fire are fresh. Football fans have filled stadiums and crowded into pubs while theatres and music venues have remained shut. Post-Brexit is crippling the UK arts and music model, of which a key part was playing festivals and tours across Europe.

"You're right to ask those questions," says Naphthali. "The point is, we live in a liberal democracy. The program would not withstand scrutiny if unfettered voices weren't permitted. We're still working on our program and some of the stuff is challenging, as it should be. We have a theme that deserves examination, and a program with components that show the breadth of Australia."

And our business muscle. While preparations for the UK-Australia Season were under way long before the new post-Brexit trade deal that saw prime ministers Scott Morrison and Boris Johnson bumping elbows at Downing Street, the Season will be accompanied by an Australian Trade and Investment Commission program aimed at promoting bilateral trade and investment in key UK regions.

In the right relationship, it seems, the arts are a big business winner.

"Australia is the third-biggest export market for UK arts and culture after the US and Europe," says Helen Salmon. "So for British companies to get access to this market will be a really important part of Covid recovery."

More than that, over and again in this impressive cultural exchange, our artists get to tell us some truths. Give us some perspective. Ask them: who are we now? and they'll show us, warts and all. It's through them that our relationship with ourselves as Australians, and as Australians connecting to Britain, will make a bit more sense.

It's complicated, sure. But it's progress.

The UK/Australia Season is held September 2021 to March 2022. Program details will be available at www.ukaustraliasession.com/.