

# FIRST CLASS

Jade Behrens Preston Brook Monique Carey Minha Choi Temeka Clarence Renae Cleary Tristan Deeg Lauren Donoghoe Kaylyn Fairhurst Melanie Hain Jasmine Hammond Morgan Hawkins Abbey Hindmarch Caitlin Houston Matt Humby Charlotte Ison Gabriella King Ainsley Knox Susanna Kwok Alex Leman Claudia McCartney Shae-Lee McDonald Brad McKinnon Jasmine McPherson Sophie McSporran Tammy Marley Tahnee Marriott Makenzi Milton Tahlia Nicholas Teghan O'Beirne Luke O'Donnell Ellie Pritchard Serena Rossi Deema Rouady Redd Sarson Hannah Small Madison Small Tylah Smith Rebekah Staunton Lincoln Trevett Bethany Urbanowicz Harriet Venter Jackson Voorby Madison Waugh Logan Whitten Natasha Wilson Nicholas Wilson

CURATED BY HELEN WILLIS IN CONSULTATION WITH COURTNEY NOVAK  
MUSEUM OF ART AND CULTURE, LAKE MACQUARIE 15 FEBRUARY – 5 APRIL 2020

# FIRST CLASS 19

In 2020, *First Class* celebrates its twelfth year, showcasing the exceptional standard of work produced by HSC Visual Arts students from the Hunter and Central Coast regions. Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, now known as the Museum of Art and Culture (MAC), initiated the *First Class* project, and this unique show 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 sees over 47 skilful young artists exhibiting in the professionally curated gallery setting, which encourages audiences to experience the richness of local talent and the voice of youth.

Themes of nature and the environment, memories, family and the importance of culture are distinctive concepts predominant this year. Through the avenue of visual arts, these student bodies of work are revealing subjective observations of current concerns such as



Nicholas Wilson, Merewether High School, *A Land of Great Fertility* (detail)  
photomedia on aluminum, arline pen, ink, copic markers, 55 x 360cm

mental health, climate change, pollution and social injustice. The fragility of the human mind, our emotional connection to past memories, exploration of identity and our increasingly threatened ecosystems are presented through a

colourful series of visual narratives. Fleeting slices of life are manipulated and distorted to encourage audiences to reflect on issues faced by contemporary 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 19* 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.

Bethany Urbanowicz's installation *In Bloom* celebrates nature's fleeting moments and the ephemeral manner in which organic life blossoms and grows. Her textural fibre sculptures are imagined organisms, oversized living and breathing entities, each with their own distinctive characteristics. Urbanowicz's work encourages audiences to reflect on the fragile balance in which our environment exists.

Conservational fears are revealed in Madison Waugh's work *Depletion*, which explores the ecological catastrophe resulting from the Carmichael coal mine in the Galilee Basin in Central Queensland. Waugh states that 'the Great Barrier Reef is part of Australia's identity, but it is in danger, increasingly threatened ecosystems precariously balanced; Adani's coal mines are causing coral to be bleached and destroyed through temperature rises in the water'. Waugh's use of faded colours in the ceramic forms supports these fears.



Tristan Deeg  
Callaghan College Jesmond Senior Campus  
*In the Best Interests of the Public* (detail)  
photomedia, dimensions variable

Environmental concerns for our waterways can also be seen in Logan Whitten's *An Individual's Choices*, which focuses on the destruction triggered by climate change. The human impact of pollution is revealed through a series of visual narratives that depicts the damage caused by plastics and the resulting devastating outcomes to the environment. The artist's face becomes a canvas signifying the pain, destruction and death of our planet; the brush, a motif symbolising painting the planet with greed and negligence. Whitten is inspired by the visual arts activism of artists Banksy and Ai Weiwei.

Nicholas Wilson's evocative work *A Land of Great Fertility* explores the ever-growing impacts that have arisen as a result of the expansion of urban areas in Australia. He comments on his work: 'To a large extent these impacts have been triggered by the invasion of the British in 1788. The red line across the photographs represents a 500km graph of population density from coastal Sydney to the Snowy Mountains.

This line was arranged in-situ within the landscape using electro-luminescent wire, tent poles and fishing line, then photographed. The lower section of the work incorporates text extracts

from Governor Arthur Phillip's journal written upon his 1788 arrival in Australia and *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Bill Gammage, 2011.'

Issues of social injustice are strongly signified through Tristan Deeg's photographic series *In the Best Interests of the Public*. The work conveys the looming pressures that individuals are subjected to in modern Western society. Deeg aims to spark discomfort in the audience through his manipulated images that express his personal frustrations. 'The motif of the "Pig" serves as a physical manifestation to expose issues and concerns that too often go unchecked in our world: corporate greed, imprisonment, authority, conformity, surveillance and wars. All driven by an overbearing culture that forces competition among individuals as well as a collective desire to consume material goods.'



Matt Humby, Merewether High School, *The Thoughtlessness and Vices of Honest Men* (detail) acrylic paint, oil sticks, oil pastels, artline pen, board, 120 x 90cm each panel

Matt Humby's *The Thoughtlessness and Vices of Honest Men* captures his own ideas about what it means to be human. He asks us about our vices. What provokes us to do sinful things? The symbolism in the paintings is drawn from his own imaginings, history and popular culture and reflects on the chaos and turmoil that happens even to honest men.

Issues of cultural identity are strongly represented within *First Class 19*. Indigenous and ethnic connections as well as multiculturalism are examined within the Australian context. *Women's Business* by Claudia McCartney is a detailed homage from the perspective of Aboriginal women which explores the intergenerational connections between people and land in a stolen cultural upbringing. McCartney's family portraits use traditional Aboriginal dotting techniques associated with dreamtime painting. The works are recontextualised with Western traditional mapping in response to the places that have impacted the women's lives and from where they have come. Three generations of Yuin women – McCartney, her mother and grandmother – are revealed amidst rich golden ochres and traditional map dotting representing culture, home and connection to land.

Cultural symbols are articulated in Susanna Kwok's *The Fortune-ate Ones*, which explores the concept of Chinese take-away culture in Australia. Her sculpture takes the form of a Chinese dragon cleverly fashioned from thrown away found objects associated with Asian restaurants such as chopsticks, fortune cookie wrappers, menus and containers. Kwok says, 'Sinophobic detrimental connotations are often associated with these little take-away dens; however, for many new migrants they are a crutch to help them survive this strange new world. With limited English skills and no educational background, they established their way in Australia, and gave me a life they always wished for.'

In her work Kwok hopes to subvert the negative undertones surrounding these shops and to associate them instead with the power, strength and good fortune symbolic of the Chinese dragon.

Personal and subjective narratives that focus on the connections between nostalgia, place, relationships and the importance of memory and family are strong concerns in *First Class 19*.

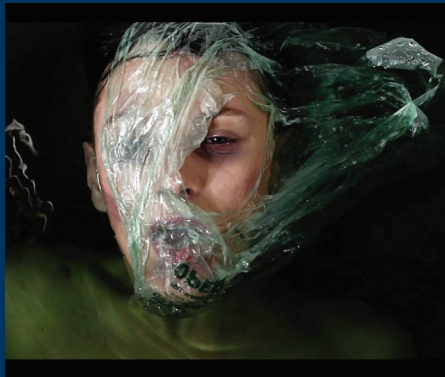


Susanna Kwok, Merewether High School, *The Fortune-ate Ones* steel, wire, newspaper, tape, paint, plaster bandages, Chinese restaurant receipts and menus, fortune cookie wrappers, chopsticks, take-away boxes, 90 x 90 x 90cm

Tahlia Nicholas's haunting *Souvenir: What I Remember, What I Forget* explores the fallibility of memories and the role of photography in retaining and defining these reminiscences. She draws inspiration from a family trip taken around Australia as a child. Many of her memories are linked with the remaining photographs from this holiday. Nicholas has used collagraphs and manipulated photocopies to reflect how her memories of the trip have not only faded over time but have become fluid, shifting and ever-changing.

In Jackson Voorby's poignant work *The Relevance of Narrative, The Preservation of Memory and the Inevitability of Decay* he conveys personal experiences through the permanence of architecture.





Logan Whitten, Morisset High School, *An Individual's Choices* (detail)  
digital video, acrylic paint, paint brush, canvas, paper, dimensions  
variable

The stippled pen drawings representing his grandfather's heritage focus on the centrality of architecture to memories, triggered by the recent passing of Voorby's grandfather. Voorby reflects how these structures served as a conduit for his grandfather's life and internal healing. His work calls for us to preserve our physical world in order to maintain a database of memories.

The complexities of mental health and the everyday struggle to meet unrealistic social expectations are ever present issues that permeate the minds of youth today. Kaylyn Fairhurst's *Suppressed Distress* reveals an entity surrounded by hellish creatures representing different mental disorders and phobias. Her work endeavours to connect with people who are dealing with mental illnesses. She comments that 'many feel isolated and struggle to express how their mental adversaries affect them physically and emotionally. Mental health is a constant fight within the individual, by creating creatures that express pain, my work aims to convey the constant battle many people endure.'

Tylah Smith's expressive paintings portray a youthful mind trying to navigate the complexities of adulthood. In *The Tempest*, Smith portrays how 'throughout my final year of school and young adulthood, I have been catapulted into a hectic world where I battle with finding a balance between material possessions, self-love and the working world. Like a storm, like a dream, life will blow you over with perplexing and strenuous circumstances. Learning that regardless of money, love, passion and work, life for everyone will be rounded by a sleep.' Smith takes her stimulus from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* with Prospero declaring, 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded by a sleep.'

Issues of self-identity and related symbolism are also strong themes which pervade works in *First Class 19*. Ellie Pritchard's *Head Above Water* is a visual narrative of glinting reflections which celebrate the connectivity between water and the human body. The physiques of the figures are mirrored and manipulated, creating distorted reflections, some more abstract than others. Gabriella King's digital work *Everything Falls in a Tremendous Shower, Dissolving Me*

depicts a series of dismantled faces. The motif of water reflects the disintegration of the self; the melting, shattering, changing and shifting faces. Masks act as symbols for the facades used by people to hide their true selves, reflecting an ideal of falsity leading to dissociation and damage to identity. By employing various techniques King has dissolved her presence within a series of portraits using water to abstract the photographic processes. Her work draws inspiration from Virginia Woolf's poem 'The Waves': 'Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me.'

The artists in *First Class 19* have encompassed a sophisticated conceptual and contemporary visual language that considers themes of nature and the environment, climate change, pollution and social injustice. Internalised personal perspectives have been created by these students to express the importance of identity, cultural connections, memories and issues of mental health, giving an insightful glimpse into the complex narratives of this generation.

HELEN WILLIS CURATOR



Gabriella King, Newcastle Grammar School, *Everything Falls in a Tremendous Shower, Dissolving Me* (detail)  
photomedia, copic markers, paper, dimensions variable



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