

Francis Upritchard blends science fiction and folklore in epic new Sydney Modern Project commission

We explore the making of *Here Comes Everybody*, Francis Upritchard's fantastical bronzes sculptures for the much-anticipated Sydney Modern Project

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Francis Upritchard's *Here Comes Everybody*, 2022, work in progress at Fonderia Guastini in Italy, for the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Sydney Modern Project
(Image credit: © Art Gallery of New South Wales, Daniel Mazza)

Sydney has welcomed some endearing new arrivals on its sunny shores. Three pairs of giant long-limbed fantastical creatures by New Zealand artist Francis Upritchard are now inhabiting the entrance court to Sydney Modern, a soon-to-open glass building designed by SANAA, a new addition to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Embodying inspirations that mix Quentin Blake, mythology, folklore, science fiction, and the local Moreton Bay fig trees, it's as though these enchanting beings have stepped out of a magical storybook with an invitation to all, to play. As curator Justin Paton says, 'we wanted there to be a sense of humour, humanity and heart to welcome the visitor'.

From a distance the coloured bronze sculptures are monumental, reaching to the underside of the 7m-high undulating glass canopy. Figures with elongated arms sit on the backs of long-legged figures, entwined in action – one gripping the slim canopy column, another building a tower of boulders, the third playing with a dinosaur-like creature on the ground. Up close they prove intimate and captivating, with fleshy, textured skin that invites touch. Hands and feet are expressive with long toes and defined toenails; small reptilian-like creatures make homes on a foot or a buttock; an outstretched hand offers a palm for children to sit. There is fun everywhere, but the co-dependence of the figures is also a more serious reminder of the state of humanity.



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(Image credit: © Art Gallery of New South Wales, Daniel Mazza)



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For London-based Upritchard the commission for the large-scale public work ‘felt like an enormous and scary task at the beginning’ especially as handcrafting is central to her work. But with the support of project manager Donna Walker, studio assistants and collaboration across the globe, she found a ‘process that I can really keep my hands involved at most levels’.

Upritchard has been working with balata rubber since discovering it in a market while on a residency in Brazil in 2004. A precious natural material that is sustainably harvested, it is malleable when heated and quickly hardens in a cold-water bath requiring more than two hands to manage. After working on a 1:20 sketch model she moved to 1:5 balata maquettes where the figures could gain form and character, through a material process where hands, imagination and intuition all combine at speed. These were then 3D-scanned and scaled to create 1:1 versions in foam onto which balata is hand-moulded to give the final texture to be cast in bronze. It was a process that she mastered with a bronze-foundry team and as she says ‘the feeling of joy and fun with the material is much more apparent’.



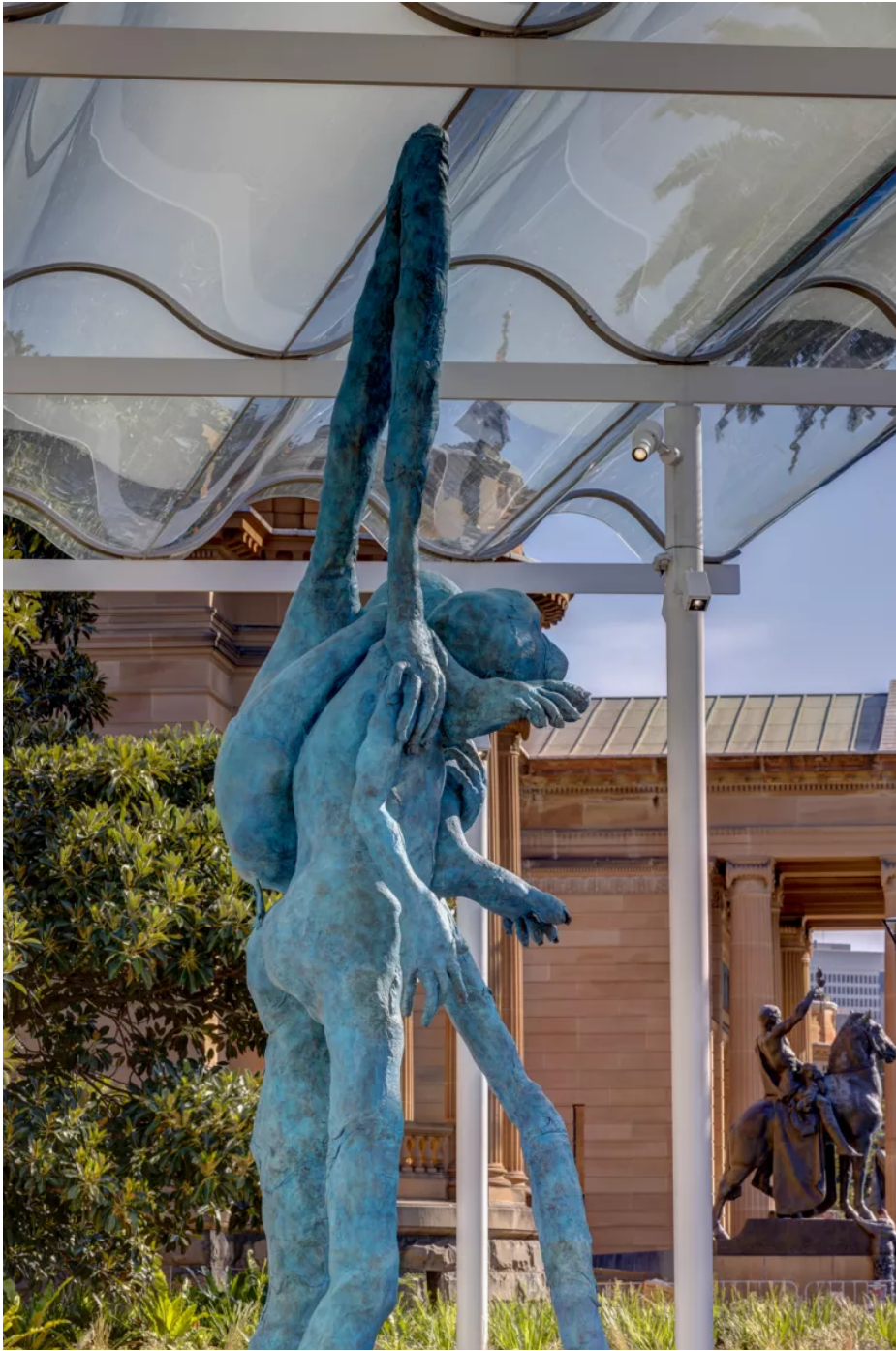
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(Image credit: © Art Gallery of New South Wales, Daniel Mazza)



Installing *Here Comes Everybody*, 2022, on site for the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Sydney Modern Project
(Image credit: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Christopher Snee)

It is one of nine commissions across the Sydney Modern project that as Paton says 'each tells a different story of place and the potential of art'. A large panel set in the niche above the entrance of the late 19th-century sandstone building by Wiradjuri artist Karla Dickens speaks of the ongoing trauma of colonialism and patriarchy. Seen from the new entrance court is a 20m collection of *narrbong-galang* (many bags) made from salvaged metal by Lorraine Connelly-Northey. On a wall in the vast internal court, fellow New Zealander Lisa Reihana has created a monumental sci-fi moving-image work that speaks of the deep connections across the Tasman Sea. And to open later next year is *bíal gwiýúño* (the fire is not yet lighted), a space of performance and cultural engagement in the territory between the old and the new building, by Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones.

Many of the works, including Upritchard's, can be seen from the surrounding neighbourhoods, promontories, and expressway. As the title of her work *Here Comes Everybody* attests, accessibility is vital to Upritchard. 'Everybody should be welcomed everywhere, especially to a gallery', she says, adding of the artwork, 'no one should feel that they don't understand' – it can mean 'whatever you want it to mean'. These new sculptures are a gift to people and the city.



Francis Uprichard, *Here Comes Everybody*, 2022, on site for the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Sydney Modern Project

(Image credit: Francis Uprichard, *Here Comes Everybody* 2022 onsite for the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Sydney Modern Project)

The Art Gallery of New South Wales' Sydney Modern Project will open to the public on 3 December 2022.