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Silver lining: First Nations artists' work can help us heal

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First Nations artists from across Australia and the world are featured in Nirin, the 22nd Biennale of Sydney. From left to right: Adrian Stimson, Latai Taumoepeau, Tony Albert, Mayunkiki and Nicholas Galanin. Photo by Rhett Wyman

There is a silver lining to the fact that the Sydney Biennale was forced to move into the digital realm for the first time in its history says Barbara Moore, chief executive of our city's 22nd global art showcase.

"Often it is in moments of trauma or distress that artists really come to the forefront in helping us heal and lead our direction in connecting and finding our way through this emotionally," she said.

Humanity, consciousness and communities working together were the themes of curator Brook Andrew's Biennale of Sydney, widely acclaimed before its necessary transition to online due to the pandemic.

Using the theme Nirin, meaning "edge" in the Wiradjuri language, Andrew curated a show where two-thirds of the artists were First Nations or people of diaspora or colour from around the world.

Andrew said the event, first held in 1973 as part of the opening celebrations for the Sydney Opera House, intended to be a celebration of edgy, groundbreaking art; a platform for people on the fringes of society who are "discarded or forgotten"; and an invitation to those



Brook Andrew, known for “reinterpreting colonial and modern history and offering alternative perspectives”. CREDIT: TIM BAUER

living on the edge to form a new centre. The curator set out across the globe to find artists who had never before been part of the Sydney event. Beginning in Haiti, he rubbed shoulders in artist-run spaces and simply “followed his nose”.

The result was an eclectic line-up of predominantly First Nations, ethnically- and gender-diverse artists. Many of the works challenge ideas around colonial history, race and sexuality. Some shine a light on environmental issues. Others promote healing and rejuvenation.

Andrew says the common theme is “a consciousness around community and working together” to address a broad range of issues.

“It's about rounding the art world. It's not about separating,” he said. Andrew has been mindful of creating a “safe space” for artists to express ideas that some may find confronting.

Artist Pedro Wonaeamirri and his group travelled from the Tiwi Islands off the coast of Darwin to exhibit their burial poles at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Despite being more than 4000 kilometres from his community, he says being surrounded by other First Nations artists “makes us feel at home”.

Spectrum met five of these artists whose work can now be seen online at biennaleofsydney.art

NICHOLAS GALANIN

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What do colonial monuments represent? And whose monuments are they? These were the questions Nicholas Galanin asked in *Shadow of the Land*.

The Tlingit and Unanga artist set up an archaeological dig site on Cockatoo Island, excavating the shadow of the Captain Cook monument in Sydney's Hyde Park.



Nicholas Galanin with his work, *Shadow of the Land* on Cockatoo Island. CREDIT: RHETT WYMAN

The statue itself was notably absent, while the hole was conveniently deep enough to bury

the monument, imagining a future “where the memories of settler colonialism have become distant and buried”.

Galanin said it was important to reclaim the practice of archaeology, which had been “largely used historically to uphold white supremacy and ... oppress Indigenous communities.”

On the 250th anniversary of Cook’s landing in Australia, Galanin examined what he called “the myth of discovery” that underpins colonial monuments around the world.

Tellingly, the dig site was littered with markers indicating found objects.

“The conundrum of that is, when you dig down, you're going to find evidence of existing communities.”