



DANIEL BOYD
Rainbow Serpent
(Version)

The Institute of Modern Art acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land upon which the IMA now stands, the Jagera, Yuggera, Yugarapul, and Turrbal people. We offer our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first artists of this country. In the spirit of allyship, the IMA will continue to work with First Nations people to celebrate, support, and present their immense past, present, and future contribution to artistic practice and cultural expression.

DANIEL BOYD

Rainbow Serpent (Version)

Curated by Liz Nowell
9 September–16 December 2023
Institute of Modern Art
Meanjin/Brisbane



One of Australia's most celebrated artists, Daniel Boyd draws on his Aboriginal and South Sea Islander heritage to interrogate legacies of imperialism. His paintings rework historical images—sourced from archives, museums, and his own family members—concealing and revealing them through expansive constellations of dots. Boyd uses dots as a visual and conceptual tool to explore themes of identity, history, and memory. He considers each dot to be a 'lens' through which we can access distinct points of knowledge, experiences, or perspectives.

Now open at the Institute of Modern Art, *Rainbow Serpent (Version)* is Boyd's first major exhibition in Meanjin/Brisbane, a place of ancestral significance for him. It is the second in a pair of exhibitions of the same title. The first was presented at Gropius Bau, Berlin, earlier this year. Both shows unfold around a spectacular mirrored-stage floor and reflect upon their sites, on opposite sides of the world.

Presenting new paintings, a new sculpture, and a program of activations, this second iteration of *Rainbow Serpent (Version)* explores the visual language of imperial placemaking, particularly as it materialised in Queensland. Spanning subjects from classical antiquity to Boyd's own family history, the paintings contend with the many ways colonisation has disrupted cultural traditions and infiltrated our civic imagination. The paintings are arranged in three groups.

The first group considers the site where the gallery stands—Fortitude Valley—and the artist’s connection to it through his matrilineal Yuggera heritage. Three paintings rework studio portraits of First Nations people taken in Fortitude Valley in the 1870s, while another reproduces a photograph of Boyd as a child in his mother’s arms.

Featuring relics from antiquity, the Enlightenment, and modernism, the second group addresses the visual language of imperial placemaking, which has been instrumental in territorial conquest. In one pairing, an architectural rendering of an elaborate classical column chapter hangs alongside the artist’s impression of the Cook Monument, located in Cooktown, Queensland.

In the third group, Boyd offers a personal perspective on the global slave trade, drawing on the experiences of his family. A portrait of his grandmother sits opposite another based on an archival photograph of a domestic servant. With their unyielding gazes fixed upon a charred dining room table at the centre of the gallery, these matriarchs confront the hidden history of slavery and indentured labour in Queensland.

Boyd extends his signature lens motif into the exhibition’s expansive mirrored-stage floor. During the exhibition, First Nations artists, activists, and scholars will activate its shimmering surface in a rich program of performances, workshops, and yarns. These acts of cultural expression will build upon the layers of history embedded in the site and serve as a reminder of the distinct traditions First Nations people have sustained for over 60,000 years, despite ongoing imperial expansion.

Rainbow Serpent (Version) unfolds as a vast universe of embodied experience, unlocking new ways of understanding history, place, and identity. Through a poetic contemplation of art, culture, science, and philosophy, Boyd challenges dominant Eurocentric narratives that have rationalised imperial conquest. Drawing attention to multifaceted histories, *Rainbow Serpent (Version)* invites us to reconsider the lenses through which we view the past, present, and future.





In Conversation Daniel Boyd and D Harding



Artist D Harding met with Daniel Boyd before the opening of *Rainbow Serpent (Version)*. Harding recognised that Boyd had reproduced a photograph of Harding's grandmother—Sophie Mummins, a Garingbal woman—as a painting in the show. The image, taken in Meanjin/Brisbane around 1910, shows Mummins in a domestic servant's uniform.

D Harding: I'm not surprised you found that image of my nana Sophie. I remember it was used on a flyer for the stolen-wages campaign, lobbying the then Queensland Premier Peter Beattie. At the time, I was offended by the way it was used because I felt that it was a totally detached re-presentation. I thought, 'Hang on a minute, this is someone's image, this is a person.'

Daniel Boyd: Our mob doesn't talk much about how those images exist in the public sphere, in public collections. They are our ancestors, our family, and we engage with them differently to historians and anthropologists, and anyone else who doesn't have a familial connection. Others may see 'a domestic servant', but we know they are a specific ancestor. Our people have had to deal with being presented as slaves and domestic servants, so sometimes it's more humanising to address those images away from their original intention and purpose.

The first time I made a painting of my grandmother, someone—an important political figure—bought it, and that didn't feel right to me, the commodification of it. That led me to think about ways of shifting the economy of that image, the cultural transference for us. So I painted additional ones for my mum and my siblings, so they would all have an image of my grandmother in their house.

But I didn't know it was your nana Sophie. This is an opportunity for you to speak to her, to what this image means, and to how you think she might have felt about it being used in this context.

Around that photograph of nana Sophie, I'm asking myself what her granddaughter, my nana Margie, would say to do? I'm pretty sure nana Margie would say to tell her story.

The original photograph is a slice of time and space. It refers to her, her life, and all things relative to her. But it also speaks to bigger things, to the church, to the stolen generation, to displacement. Sometimes an image can do all these things. You were saying the original photograph was used in the stolen-wages campaign. So, it offers an opportunity to speak to things that affect so many of our people, all that trauma.

I think of my great-great-grandmother Maggie Tonton. She was the sole survivor of a massacre. She lost her family and was forced into domestic servitude. She was taken in on a station, Bluff Downs, just outside Charters Towers. She was a slave there and had a child with the station owner. She was then given to a slave from Santo Island working on the station. All these ideas are part of those images.

I think about my nan too. Her grandmother was also a domestic servant who ended up working in a hotel in Port Douglas and had a child with the owner, a white man. His brother was the Queensland Colonial Architect. I remember a story about my nan as a teenager. They were recruiting workers to work at Cairns Base Hospital. She went and saw a baby being delivered and was traumatised, because the missionaries had never explained how babies come into the world. My nan ended up working at the hospital. She was granted an exemption from the mission to work in the city. The British used our people as free labour to advance the economy in Queensland. That's why we ended up in stations, plantations, and missions. Our stolen wages and free labour grew the economy.

This is an enormous can of worms. In the early part of the twentieth century, Queensland's roads and hospitals were funded by the stolen wages of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and South Sea Islander people who were forced to work. The Base Hospital in Rockhampton, where my family worked early on, and the roads in that region, were built on stolen wages. We can read Rosalind Kidd's book *Trustees on Trial*. So, with the hospital in Cairns, it would probably be the same story.

For me, that image of nana Sophie offers a way to talk to the church's involvement. The church controlled people's lives. If our people were in the missions, their movements were restricted and any money they made was controlled by the mission. My grandfather—a returned soldier—worked, had money, and wanted to buy a motorbike. So many letters went back and forth between the head of the mission and the Protector of Aborigines to decide whether he was worthy of owning a vehicle. These letters are hard to read, because they were just wasting his time and trying to keep his money.

Many points in your nan's story are familiar to me from my mum, her mum, and her mum's mum—all the Old Girls on our side. Now, some of the stories get told in a way where we have yet to recognise the layers of violence. Little things, like Murri boys in Woorabinda making fun of girls being lined up for inspection before being taken to work on stations saying, 'Who's going to come home pregnant?' There's that violence of girls not being given any understanding of their own bodies, and being sent away from home into vulnerable scenarios, then boys making these comments. These stories are passed down as oral histories.

We are so traumatised that we don't recognise some of those things as so dramatic. We've been conditioned to meet the status quo, to not push those boundaries, because we would be severely punished. It continues today, with how our children are being treated and the police brutality that still exists in this country. It's not what we need. We need love and care because there's such an accumulation of trauma.

I've encountered your work in philosophical, theoretical, poetic, and other spaces, but today we're in a space where we're putting forward a specific story. Is that your intention for this body of work?

In my work, the personal specificity of the images is always part of it. The IMA show offers some people the opportunity to attend to something they might not otherwise encounter or even try to distance themselves from.

Would you have made this show for another building, another location, another community?

This is the second *Rainbow Serpent (Version)* show. The first was at Gropius Bau in Berlin. There, I was looking at imperial expansion, relating to classicism, with Europe as a departure point. A lot of the work in the IMA show has to do with colonial or imperial placemaking on the frontier, with colonists using the language of classicism to author themselves into Country.

At the IMA, I wanted to think about how my ancestor, the Queensland Colonial Architect from around the 1870s to the 1890s, perpetuated that. He designed some buildings in Fortitude Valley, including a Post Office around the corner on James Street. I was thinking about the traumas associated with the imposed language of classicism, particularly with monuments. Showing in Brisbane offered the opportunity to address that.

In the show, there's a painting of the classical marble sculpture, the Apollo Belvedere—the epitome of beauty in the West. It's cold, detached, and very white, and it becomes this ideal man. It's not a real person, yet the Dutch anatomist Pieter Camper used it as evidence that white people are smarter. He created a diagram based on his study of skulls to construct a hierarchy of intelligence by race, culminating in the Apollo Belvedere. Its head has curly hair grouped on top, so Camper assumed its skull went right up to the top of where its hair is, suggesting a big brain, the pinnacle of intelligence. It was white supremacy.

We're in Brisbane, on Turrbal and Jagera Country, and the home of one of our most senior Australian painters, Gordon Bennett. Through my little lenses here in Brisbane, there's a formal relationship between some of your paintings and Bennett's. Do you see your work as being in dialogue with him?

Yes. When I was at art school, Bennett was one of the key figures that helped me have the confidence to question why and how I existed in the world, and why people treated me and my family the way they did. I had questions and I used my art to try to figure those things out.

With this show, there are lots of ways you've considered the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. You put a fair bit of effort into the public program.

I tried to involve the community as much as I could in the exhibition, because they are the foundation of the relationship to the place, to Country. And I have ancestral connections to Country there. So many threads are present in the work. The community can come into the IMA and see themselves in the show, in the museum.

Walking up to a museum, like the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, with its classical columns at the front ... it can be daunting just to cross that threshold. Our people don't have the confidence to navigate these institutions, what they mean, what they offer. They don't have the privilege that allows other people to enter them with confidence. Our people don't feel they belong in public institutions that are created for them. But the Queensland Art Gallery collection, say, is *their* collection; it's the people's collection.

We need to share the power of art with the next generation, because that's what we've always done. Cultural transference—through painting, through dance—it's part of who we are. We want the kids to have a voice and to find comfort in that long connection to tradition and knowledge.

You talk about transferring good knowledge—constructive, generative, healthy knowledge. That's a major focus in my work too. But, on the other side, there's our grandmothers' and mothers' experiences, and the men too, who were ripped off and treated poorly. They carry the wounds of racism and violence, which often don't get told. Our family also has South Sea and other connections, so we also know the railway workers', the stockmen's, and the canecutters' stories. We need to give young people the chance to have contact with those stories and build something on them. Through your dot motif, your works offer touchstones upon which to build bigger stories, conversations, and actions.

For me, the circle or lens represents equity, because there's no hierarchy in the distance from the centre to the edge. That's a fundamental principle of how we exist in the universe. I offer these holes or oculi as multiple entry points into something, to shift away from a hierarchy of representation. My images are not singular. They are not defined by the Western linear model, by Enlightenment parameters. They offer the opportunity to be all these different things.

One can't put forward a singular, linear, centric proposal anymore. It's not valid.

That's why I'm drawn to art. Even though I'm creating something, I'm not being authoritarian. I offer people the opportunity to have a conversation about something. I want them to be caught by the shimmer of the painting. The surfaces of my works are activated through light. I like Édouard Glissant's idea of 'tremblement'.

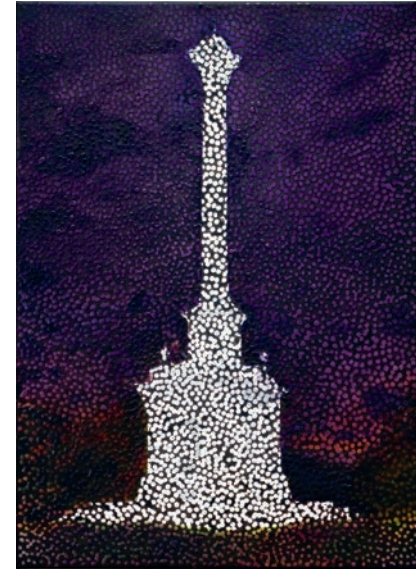
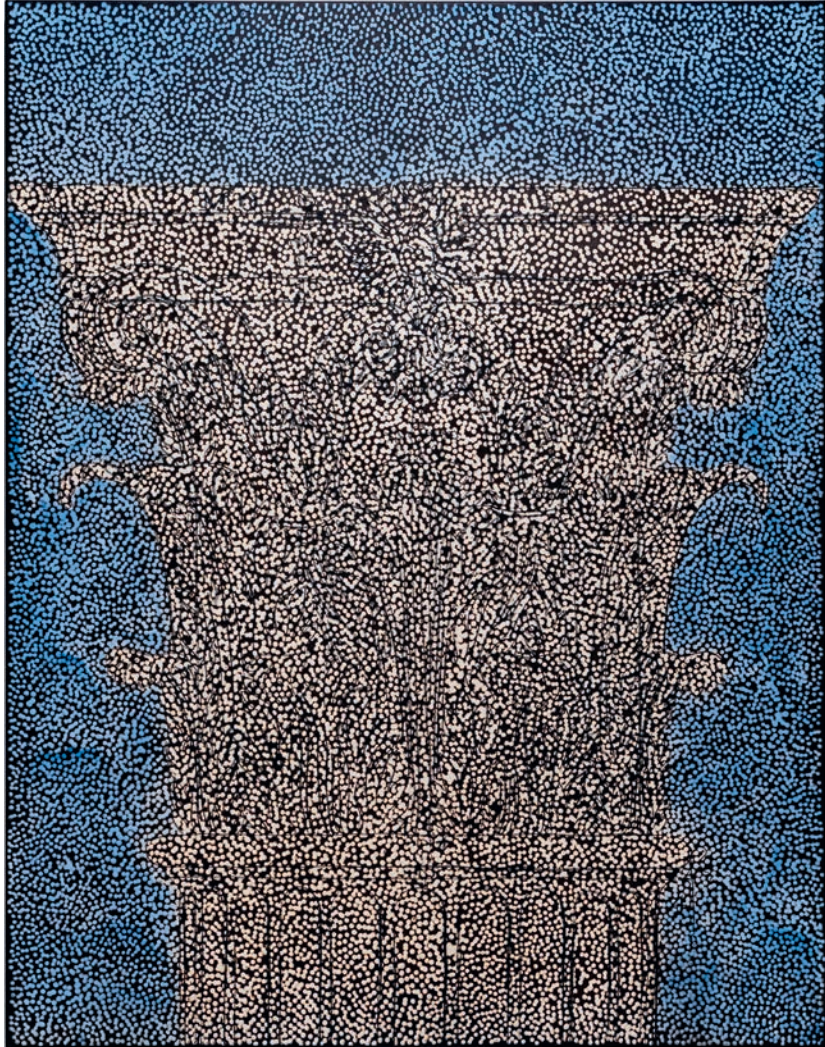
I saw the Gropius Bau show twice. The gallery has natural light, and they said to come back and see the show during sunset, which I did.

Light is something you can't control. It comes and goes. You don't know whether the sun will be beaming into your works or not. You just have to be ready for it. It's magic, because it's there for a fleeting moment, like a rainbow. That's why the title was *Rainbow Serpent (Version)*. Rainbow Serpent is white fellas' blanket term for all those different creation stories. But, within that, there's the opportunity to think about the magic of what we can't control.

I feel less defensive showing overseas. People are more receptive. I'm not in Queensland, with all those coal miners trying to tell me that we're taking their jobs from their families.

You go outside the country to have a different conversation, a more grown-up conversation sometimes, where you don't have to contend with those legacies here, the land. That can be invigorating. It's great that we're getting the opportunity to do that. Like you at Lisson Gallery. That's deadly. The visibility—the way people are allowing us to share what we do—it feels like there's momentum.









Activations

Rainbow Serpent (Version) is accompanied by a program of First Nations-led activations that take place on the exhibition's mirrored-stage floor. These performances, workshops, and yarns build upon the layers of history embedded within the site and create space for a multiplicity of First Nations voices.

SEPTEMBER

Exhibition Opening

Saturday 9 September
2PM

A conversation between artist Daniel Boyd and curator Liz Nowell, performance by Nunukul Yuggera Jarjum Dancers, poetry by Uncle Lionel Fogarty (Yugumbah), and music by Ben Barker (Biripi, Dunghutti).

True Reflections Lenesha Duncan

Performance
Thursday 14 September
6PM

Poet Lenesha Duncan (Wakka Wakka) considers how the attitudes of non-Indigenous people can impact First Nations youth, accompanied by sounds of the didgeridoo and falling sands. In partnership with Brisbane Festival and Digi Youth Arts.

Belonging Misteria and Shaieisha Towler

Performance
Thursday 21 September
6PM

Through spoken word and movement, sisters Misteria and Shaieisha Towler (Wiradjuri) express their journey from feeling dispossessed in colonised spaces to achieving a sense of belonging. In partnership with Brisbane Festival and Digi Youth Arts.

Still Standing Olivia Adams

Performance
Saturday 23 September
12PM

Olivia Adams (Wulli Wulli) considers the colonial architecture of Meanjin/Brisbane and uses dance to reclaim the city space. In partnership with Brisbane Festival and Digi Youth Arts.

Beyond the Facade Kevin O'Brien

Talk
Thursday 28 September
6PM

Architect Kevin O'Brien (Kaurereg, Meriam) explores the conflict between Country and architecture, and opportunities ahead.

Aura | Country | Terror | Refrain Michael Mossman

Talk
Saturday 30 September
12PM

Academic Michael Mossman (Kuku Yalanji) on concepts of aura, Country, terror, and refrain.

OCTOBER

Belonging to Fire Tjilala Brown-Roberts

Performance
Saturday 7 October
12PM

Tjilala Brown-Roberts responds to the exhibition through poetry and movement.

The World as We Know It Tida's Magic

Performance
Thursday 12 October
6PM

Tida's Magic (Zakiya Ah Sam and Sophie Diezmann) navigate the effects of imperialism through poetry, seeking truth, acknowledging the past, and giving power back to their ancestors.

Sounds of Connection Glenn Barry and Jorge Rico

Music
Saturday 14 October
12PM

Musicians Glenn Barry (Gamilaraay) and Jorge Rico perform with didgeridoo, clapsticks, flute, and guitar.

Sam Harrison

Talk
Thursday 19 October
6PM

Artist Sam Harrison (Kamilaroi, Wiradjuri) discusses his work, which centres on the analysis of Australian identity, and reflects on the exhibition.

Making Space Dominique Chen

Talk
Saturday 21 October
11AM

Dominique Chen (Gamilaroi) discusses how to create and hold space for cultural ethics within institutional frameworks.

Visual Languages Georgia Birks and Troy Casey

Conversation
Thursday 26 October
6PM

Georgia Birks (Birpai, Dunghutti, Kamilaroi) and Troy Casey (Kamilaroi) discuss how collaborations between artists and architects can change the visual language of the built environment.

Weaving Circle Jody Rallah

Workshop
Saturday 28 October
12PM

Artist Jody Rallah (Yuggera, Biri) leads a hands-on weaving workshop.

NOVEMBER Connecting Dots Nalingurrie Projects

Performance
Thursday 2 November, 6PM
Saturday 11 November, 12PM

Nalingurrie Projects, led by Mitchell Harrison-Currie, activates the exhibition through dance.

Network of a Wave Reece Bowden

Music
Thursday 9 November
6PM

Musician Reece Bowden (Anawain) incorporates guitar, lo-fi synths, and electronic beats in a hypnotic, improvisational sound performance.

Weaving Circle Jody Rallah

Workshop
Thursday 23 November
6PM

Artist Jody Rallah (Yuggera, Biri) leads a hands-on weaving workshop.

Little Stories Melanie Saward

Storytelling
Saturday 25 November
12PM

Author Melanie Saward (Bigambul, Wakka Wakka) presents a new story written in response to the exhibition.

DECEMBER Yugal Gari Language Song Glenn Barry and Jorge Rico

Music
Saturday 2 December
12PM

Musicians Glenn Barry (Gamilaraay) and Jorge Rico perform a sonic response to the exhibition in language.

Poetic Intentions Darby Jones, Cheryl Leavy, Aurora Liddle-Christie, Yasmin Smith, and Joella Warkill

Poetry Reading
Thursday 7 December
6PM

Curated and hosted by writer Ellen Van Neerven (Mununjali), poets Darby Jones, Cheryl Leavy, Aurora Liddle-Christie, Yasmin Smith, and Joella Warkill share their unique responses to the exhibition.

Songs of the Queencitiverse Blak Social

Music
Saturday 9 December
12PM

Blak Social perform songs from their fictional Indigenous-futurist universe, the 'Queencitiverse', created by founder Alethea Beetson (Kabi Kabi, Wiradjuri).

A Sonic Journey Tjaka

Music
Thursday 14 December
6PM

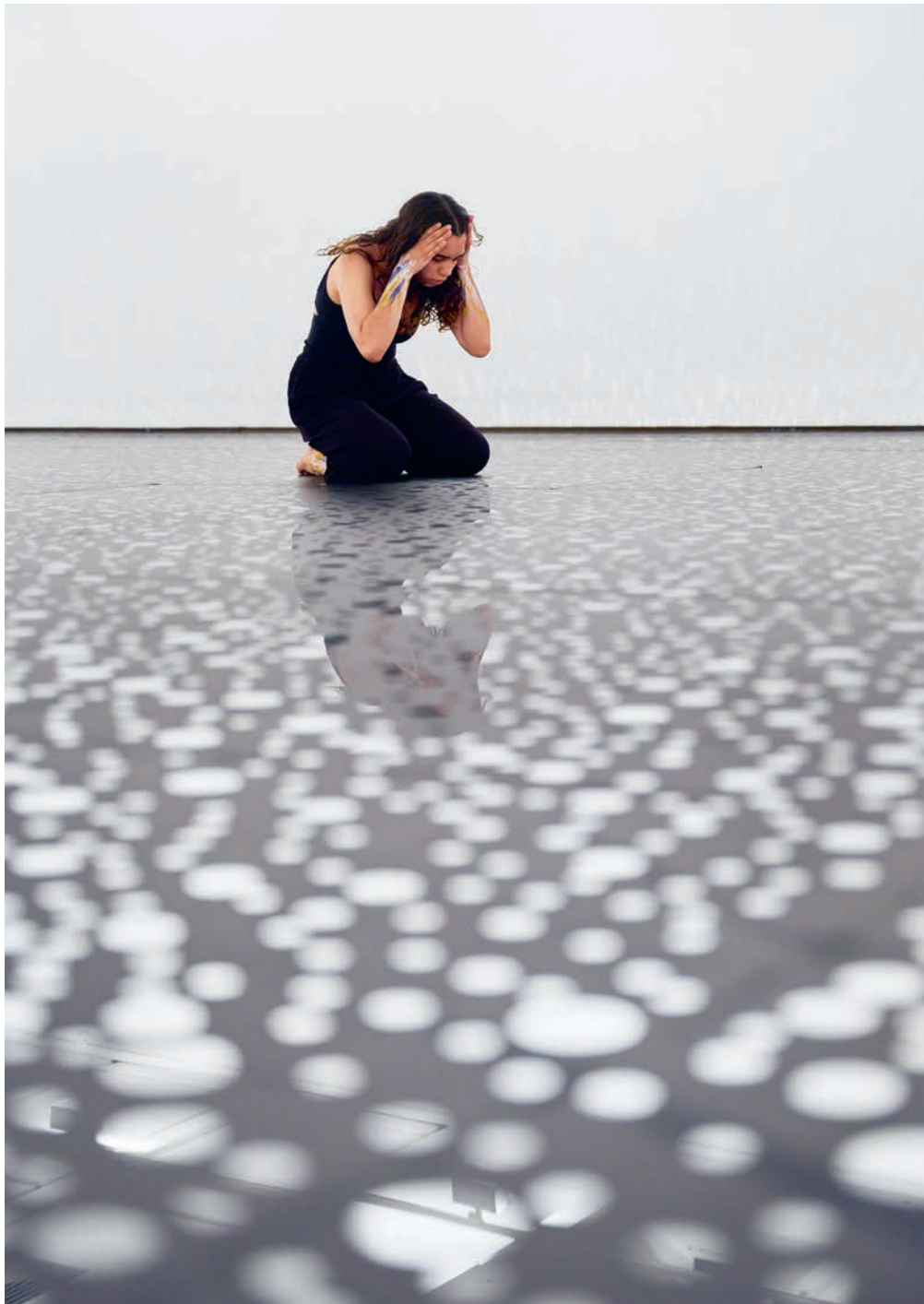
Hip-hop fusion trio Tjaka present an improvised sound performance, featuring Didjeribone (slide didgeridoo), hemp didgeridoo, guitar, and keys.

Weaving Circle Jody Rallah

Workshop
Saturday 16 December
12PM

Artist Jody Rallah (Yuggera, Biri) leads a hands-on weaving workshop.





Performance Tjilala Brown-Roberts



^ Poetry Reading Uncle Lionel Fogarty

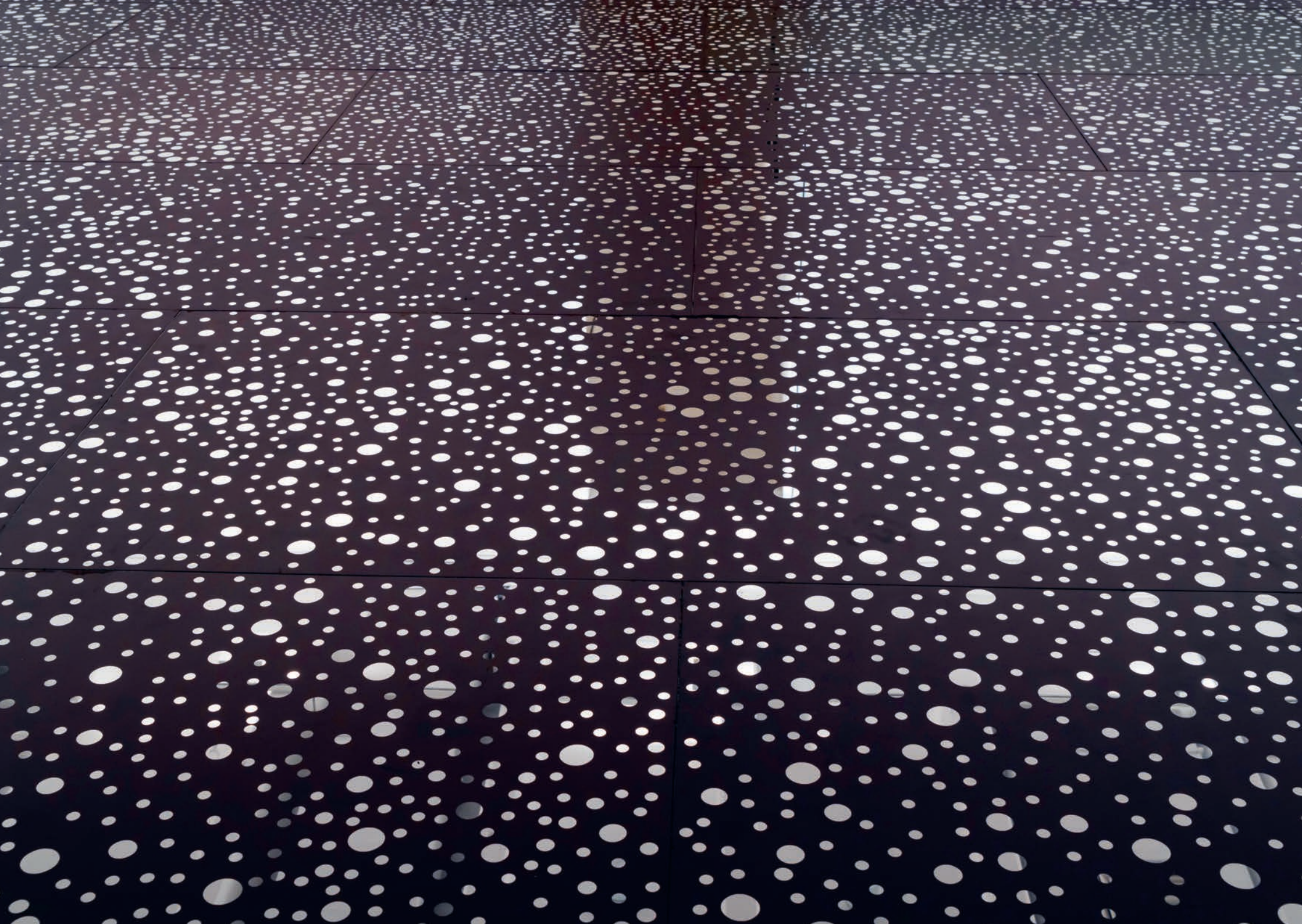


^ In Conversation Liz Nowell and Daniel Boyd

Artist Biography



Daniel Boyd was born in Gimuy/Cairns in 1982. He draws on his heritage—as a Kujjala, Ghungalu, Wanggerriburra, Wakka Wakka, Gubbi Gubbi, Kuku Yalanji, Bundjalung and Yuggera man from North Queensland and North Pentecost Island in Vanuatu—to interrogate legacies of colonisation. He has been exhibiting nationally and internationally since 2005. In 2014, he was the first Indigenous Australian to win the prestigious Bulgari Art Award. He has participated in major biennales and exhibitions, including the 2015 Venice Biennale, the 2016 Biennale of Sydney, the 2017 National Indigenous Art Triennial at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and the 2017 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. In 2017, he was in *Mondialité*, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Asad Raza at the Boghossian Foundation, Brussels. In 2022, his survey exhibition *Treasure Island* was presented by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Daniel Boyd is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; Station, Melbourne; and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.



Daniel Boyd: Rainbow Serpent (Version)

9 September–16 December 2023

Curated by Liz Nowell

VISIT US

Institute of Modern Art
Ground Floor, Judith Wright Arts Centre
420 Brunswick St, Fortitude Valley
QLD Australia 4006

OPENING HOURS

Tuesday–Saturday, 10am–5pm
Thursday, 10am–8pm

CONTACT US

T +61 7 3252 5750
E ima@ima.org.au
W www.ima.org.au

CONTRIBUTORS

Texts by Daniel Boyd, D Harding,
and Liz Nowell.

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Louis Lim.

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**GROPIUS
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BRISBANE
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speculative
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