

the
churchie
emerging art prize

2023 EDITION

We acknowledge, thank, and pay our deepest respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we work with and the Country we work on.

FINALISTS

ALREY BATOL
AMANDA BENNETTS
DYLAN BOLGER
LUKE BRENNAN
MATTHEW BROWN
RAF MCDONALD
CORBEN MUDJANDI
MELODY PALOMA
ROBERTA JOY RICH
JOEL SHERWOOD SPRING
JESS TAN
DEBBIE TAYLOR WORLEY
ASH TOWER

CURATOR

SEBASTIAN HENRY-JONES

JUDGE

TARA MCDOWELL

FOREWORD

emergence

1. The process of becoming visible after being concealed.
2. The process of coming into existence or prominence.
3. in evolutionary theory, the rise of a system that cannot be predicted or explained from antecedent conditions.
4. in physics, a property, law, or phenomenon that occurs at macroscopic scales (in space or time) but not at microscopic ones.

The art world loves a state of emergency, a state of becoming. We hanker for new faces, new ideas, new art. We all watch as things take shape.

Since 1987, Meanjin/Brisbane's Anglican Church Grammar School (Churchie) has staged its annual emerging-artist award exhibition, identifying and celebrating, enabling and boosting Australia's emerging artists. 'the churchie' has now established itself as a fixture on the nation's art calendar. For the fifth year running, it's being presented at the Institute of Modern Art. We are thrilled to continue our partnership.

This time, curator Sebastian Henry-Jones—currently working at West Space in Naarm/Melbourne—selected thirteen artists from almost 400 entries. He shaped his selection around the theme of context—addressing the cultural and economic conditions that shape our lives on this continent—and worked with the artists to finalise and stage their works in the exhibition.

'the churchie' offers a career-making opportunity for the overall winner, with a \$15,000 major prize provided by generous long-term supporters BSPN Architecture. There are three further prizes: the special commendation prize, donated by Fardoulys Constructions, and two Sam Whiteley highly commended memorial prizes, donated by Madison Cleaning and Painting Services. These prizes will be announced by our judge Tara McDowell, Associate Professor and Director of Curatorial Practice at Monash University, Naarm/Melbourne, on Friday 2 June, at a reception at the IMA. However, the general public can keep judging. Madison also sponsor a people's-choice prize, which will be announced at the close of the exhibition. One lucky voter will receive a two-night getaway from Spicers Retreats.

Our thanks go to the artists, for being up for the journey, and to curator Sebastian Henry-Jones and judge Tara McDowell, for lending their discrimination and credibility to this project.

ROBERT LEONARD
Director, Institute of Modern Art

THE UNTRAINED EYE

SEBASTIAN HENRY-JONES

This year, the theme for ‘the churchie’ is context. What does it mean to introduce this theme into the white-cube gallery—a space designed to isolate art objects and their audiences from the relationships that inform and sustain them?

We are all implicated in a relationship with place. In various ways, the artists in ‘the churchie’ exemplify our entangled, complex relationship with where we live and work in Australia. At a time of environmental, social, cultural, and political crises—many tied to our continuing colonial history—they ask us to expand the principles of care that museums and galleries apply to objects, to encompass people and Country.

Positioning art within a socio-historical conversation that extends beyond art history, the exhibition also provides the artists an opportunity to think about how their practice might sustain them, both within and without the art industry. As emerging artists, this second point is important in counterbalancing the ideas of competition, professionalism, and careerism that historically inform art prizes.

ALREY BATOL and **RAF MCDONALD** make art in their backyards on Wurundjeri Country, using freely available natural materials. In the DIY tradition, Batol builds rocket stoves and potbelly heaters, from materials to hand: clay, grasses, and scraps of metal. His burners embody our relationship to place and natural resources, literally burning raw materials to create energy. McDonald buries large textile works in the ground, where they are marked and stained by metals and microbes in the soil—a gesture that recognises the generative, creative potential of Country as an artistic collaborator. The act of digging into Country from a settler position is complex. McDonald asks: What is the significance of having a creative practice on stolen land; to make work in the context of an unpayable debt?

Art practice is inherently linked to particularities of time and place. **JESS TAN** is specific about the provenance of the materials she uses in her associative works, which demonstrate the poetic potential of materials in slow flux. She likens her activity to an ‘endless circulation of slow digestions, regurgitation, indigestion, and redigestion’ of material. This outlook can also be found in **LUKE BRENNAN**’s paintings, which mimic the processes of deterioration, germination, and growth that occur in the natural world. While Brennan employs this strategy as a means to erase evidence of the artist’s hand, Tan understands her works as temporary accumulations and combinations of matter. Working in this way, both resist notions of artistic genius that position artists as creators rather than

as manipulators of matter, undermining their authorship and the institutional structures that reify this authority.

Over the last few years, **JOEL SHERWOOD SPRING** has provoked us to consider what it means to live on sovereign land—his practice has been significant in my thinking about this exhibition. Sacred Country and its instrumentalisation within a colonial context are at the heart of his video work *Diggermode*, which poses important questions about our relationship to the resources we utilise under extractive capitalism. For Spring, the evacuation of natural resources for industry must be urgently rethought through a First Nations worldview. **ASH TOWER** also finds expression through a material engagement with place. He is interested in the material history of atomic technology. By rendering drone-viewfinder imagery in lead, he links Australia’s legacy of nuclear-weapons testing and the global nuclear industry that is literally fuelled by raw materials found in the ground. One such material is uranium, used in the production of nuclear power. It is abundant in Australia, which holds around a third of the world’s deposits.

DEBBIE TAYLOR WORLEY and **CORBEN MUDJANDI** demonstrate spiritual connections to place. Taylor Worley created her works on Gamillaraay Country, her birthplace, in collaboration with natural forces. Her paired canvases bear direct traces and rubbings from nature. In each pair, one panel was created at points in and alongside significant waterways on Country, the other at trees nearby. Mudjandi was born in Darwin, and, in his younger years, moved with his family between Jabiru, Barunga, Darwin, and Katherine, eventually settling on Mirarr land in Jabiru, Kakadu National Park, where he is a traditional owner. His dramatically lit photographs appear stylised, in the manner of the video games and popular culture he consumes. They communicate experience of idle time, travel, and isolation, as a condition of settling into a new place or of life on the move.

MELODY PALOMA’s video *Kitsch Sites* combines archival and new footage to consider the Snowy Mountains Scheme, the largest modern engineering effort on this continent, which transformed the living, material makeup of Southeast Australia. Paloma investigates the promotional imagery surrounding the Scheme, which aestheticises nationalistic tropes: nation building, multiculturalism, exploration, and collective labour. Such propaganda deadens our capacity to actively oppose large-scaled, state-sanctioned change, by obscuring our connection to what is at stake.

This idea sits at the heart of our theme—context. Art is inextricably connected to the material reality of the places where we live and work, but it communicates through representation and symbolism. Artists and art institutions may master rhetorics of transformation and progress, but, if they only work for change on a symbolic level, we will only get symbolic change. In a recently colonised country, where our biggest issues stem from the theft of land and its resources,

understanding our material relationship to place through nuanced First Nations and settler perspectives is paramount.

Working at the intersection of art and architecture, **DYLAN BOLGER** demonstrates the differences between symbolic and material approaches to transformation. His large, labour-intensive painting represents the internal structure of a macaranga leaf, a motif he plans to use many times across a variety of forms and contexts. While the leaf symbolises resilience in the wake of devastation—colonial, ecological, or both—the painting itself is made of paint and plywood. What raw materials were these made from? Where did those materials come from? And what context necessitated their transformation? These are important questions to consider, if we are to reframe our relationship to sovereign lands on this continent. Working as an architectural technician, Bolger also presents his leaves outside, like actual leaves, in wall murals in public spaces around Brisbane, in an explicitly material negotiation between art and place—architecture exemplifying the manipulation of materials to suit our needs and desires under capitalism.

Artists often critique public institutions as embodiments of dominant social-belief systems. **AMANDA BENNETTS** is critical of medical institutions for the way they conduct research into disability in a society that asserts wellness as normal. Her polished, clinical, and, at times, uncomfortable installations challenge the way we position people living with chronic disabilities as being in a state of stasis or decay. Their vilification and invisibility exemplify a culture of disposability enshrined across our public institutions and perpetuated through institutional thinking. **MATTHEW BROWN** looks to subvert such logics as they are practised in museums. He explores the disruptive possibilities of subjective, fan-oriented modes of collection—predicated on internet use—in relation to institutional archival practices and modes of display. His work undermines museum aesthetics by making the context of the collector's world key in understanding archives and collections.

ROBERTA JOY RICH's *Lunch with the Family at Mignon Street, Cape Town* considers apartheid as a systemic framework, applied in places throughout the world. It relates the experiences of her family under the South African apartheid system, especially within District 6—an inner-city residential area of Cape Town, from which thousands of First Nations people, black people, and people of colour were forcibly removed from the mid-1960s into the 1970s. The setting for this intimate conversation—recorded more than a decade ago—is bathed in purple light. This light refers to Rich's earlier work *The Purple Shall Govern* and the historic anti-apartheid Purple Rain Protest in Cape Town on 2 September 1989. By couching an acute moment of political transformation within a longer, intimate reflection of life under apartheid, her work argues that change is possible through active public participation. Presented in Australia, the work prompts us to consider the legacy of racialised hierarchies here, and our capacity to collectively engage and radically alter them.

The late Australian philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood wrote about 'shadow places', whose complete destruction supports the functioning of metropolitan centres. If ideals of care and preservation expounded within museums require cultural material to be wrested from the places and relations that sustain them, what are the implications for those who make them and the places they come from? We cannot survive without the nourishment provided to us by the earth, and we cannot carry out the work we do without our connection to place.

Global capitalism requires instrumentalising raw materials on individual and mass scales. Artists are interesting figures within this, as their research finds expression through the explicit manipulation of matter. Despite this, art is often merely symbolic. However, through their materials, their research, the places they work, and the audiences they address, the artists in 'the churchie' connect to the cultural, social, economic, and historical conditions that shape our lives, here, today. I hope the exhibition makes these connections explicit, as a means to reframe our potential to work in the interests of this place.

FINALISTS₂₀₂₃

ALREY BATOL



Cooking and Heating 2019–22

recycled metal, hand-sourced clay, homemade concrete, crushed glass

Inspired by DIY aesthetics, Alrey Batol makes cookers and heaters using recycled and home-sourced materials: clay, crushed glass from beer bottles, concrete with homemade cement. He says, 'The works remind me of my upbringing in the Philippines, where heating and cooking are still being done the old way, with fire fuelled by friendlier sources, such as kindling.'

AMANDA BENNETTS

The Spectacle of the Antagonist 2022

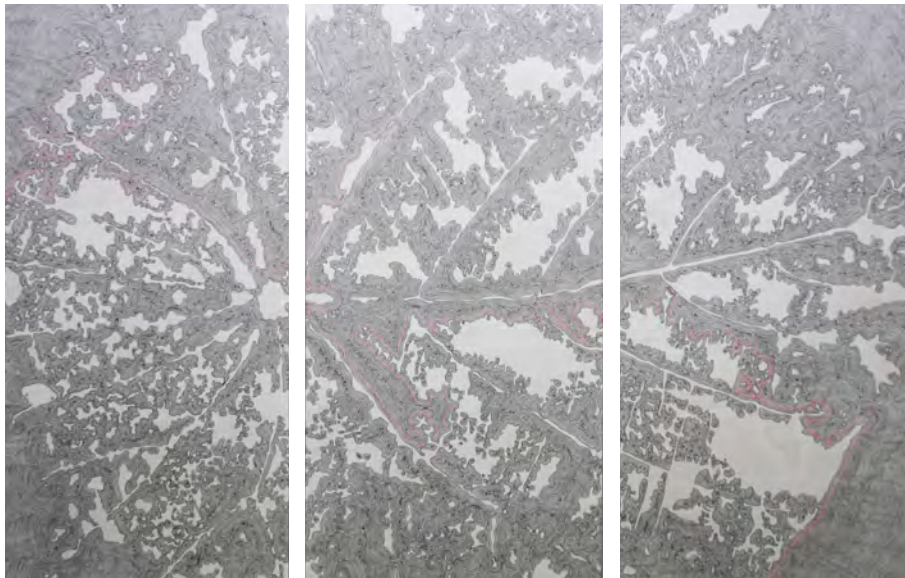
two-channel video, oscilloscope, medical trolley, auto poles, 2min 50sec



Amanda Bennetts challenges our social norms that prioritise able-bodied wellness. With its rabid montage of found footage, her video installation *The Spectacle of the Antagonist* contrasts the celebration of able-bodied protagonists and the treatment of illness in the movies.

Sixty Two, Sixty Three, Sixty Four 2023

paint and stain on plywood, 1210 x 1900mm



Maiawali, Karuwali, Pitta-Pitta, and Gomerioi artist Dylan Bolger uses a macaranga-leaf motif to explore resilience and Blakness. This ancient plant is considered a recoloniser or pioneer plant, meaning that, after devastation, it will be one of the first to grow back. Bolger says, ‘I use the macaranga leaf to represent my people and culture as being of an “old-world genesis” as we grow back through the devastation of colonisation.’

LUKE BRENNAN



Untitled 2022

oil, pencil, and wax on canvas, 2230 x 1670mm

Untitled (SMAC 273) 2022

acrylic, oil, pencil, studio detritus, raw pigment, and wax on canvas, 2230 x 1670mm

Untitled (Still) 2022

acrylic, oil, coloured pencil, and wax on canvas, 245 x 300mm

Untitled (Tears) 2022

acrylic, oil, coloured pencil, raw pigment, and wax on canvas, 2230 x 1670mm

Luke Brennan's paintings appear at once densely layered and distressed. He explains, 'While painting has historically been used to capture or fix an idea, I think of my works as being alive, with the commingling materials within them evidencing a lifeforce. The remnants left visible on the canvas embody an exchange, an emotional, organic sediment, solidified like sun-dried mud. Both creatively and scientifically, these paintings represent the richness and fragility of life itself.'

MATTHEW BROWN

Exodia (#ClaireBishopArtCritic) 2023

found and digitally collected dragon-image objects, sublimation print on vinyl, inkjet and laser prints, video



Exodia (#ClaireBishopArtCritic) is a 'dragon archive', centred on an interest in the proliferation of dragon images and objects made accessible and collectible through the internet. Matthew Brown's archive addresses traditional museological principles and display modes, but in the context of a new digital milieu that has destabilised notions of value and archival priorities. He explores the subversive possibilities of subjective, fan-oriented modes of collection.

RAF MCDONALD



Sand Dune a Dog, and a Knot in Motion 2023

alum, soda ash, vinegar, guar gum, xanthan gum, clay, egg, sodium carbonate, citric acid, latex glue, magnesium sulfate, madder root, onion skin dye, cow dung, synthetic dye, woad dye, soil, raw canvas, repurposed cotton sheet, thread, 2860 x 4430mm

Raf McDonald buried their painting *Sand Dune a Dog, and a Knot in Motion* in their backyard, inviting the earth to contribute to the work. The painting depicts a dog and a person, who emerge through reactive dyes and in mould lines where microbial matter grew, interacting with the rice glue bonded to the cotton. McDonald says, 'by turning toward animals and non-human entities, I engage with what is unknowable. Materially this implicates other life histories, and leads me to reflect on aspects of climate, topography, hydrology, soils, vegetation, migration, class, and rental and husbandry laws shaping both the "backyard" and the art work.'

CORBEN MUDJANDI



Davis 2022

inkjet print, 600 x 600mm

Late-Night Thoughts 2023

inkjet print, 600 x 900mm

Night-Time Hitchhike 2022

inkjet print, 600 x 600mm

Photographer Corben Mudjandi is a traditional owner of Jabiru and parts of Kakadu and West Arnhem. In his younger years, he moved between Jabiru, Barunga, Darwin, and Katherine. In 2013, his family decided to stay put in Jabiru, on Mirarr country. His work explores living on Country and the isolation he has faced. *Davis*, *Late-Night Thoughts*, and *Night-Time Hitchhike* are analogue photographs depicting a lone figure at night. Mudjandi says, 'I really like taking night shots. My favourite part of photography is capturing night atmosphere. There's something about how the camera captures light in the dark. It's what I enjoy most.'

MELODY PALOMA

Kitsch Sites 2023

two-channel video, 29min 8sec

Sound design: Tom Smith

Cinematography: Alena Lodkina

Archival footage: National Archives of Australia



Built between 1949 and 1974, the Snowy Mountains Scheme is the largest engineering project ever undertaken in Australia. Despite its significant environmental and cultural impacts, the myth of the Scheme elevates Australia as industrially, environmentally, and culturally progressive, while fortifying nationalist values. *Kitsch Sites* combines new and archival footage to consider the Scheme as an aesthetic project with colonial kitsch at its centre. Here, colonial kitsch is seen as enacting a particular form of settler nativism, reproducing figures such as the battler, the pioneer, the melancholic, and the larrikin. Melody Paloma interrogates this mythmaking as violently mobilising nostalgia, sentiments of national belonging, and Indigenous dispossession.

ROBERTA JOY RICH



Lunch with the Family at Mignon Street, Cape Town 2022

video installation with headphones and flatscreen, seating, 36min 33sec

Commissioned by Footscray Community Arts and Australia Centre for Contemporary Art for the exhibition *The Purple Shall Govern*, presented at Footscray Community Arts as part of the Australia Centre for Contemporary Art *Who's Afraid of Public Space?* program. Funded by the Australia Council for the Arts, Creative Victoria, and the Besen Foundation.

The apartheid segregation system, which operated in South Africa between 1948 and 1994, was inspired by Australian laws. *Lunch with the Family at Mignon Street, Cape Town* is built around a recording of Roberta Rich's family and friends, recounting stories of resilience, survival, and oppression under apartheid. Rich says, 'I hope this installation can serve as a timely interrogation of the underlying conditions of power and exclusion that continue to shape the ways we inhabit public space and reveal our capacity for collective resistance and change.'

JOEL SHERWOOD SPRING

Diggermode 2022

two-channel video, 22min 50sec

Commissioned by Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Naarm/Melbourne.



Wiradjuri artist Joel Sherwood Spring examines the contested narratives of Australia's cultural and Indigenous history in the face of ongoing colonisation. Tracing the material and cultural implications of extraction and storage, his two-channel video *Diggermode* addresses the social and environmental ethics of digital technology in constructing, storing, and sharing images, whether in surveillance databases, in museum archives, or online. Using artificial intelligence, Spring has created landscapes—in the style of acclaimed Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira—being torn apart by mining machinery. His work confronts the viewer with uncomfortable and overlooked aspects of our networked age, addressing the possibilities of 'the cloud' and AI in the context of ongoing colonisation.

DEBBIE TAYLOR WORLEY



The Barwon and Namoi Confluence 2020 **Mehi River and Warialda Red 2020** **Nundle Creek and Hanging Rock Gold 2020**

from *Earth and Water*

canvas, ochre, gum arabic, recycled timber, each 1800 x 1000mm

Matriarch of the Mehi 2020

Rumi's Tree, Walaay 2020

Yarrie Forest 2020

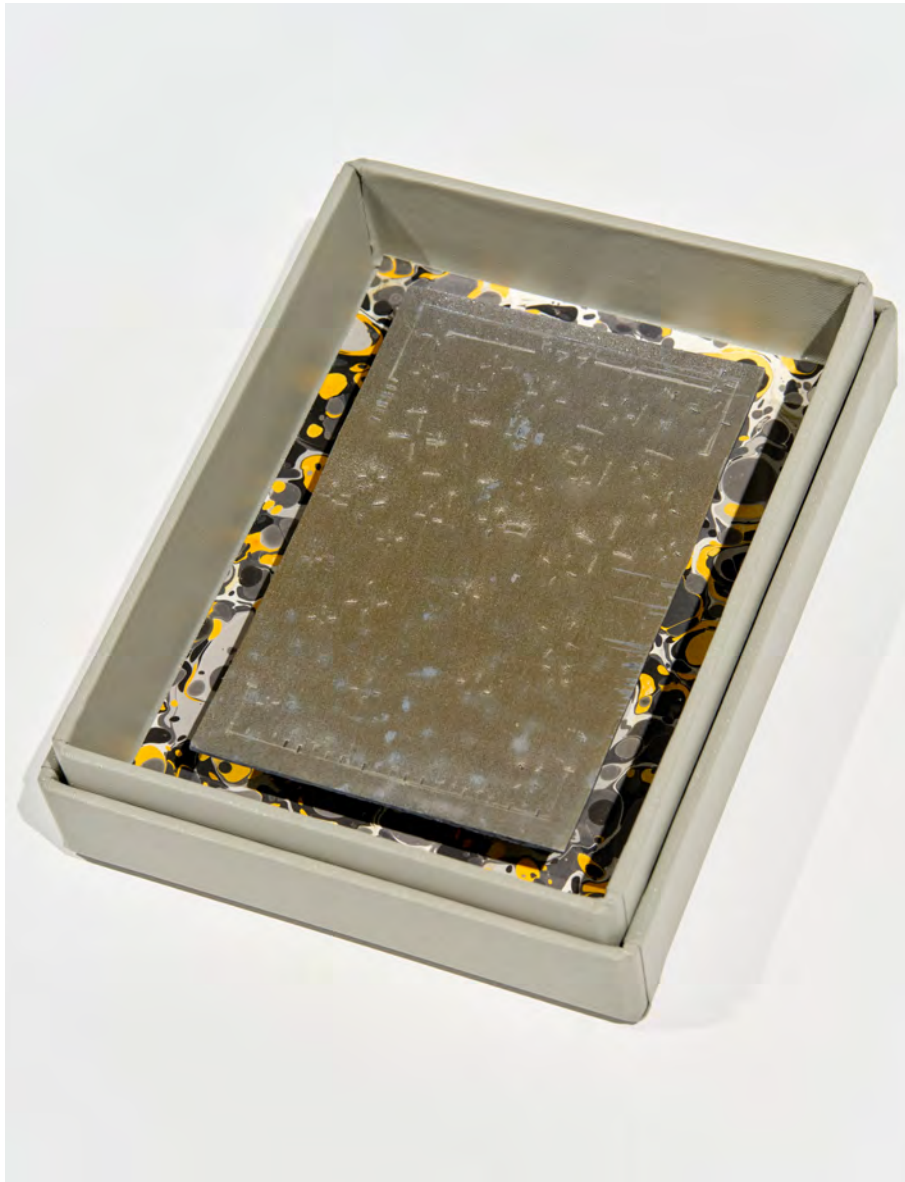
from *Let There Be Trees*

canvas, pigment, charcoal, metallic thread, recycled timber, each 1150 x 750mm

Debbie Taylor Worley describes her work as 'an immersion into Baayangali, the nature of all things'. She adds, 'I contemplated the memories of ancestors held in the water that bubbled over the rocky beds of the creeks. I thought of the stories they must hold and wondered of the lessons I was still to learn.' Taylor Worley responds to Country by soaking canvasses in creeks, rivers, and lakes, pooling pigment over them, and working in local ochres, clays, muds, and charcoal from recent bushfires. Alongside them, she hangs smaller, similarly prepared canvases with charcoal rubbings of ancient trees located near each waterway. The smaller canvasses are embroidered with glistening gold thread, representing the gold found around Nundle, known as 'the Hills of Gold'.

◀ *Mehi River and Warialda Red 2020 and Yarrie Forest 2020.*
Photo: Mike Terry.

ASH TOWER



Ord[i]nance III 2023

lead, marbled paper, archive box, 200 x 150 x 40mm

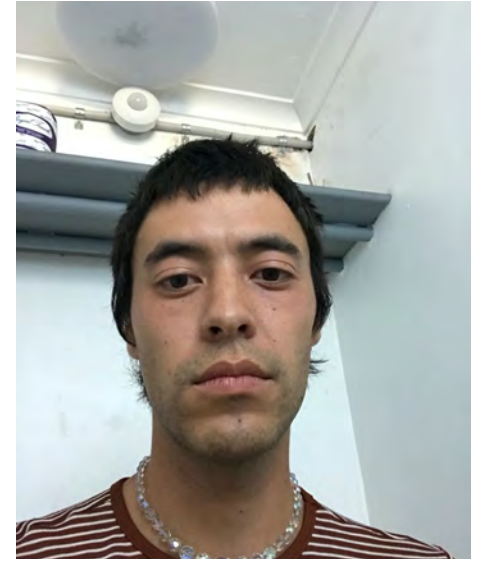
Neon Genesis 2022

copperplate etching, 150 x 100mm

The ancient Romans made defixiones—magical curses inscribed on lead tablets seeking justice or vengeance. In *Ord[i]nance*, Ash Tower replaces their Latin script with accumulated crosshairs from drone-strike footage, replacing the traditional divine gaze with a more ominous view from above, undermining the apparent righteousness of recent geopolitical conflicts. *Neon Genesis* flattens this accumulation into a ‘user interface’, suggesting the physical and psychological distance of contemporary conflicts, waged through screens, markets, and other sinister proxies.

CURATOR
AND JUDGE 2023

CURATOR



SEBASTIAN HENRY-JONES

Sebastian Henry-Jones is Curator at West Space, in Naarm/Melbourne. He was Curatorial Assistant for the 2020 and 2022 Biennales of Sydney, co-founder of experimental arts platforms Desire Lines and Emerson, and former editor at *Runway Journal*. He graduated with a Master's degree in Art Curating from the University of Sydney in 2018.

JUDGE



TARA MCDOWELL

Tara McDowell is Associate Professor and Director of Curatorial Practice at Monash University in Naarm/Melbourne. Her research interests include contemporary curating and exhibition histories, art institutions and support structures, and feminist and queer spaces of sociability and production. McDowell has held curatorial posts at CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

Her curatorial projects include *Take Hold of the Clouds* (2022), *Shapeshifters: New Forms of Curatorial Research* (2019), *John Baldessari: Wall Painting* (2017), *124,908*, for the Tbilisi Triennial (2015), *Nothing Beside Remains* (2014), and *The Land Grant: Flatbread Society with Amy Franceschini* (2014). Her books include *The Mother Artist*, *The Artist As*, and *The Householders: Robert Duncan and Jess*. She has also written for *Artforum*, *Artlink*, *Discipline*, *E-Flux Criticism*, *Filip*, *Memo Review*, *The Miami Rail*, *Mousse*, and *The Exhibitionist*, a curatorial-practice journal for which she was Founding Senior Editor.

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the churchie emerging art prize 2023

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