

Art Gallery of NSW unveils fantastical new artworks ahead of Sydney Modern opening

By Linda Morris
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The Art Gallery of NSW has announced the largest multimillion-dollar commission of artworks in its 150-year history including bronze-cast super-sized creatures that will greet visitors on arrival at its new contemporary art galleries.

Nine new works, more than half by women artists and three by Indigenous artists, will go on display inside and outside Sydney Modern and the existing Walter Vernon-designed building from December.

The largest of these will be a family of bronze-cast mythical creatures to be installed in the new Welcome Plaza.



Francis Upritchard working on one of her fantastical figures that will greet visitors in the Welcome Plaza of the Art Gallery's new building. CREDIT: DAVID MAZZA

Inspired by the gnarled forms of the Moreton Bay figs of Sydney Harbour the London-based, New Zealand-born artist Francis Upritchard has been bringing them to life in her Italian studio. It's believed to be her largest commission to date.

"As you approach them, my long and improbable mystical creatures invite intrigue and wonder: who are they, what are they doing and how do I respond to them?" she said.

Director Michael Brand said many of the site-specific artworks were of a scale never possible in the existing galleries.

Along with Upritchard, the commissioned artists are Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Karla Dickens, Simryn Gill, Jonathan Jones, Yayoi Kusama, Richard Lewer, Lee Mingwei and Lisa Reihana.

Working across a wide variety of artforms, their commissions are currently being completed in studios, workshops and foundries in Australia and overseas.

The multimillion-dollar public art commissions have been funded by the Art Gallery of NSW Foundation and Sydney's leading philanthropists, the names of which will be revealed when the artworks are officially unveiled.

But they are believed to have come from among the high-wealth donors who contributed \$109 million towards the building of the gallery's expanded museum, taking shape next door to its sandstone galleries.

On the wall of the new Yiribana Gallery, showcasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, Connelly-Northey will repurpose rural materials like rusted wire, corrugated iron and other salvaged items to create an epic-sized collection of narrbong-galang bags.

Simryn Gill is creating a work for Sydney Modern that features a life-sized rubbing of a Canary Island date palm planted in 1906, which was removed to make way for the new galleries.

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Wiradjuri-Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones has created an artwork that links the new and existing gallery buildings, the details of which have yet to be revealed.

Jones was the artist behind the Hyde Park Barracks' installation (*maraong manaóuwi*), which created emu footprints in stones on the forecourt.

Tokyo-based Yayoi Kusama has created an "exuberant floral sculpture" visible day and night, to be prominently positioned on the new building's terrace overlooking Woolloomooloo Bay.

Melbourne-based multimedia artist Richard Lewer has gone behind the scenes of the Sydney Modern project to create a multi-panel painting celebrating the personalities of those who've helped build the new Sydney landmark.

Stories of women and their place in the development and history of art will have a central place in Sydney Modern, deputy director Maud Page said.

Builder Richard Crookes has begun the final stages of construction with work underway on internal walls, lifts, escalators, bridges and terrace canopies, and external and internal finishes.



Francis Upritchard in her Italian studio. CREDIT: DAVID MAZZA

Handover is expected in the coming months with a public opening by Christmas.

These first commissions are in the tradition of Tate Modern which since its opening has invited artists the opportunity to activate its cavernous Turbine Hall.

Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*, handmade from porcelain, and Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus*, a distorted replica of the Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace, has helped draw an unparalleled number of visitors to the London gallery.

Page hopes for the same level of engagement, foreshadowing the announcement of further commissions and acquisitions ahead of Sydney Modern's opening.

The new commissions "offer humour and challenge; they confront, prod and delight, powerfully heralding new art histories," she said.

"Artists address where we are now and are acutely aware of the paths we have taken to get here. "They remind us what it is to be human today as many of the Sydney Modern Project commissions intertwine with urgent social issues."

Ahead of the opening of the Art Gallery of NSW's new museum building, the gallery surveyed its collection to determine priorities for growth, research, interpretation and display with gender diversity emerging as a priority.

"The Sydney Modern Project has allowed us a rare opportunity to reconsider received art narratives and showcase the central role of women artists throughout the development of Australian and international art," Page said.