

# Indigenous songs embrace politics

Ron Cerabona

INDIGENOUS and non-Indigenous artists will come together in the musical broadcast *Songs from a Stolen Senate*.

Canberra music group the Griffyn Ensemble commissioned, with the support of the ACT government, six Indigenous composers who work in diverse genres.

The composers are Aranda country music performer Warren Williams, Noongar singer-songwriters Gina Williams and Guy Ghouse, Norah Bagiri from Mua Island in the Torres Straits, Canberra-based composer Christopher Sainsbury from the Dharug nation and Yuin composer Brenda Gifford.

The ensemble's director, Michael Sollis, says the brief for the diverse group of composers was to take texts from words spoken into Hansard on a subject that was meaningful to them and rework the spoken words into songs.

Sollis says the composers' subject matter was diverse and ranged from the stolen generations and the rabbit-proof fence policy to youth incarceration and climate change.

*Songs from a Stolen Senate* was built on existing collaborations between the Griffyn Ensemble and First Nation artists including Sollis's *One Sky Many Stories* with Warren Williams.

Griffyn bassist Holly Downes and violinist Chris



Composer Warren Williams. Picture: William Thomson

Stone regularly perform with Williams and Ghouse.

*Songs from a Stolen Senate* was to have premiered in May 2020, but was cancelled because of physical isolation. Through the support of Rise Canberra and the Where You Are Festival it has been able to proceed.

Sainsbury says, "My music sits somewhere between folk and jazz and contemporary classical."

He teaches composition at the Australian National University and heads the Ngarraburra Indigenous Composers Program.

His piece, *Red Kangaroo Standing*, was inspired by the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt. It's written for a female voice - one of the Griffyn Ensemble members will sing it - with violin, flute, mandolin and double bass.

Collaborator Melinda Smith adapted sections of Wyatt's first speech in Parliament into lyrics and Sainsbury composed the music.

Although the speeches were in the public domain, Sainsbury says he and Smith sought and received permission from Wyatt's family to use the minister's words.

"There were three parts we focused on," Sainsbury says.

They used words Wyatt spoke about himself and his family - his mother was one of the removed Indigenous women - as well as him talking about former prime minister Bob Hawke discussing the idea of a treaty with Indigenous people at Barunga.

Also incorporated were Wyatt's remarks about being the first Indigenous person elected to the House of

Representatives and the first to be a cabinet minister.

Sollis says he is glad the music was workshopped and recorded at Mulligans Flat, a site that has significance to Ngunnawal people.

The Griffyn Ensemble, he says, "doesn't just play dots on the page" but collaborates with people - some able to read music, others not - to create musical pieces of many kinds.

*Songs from a Stolen Senate* is one example of such collaboration, this time with Indigenous composers working in different genres and with a range of interests.

Sainsbury says the Griffyn Ensemble "puts its money where its mouth is" when it comes to supporting Aboriginal musicians, collaborating with them and commissioning new works.

In addition to the free broadcasts of the performances, the composers will be available to answer questions and hear comments about the works.

Sainsbury says he might take part by telephone but has another important engagement on the second day.

"Saturday is my dad's birthday."

**Songs from a Stolen Senate. The Griffyn Ensemble, various composers. Friday, September 4 at 7pm, Saturday, September 5, 2pm and 7pm. To register attendance at the free online interactive performances, visit [griffynensemble.com](http://griffynensemble.com).**

# Small visions of insight expose the big picture

Ron Cerabona

**Thirteen Artists: Perfect (20/20) Vision in the year 2020. Gallery of Small Things: Until September 6, 2020 Also online at [galleryofsmallthings.com/photoaccess-products](http://galleryofsmallthings.com/photoaccess-products) and [gallery.photoaccess.org.au](http://gallery.photoaccess.org.au).**

The Gallery of Small Things (GOST) is the tiniest gallery in Canberra. Visitors usually see a variety of artworks in a space less than six metres square which, in the 1960s, was an outside laundry!

GOST conducts an annual group show showcasing a different visual arts sector. This year it is photography and the exhibition has been worked up in collaboration with PhotoAccess which invited proposals responding to the theme of 20/20 vision with artworks 20 centimetres by 20 centimetres in size, in the year 2020. Applications were assessed by a panel comprised of GOST and PhotoAccess staff.

In total, the 13 selected artists created 50 small works, which makes for a rather crowded gallery - despite a few not being displayed in it. Gallery owner and operator Anne Masters had a challenging choice to make when curating this show.

Rowena Yates has four images framed in

deep-set black boxes. There is much to see in each of these works if we spend adequate time looking into them. Yates says, "This series explores the political and environmental consequences of climate change for farming families of the Ungarie district ... and seeks to complicate stereotyping of primary producers as stoic 'battlers', particularly as these play out in popular constructions of national identity ..."

Brian MacAlister has created five works titled *Not known to self*. In each work there are fascinating juxtapositions. He has used a combination of digital photography and photographic collage to give these works a contemporary edge.

Yvette Perine has created I-Type Polaroids documenting bushfire smoke, affected land, and regrowth. Appropriately, they are displayed close to Ian Skinner's images of the bushfire aftermath at Cadgee. I was pleased to see a print of an image that was a finalist for Skinner in the recent Mullins Australian Conceptual Photography Prize - albeit a small cropped version.

Tessa Iveson has created lovely digital images on glass in a series titled *Liminal landscapes*, reflecting her view that 2020 has been a liminal year of despair and hope.

Jason McDonald's contribution is three



Tessa Iveson, Liminal Landscapes - Sonder. Picture: Supplied

exquisite works in solid oak box frames. The subject matter first seen is wildflowers, but closer inspection reveals small creatures, such as geckos, lizards, frogs, and hoverflies, among the flowers.

Sammy Hawker contributes some wonderful art with a set of Multigrade FB prints, made from 120 film developed with XTol and ocean water collected on site at Broulee.

They each show great textures and details. I loved *Broulee detail 1*.

Thomas Edmondson is showing works created using medium format colour negative film. They show us varied observed urban subjects within 100 kilometres of his home.

Emily Bull pays homage to the acclaimed American photographer Vivian Maier's self-portraits, with two inkjet prints reflecting a search for inner clarity.

David Lindesay's Polaroid titled *Corrupted Touch* very much conveys a sense of touch despite his having altered and deformed his image by applying heat to the film.

Sari Sutton has a series of framed digital inkjet prints. One of them, *Orbital (brain) storm*, is a great representation of what my brain must be like during times when my thoughts are all over the place.

Damien Laing contributes five digital prints of flying foxes.

They are amusingly displayed directly above Sinead Alison's five images documenting cats through windows. She is inspired by Lee Friedlander's *Mannequin* and Herbert List's *Monograph*. This body of work has allowed her to explore the light and play with reflection in all conditions - to capture a unique composition of these subjects in a surrealist yet documentary manner.