

FIRST CLASST

Trinity Alt Lilly Andrews Dylan Arkininstall Amelia Banister Tenicia Barry Pepita Barton Grace Bosworth Ashlyn Brady Natalie Costa
Maya Cox Emily Davidson Sophie Davidson Alivia Dwyer Amber Eldridge Taylah Ellercamp Jasmine Gibson Naz Gulmez Mikayla Haddow
Delaya Johns Rosie Jones Zara Kelly Isabela Kennedy Alanna King Jacinta Leck Madeleine Lock Jenna Marley Josef Milan Cassidy Motum
Bella Myers Liam Nash Milli Neilson-Spitzer Abbey-Rose O'Toole Myra Paleologos Sarah Peisley Holly Quigley Lorien Saunders Grace Williamson

CURATED BY HELEN WILLIS AND MELODY JONES MUSEUM OF ART AND CULTURE | YAPANG, LAKE MACQUARIE 12 FEBRUARY - 2 MAY 2021

FIRST CLASS 20

In 2021, *First Class* celebrates its thirteenth year, showcasing the exceptional standard of work produced by HSC Visual Arts Students from the Hunter and Central Coast regions. MAC: Museum of Art and Culture Lake Macquarie, *yapang* initiated the *First Class* project, and this unique exhibition continues to be a highlight of the exhibition calendar. Selected from school-nominated submissions produced in the previous year, the exhibition continues to embrace the diversity of media and techniques representative of the enormous scope of the NSW HSC Visual Arts syllabus. This exhibition offers young artists the chance to exhibit in a professionally curated gallery setting while encouraging audiences to experience the richness of local talent and the voice of youth.

Employing a variety of visual imagery and techniques, many of these artists have turned inwards to explore the impact of this pandemic year on emotional and mental health. Themes of family, memories and the importance of home are distinctive concepts predominant in these exceptional times. Intimate works explore complex connections to home and identity, nostalgia, youth and personal relationships.

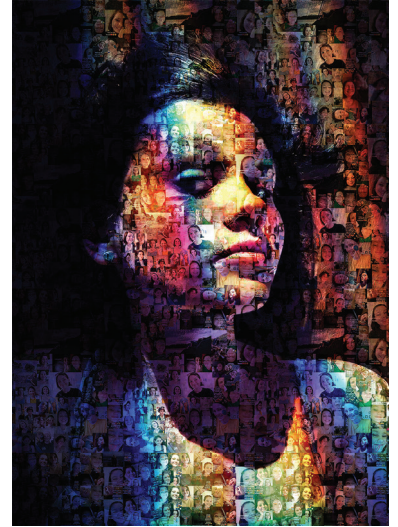
Through the avenue of visual arts, these student bodies of work reveal subjective insights into current concerns such as COVID, science and medicine, isolation, fear and anxiety. Many works highlight the vulnerability and fragility of the individual, allowing the audience an entry into the artist's world through revealing private moments. A deep connection to nature is also explored with symbolic interpretations commenting on environmental impacts, damaged ecosystems and ecological responsibilities. The artworks embody the uncertain narrative of life today and comment on contemporary issues faced by society.

The HSC Visual Arts course encourages students to create a body of work that demonstrates conceptual strength and technical resolution. Those selected for *First Class 20* have excelled in both these areas, and demonstrate serious involvement in the development of their respective art practices. The curatorial process, however, ultimately rests on the selection of artworks that best expose this generation's awareness of the big issues facing us all. Fears for the environment and mental health issues, for instance, continue to absorb today's youth, and this exhibition creates a platform to present, interpret and broadcast these fears.

Pepita Barton's *Delicate Deadly* is a pertinent study of the relationships between science, nature, art and our time living with COVID-19. The title refers to the fast-evolving nature of the virus and its adaptability to undergo mutations. The artwork juxtaposes the delicate but deadly nature of a virus and comments on contemporary issues faced by society today. Barton's work references clinical environments used to treat diseases and she comments '*our population has been encouraged to live in similar sterile and hygienic conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. While it has caused many deaths worldwide, the virus, like many other elements of nature is a beautiful microscopic particle, a complex, convoluted design of intricacy*'.

Milli Neilson-Spitzer's *Stockpiling 2020* similarly represents the period when COVID-19 sent the nation into lock-down. Her concept focuses on unobtainable products and the huge impact of stockpiling. Neilson-Spitzer says '*my part-time work shifted, and products such as toilet paper and hand sanitiser became difficult to find. My thoughts turned to how these everyday goods once thought of as unimportant were now prized*'. The small, precious works focus on these rare items, and by displaying

them as embroideries from the past they resemble a precisely made tapestry shopping list. The care taken in creating these pieces makes them exceptional, like the stockpiled objects they represent.



Liam Nash, St Mary's Catholic Collage, Gateshead
184 Kilometres (detail), photomedia, dimensions variable

Liam Nash's digital work *184 Kilometres* represents the development of a relationship during the COVID-19 lockdown. Nash observes that in early 2020 he met his new partner at a retreat, subsequently they returned to their respective homes, 184 km apart.

'Virtual images, digital snips and lines of text became the sense of my new girlfriend, adding and substituting memories of her from our brief initial meeting'. His images expose themes of isolation and loneliness as well as the role of technology in distant relationships. The work comprises pictures from online conversations and aims to simulate the visual memory of a relationship.

Other compelling subjects permeate *First Class 20*. Environmental concerns can be seen in Jenna Marley's *High Tide*. In her sculpture, man's architectural accomplishments deteriorate into sandcastles washed away with the tide, a product of a child's pastime. Her work is a metaphor for the fragility of civilization against natural forces and is inspired by historical natural disasters such as Pompeii. Marley says 'the childlike quality of the work is symbolic of my generation's dependence on climate action due to the ignorance of world leaders. Rising sea levels caused by climate change impact on us all, we are literally responsible for keeping civilization afloat'.

Maya Cox's series *Inheritance* explores the consequences of global warming on the environment and how it subsequently affects the next generation. Cox comments 'students are standing together to recognise the importance of global warming. We must act before detrimental implications are irreversible'. Her photographic images set the scene whereby past actions have become destructive to future generations.

Conservational fears and mental health issues are examined in Jacinta Leck's collection of work. *Rewilding* represents an approach to conservation that involves rehabilitating plants in their natural environment, allowing damaged ecosystems and degraded landscapes to restore. Leck remarks 'this process closely parallels the human mind whilst healing from trauma. After grappling with my

own mental health issues, I found myself in a new and terrifying environment, one that forced me to adapt and overcome challenges. My mind felt like a degraded landscape needing restoration, a landscape that was mine to restore and conserve'.

The complexities of mental health and the everyday struggle to meet unrealistic social expectations are ever present problems that permeate the minds of youth today. Lilly Andrews' *Collision* depicts her feelings of being submerged by society's views. She comments, 'a collision occurs when two or more bodies exert forces on each other; my paintings depict a collision between my own identity and the overwhelming opinion of others'.

Issues of self-identity and symbolism are also compelling themes which pervade artworks in *First Class 20*. Ashlyn Brady's *Lost in the Moment* is a photographic narrative which documents individuals in personal landscapes. Brady's work captures portraits of family and close friends, exposing raw compositions which allow an audience entry into the subjects' world. Her figures are depicted in settings central to their identities, contexts which capture the essence of their stories through revealing private moments.

Personal and subjective narratives that focus on the connections between place, relationships and the importance of family are strong concerns in *First Class 20*. Naz Gulmez's *Time, Interrupted* explores themes of time, memory and change. Her photographic series is inspired by her family's immigration and the resulting unfamiliar experiences. The works depict surreal empty interiors and shadowed blurry figures. Gulmez quotes 'old friends, family, and possible futures became more and more distant through time, unfinished and fading away'. Her work depicts how the process of time dissolves memories, leaving the eerie presence of a life that used to occupy these spaces.

Holly Quigley's *Memory Unfolded* depicts a conflict between two worlds wherein an inner journey is explored through a representation of the external world. Quigley faces an identity displacement after being introduced to a new environment. The paintings layered surface symbolises relationships between individuals and their surroundings.



Maya Cox, Merewether High School, *Inheritance* (detail), photomedia, epson enhance matte paper, dimensions variable



Lilly Andrews, Lake Munmorah High School, *Collision* (detail), acrylic paint, canvas 1860 x 1220



Sophie Davidson, Warners Bay High School, *Is What's Yours Mine?...Joy* (detail), rice paper, watercolour, gouache, acrylic paint, dimensions variable

Sophie Davidson's painting *Is What's Yours Mine?...Joy* integrates childhood nostalgia with memories of her grandparents' garden. Davidson's concept relates to transcendence which is defined as the weightlessness of the mind. This idea is interpreted through dreamlike images personalised in her painting. Intense streams of colour and line intertwine the work representing the intricacies of the mind. She observes '*the recurring spiral parallels anxieties and challenges which invade my peace of mind but embody a sense of continuation, growth and movement*'.

The artists in *First Class 20* have embodied a sophisticated conceptual and contemporary visual language that has considered the impact of this pandemic year on mental health. Themes of family, memory and the importance of home are distinctive concepts predominant in these exceptional times. Issues relating to COVID, science and medicine, isolation, fear and anxiety are articulated. Internalised personal perspectives highlight the vulnerability and fragility of the individual, allowing the audience an entry into the artist's world. These artworks embody the uncertain narrative of life today and comment on contemporary issues faced by society.