Jennifer Higgie ON **'Know My Name' at the National Gallery of Australia**

A new kind of history

Lily Sandover Kngwarreye, Alyawarr people, *Untitled* (1999), NGA, gift of Michael Blanche 2017,
donated through the federal government's Cultural Gifts Program in recognition of the directorship of Ron Radford.

A QUICK QUIZ: how many women artists can you name from, say, before the mid 20th century? Or the 19th century? How about the Renaissance? Apart from Frida Kahlo – and perhaps even she's a stretch – how many are household names? Given that the answer is most likely "none", the importance of exhibitions such as *Know My Name: Australian Women Artists 1900 to Now* is glaringly clear. Apart from providing the sheer joy of viewing so many of these works, some of which haven't seen the light of day for decades, *Know My Name* reiterates that art history is a work in progress – and not simply the story of white male achievement.

To get a sense of what women have been up against, have a skim through H.W. Janson's textbook *History of Art*, which is grandly subtitled *A survey of the visual arts from the dawn of history to the present day*. I studied it at art school in the 1980s and '90s; more than 4 million copies in 15 languages have been sold. In its first edition, in 1962, there is no mention of women except as subjects: saints or sinners, muses, virgins, victims. When an

Anne Wallace, *She is* (2001), National Gallery of Australia, purchased 2002. © Anne Wallace

updated version was published in the 1980s, 27 women out of 318 artists made the cut – none of them Australian. Interestingly, though, Janson was well aware of his own fallibility. In his introduction, he wrote: "There are no 'plain facts' in the history of art – or in the history of anything else, for that matter, only degrees of plausibility. Every statement, no matter how fully documented, is subject to doubt and remains a 'fact' only so long as nobody questions it."

Well, the questioning has taken place – in the main, by more than half a century of feminist art historians – and its answers are unequivocal: commonly held assumptions about the role of women in art have, for far too long, been wrong. It wasn't until I read Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", Janine Burke's 1976 book *Australian Women Artists: One Hundred Years 1840–1940* (which was also a pioneering exhibition and something of a precursor to *Know My Name*); Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (1979) and Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) that I realised the extent of the gender discrimination that had beaten at the heart of my art education.

Despite the many hurdles we've faced, women have always been part of art's story. Female artists are mentioned by Ancient Greek and Roman historians, in mediaeval manuscripts and by art historians such as Giorgio Vasari, the preeminent chronicler of Renaissance creativity. In 15th- and 16th-century Italy, at least 120 women worked as artists and some of them, such as Sofonisba Anguissola, were stars: she was the most prolific self-portraitist in the period between Dürer and Rembrandt. One of the greatest painters of the

Not only have they assembled the most comprehensive presentation of art by Australian women to date, they've also pulled something genuinely radical out of the bag.

17th century was the Baroque firebrand Artemisia Gentileschi; in the 18th century, Marie Antoinette's favourite, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, left behind a staggering 660 portraits, 40 self-portraits and 200 landscape paintings. By the end of the 19th century, Mary Cassatt, Eva Gonzalès and Berthe Morisot were central to Impressionism. And yet, despite their accomplishments, none of these women had any political agency: essentially, they were controlled by male authority. How they managed to train was a feat in itself. Apart from rare exceptions – such as the art academy for women that was established by the dazzling Bolognese artist Elisabetta Sirani in the 17th century – public art schools didn't admit women in some countries until at least the 19th century (and in Germany, 1919), and even if they studied with a private tutor, women were generally forbidden to work from life models.

In Australia, non-Indigenous women fared better than their European counterparts: in 1902, the nation became the second in the world, after New Zealand, to grant female suffrage. In Melbourne, the National Gallery of Victoria Art School was founded in 1867 and it accepted women as students. Unusually for the time, female students could study life drawing from nude models. By 1900, female students outnumbered men – but, of course, they still laboured under societal pressure to marry and have children, which often put a stop to their artistic ambitions. In Indigenous communities, women's creativity has long been central to cultural expression, but until relatively recently, Western art historians classified their work as anthropology, not art.

All of which makes the work of the curators of *Know My Name*, Deborah Hart and Elspeth Pitt, so necessary. Not only have they assembled – in the midst of a pandemic – the most comprehensive presentation of art by Australian women to date, they've also pulled something genuinely radical out of the bag. The two-part exhibition, now in its second stage, draws on 502 works from the National Gallery of Australia's collection and loans from across the country. In it, they challenge not only the phallocentric tenets of art history, but also the divisions that have customarily determined the way art has been understood and displayed: that is, as a neat story in which one movement seamlessly grows into the next, in which Indigenous and Western forms of image-making are irreconcilable and painting is assumed to be more meaningful than, say, weaving or ceramics, jewellery or design.

Notwithstanding its ambition, *Know My Name* is not a complete account – that would be as impossible as Lewis Carroll's story of a map made on a scale of "a mile to the mile" that would block out the sunlight were it unfolded. It is, rather, part of an ongoing conversation that proposes a new kind of art history to more completely recognise lineages, different knowledge systems and myriad connections through time and space. To this end, the curators have transcended the confines of the gallery: *Know My Name* has generated a national program of exhibitions, commissions, education programs, partnerships and creative collaborations. In May 2020, the NGA established a gender equity action plan in order to foster change across the organisation, and it's being implemented in other Australian institutions.

Although I missed Part One, because of you-know-what, Part Two – which comprises 209 works by 80 or so artists and runs until June 26 – is a deeply engaging corrective to the gallery's acknowledgement that only 25 per cent of its Australian art collection and 33 per cent of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art collection is by women artists. The second exhibition – which eschews conventional timelines for thematic groupings – is broadly more contemporary than Part One, although connections between the old and the new are teased out.

Setting the bar very high, a couple of staggering paintings greet you on entry – one on wood, one on bark – by the late Nyapanyapa Yunupingu of the Gumatj people of Yirrkala. Star-like shapes in dusty pink emerge from white and ochre pigments that shimmer with light and movement in their evocation of the Djulpan, or "Seven Sisters", dreaming – aptly, an origin story of female power and transformation.

Making clear that traditional hierarchies between art and craft no longer apply, just across from Yunupingu's paintings is a glorious suite of Margaret Preston prints – vivid flowers and landscapes from the 1920s to the '50s – which inspired the exuberant clothes designed by Jenny Kee in 1984 and the fashion house Romance Was Born in 2014–15, examples of which are displayed in adjacent glass cases. Nearby, delicate heart-and-shell-like sculptures from 1972 by Marea Gazzard complement a display of sculptural jewellery by artists including Darani Lewers, whose mother, Margo Lewers, is represented by a lively modernist tapestry, *Wide Penetration*, from 1968.

The loose grouping of works that comprise the section titled "Assemblage, Irreverence and Alternative Histories" is dominated by Justene Williams' *Given that / You put a spell on mine / Uterus* (2014/2020–21): a huge installation that comprises a Ford Falcon ute, 12 fluorescent lights, a freezer, a barbecue and five video-screens. A complex, coded work, it references – or debunks, depending on your take – Australian machismo and famous men, including Marcel Duchamp, Dan Flavin and Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Along the way, Williams employs sign language and parts of her body to complicate the idea of communication. In close proximity to the installation, three works from 2021 by Natalya Hughes riff on Willem de Kooning's *Woman V* (1952–53), owned by the NGA. In de Kooning's painting, the woman is dissolving, bug-eyed, with prominent red breasts and a gaping, grinning mouth. In Hughes's take, the woman

Commercial galleries still represent significantly more men, women earn far less at auction, and important museum collections are overwhelmingly weighted to male achievement.

is painted, stitched and collaged onto both sides of the freestanding support: she is joyous, indecipherable, formed of multitudes. Equally feisty is Wiradjuri artist Karla Dickens's *Assimilated Warriors* (2014), which honours Aboriginal activists: it features 13 fencing helmets variously decorated in feathers, bones, fabric and seeds.

Wondrous connections abound. In "Art as Lived Experience", a chair designed by Marion Mahony Griffin in 1916 faces Grace Cossington Smith's bright painting *Interior in Yellow* (1962–64) and Elisabeth Cummings' similarly vibrant interior *The Green Mango B and B* (2006). Roma Center's glowing geometric tapestry *Iridescent web* (c.1975) converses with Diena Georgetti's vibrant, four-panel painting *Superstudio* (2015–17), in which abstract shapes hum like the digital patterns that flash across the screen of Agatha Gothe-Snape's *Powerpoints* (2008–21). In the latter, however, cryptic phrases interrupt the lush colour: "you can see clearly", "big opinions, "stand down wizards". In "Meaning and Materiality", Simryn Gill's mesmerising *Forking Tongues* (1992) – an enormous, floor-based installation of concentric rings created from cutlery and dried chillies – is echoed in Margaret Rarru's hypnotic hand-dyed yellow and ochre *Pandanus mat* (2009). It's part of "Pattern, Weaving and Understanding", which also includes Ewa Pachucka's brilliantly strange *Landscape and bodies* (1972): five naked, life-sized figures woven from sisal and hemp, slumped and dreaming among nine ambiguous structures – they could be totems, rocks or containers – made from the same material.

In the final room, "Dreams, Time and Rhythm", Marion Borgelt's homage to the moon, *Lunar Arc* (2007) forms a celestial canopy to Rosslynd Piggott's dreamy *High bed* (1998): a fairytale-like installation of a towering bed, tiny shoes and a mirror that is charming and chilling in equal measure. On the opposite side of the gallery, Joy Hester's moving brush-and-ink depictions of animated faces crowd around her friend Mirka Mora's otherworldly creations.

Across the globe, recent years have seen a groundswell of exhibitions devoted to the achievements of female artists. The main exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale, for example – which includes, for the first time, a majority of women artists – is titled after the surrealist Leonora Carrington's short story "The Milk of Dreams". But although things are moving in the right direction, still the bias persists. If you don't believe me, a quick read of various online sources – from *The Countess Report*, an artist-run initiative that publishes data on gender representation in the Australian contemporary art world, to Sheila, "a national philanthropic foundation with a mission to overturn decades of gender bias by writing Australian women artists back into our art history", and the annual Freelands Foundation report on the representation of women artists in Britain – will set you straight. It's simply a fact that while far more women than men graduate from art schools, commercial galleries still represent significantly more men, women earn far less at auction, important museum collections are overwhelmingly weighted to male achievement and women do far more childcare than their male colleagues, which means that they have less time to spend in the studio.

Robyn Stacey, *Untitled (Girl in blond wig on floor)*, 1985, NGA. Gift of the artist 2018, donated through the federal government's Cultural Gifts Program

A couple of years ago, I visited a blockbuster exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. Titled *Dawn of a Nation*, it explored the intertwining of art and politics in Italy from the 1950s to the late '60s, a period in which a slew of remarkable women artists were working in the country. Nonetheless, though it included more than 80 works of art, only one was by a female artist: Giosetta Fioroni. It seems so obvious, but bears repeating until real change happens: if a woman's creativity isn't publicly recognised, then her name disappears. A true history of art is one that honours everyone who took part. **M**