


TarraWarra Biennial 2023: an experience of Indigenous-led relationships

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TarraWarra Biennial 2023 offers an invitation that goes beyond the gallery walls.

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Visual Arts

Unbound Collective (Ali Gumillya Baker, Faye Rosas Blanch, Natalie Hardin, Simone Ulalka Tur) Mirning, Mbararam / Yidinyji, Narungga, Yankunytjatjara. 'PERMEATE | mapping skin and tides of saturated resistance', 2023, installation view TarraWarra Biennial 2023: *ua usiusi fa'ava'asavili*, courtesy the artists. Photo: Andrew Curtis.

The cycle of biennials, triennials and major blockbuster exhibitions is back in motion. Seeing familiar faces at openings, sipping wine and trying to navigate the crowd to see the actual artworks – it's hard not to feel like everything is caught up in this one, massive jumble called the arts.

The *TarraWarra Biennial 2023: ua usiusi fa'ava'asavili* (an *alagā'upu*, Sāmoan proverb, meaning 'the canoe obeys the wind') is a refreshing detour. It is located at the TarraWarra Art Museum among rolling hills and laid-back vineyards in the Yarra Valley, around 60 kilometres from Melbourne's CBD.

For this iteration, Indigenous voices sit at the core of the artistic practices presented. This has been the approach at previous biennials, but under the curation of Dr Léuli Eshrāghi, it flows through *ua usiusi fa'ava'asavili*, right from the start of the speeches at the opening (31 March).

The crowd that gathered at TarraWarra took the significance of such events to heart, not only for the art, but also to celebrate communities and genuine relationships between people. It was a crowd that could sing 'happy birthday' to Eshrāghi, feel united against the struggles of our current age on the Trans Day of Visibility, and shed a tear as Senior Wurundjeri Elder, Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin AO, spoke of pride for First Nations people.

Clothilde Bullen, Curator, Head of Indigenous Programs, Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), flew in from WA to deliver her opening speech as Chair of the Board of the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA).

As Bullen noted, 'The methodology by which this exhibition has been conceived and developed has become a framework of sorts by which we can interrogate our understandings of so-called Australia.'

It's a reminder of the human element behind the breadth of works presented, and an important note that set the foundations of this particular preview experience.



Phuong Ngo, 'Remastered', 2023. Installation view, TarraWarra Biennial 2023: *ua usiusi fa'ava'asavili*, courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne. Photo: Andrew Curtis.

This ethos is grounded firmly from the beginning of the Biennial with Unbound Collective's *PERMEATE | mapping skin and tides of saturated resistance* in the opening gallery. The video installation highlights the ecological destruction of Kaurua Yarta

mangrove forests – a vital, but often under-acknowledged carbon storage.

Two illuminated globes sit under fibre skirts, offering protection and perhaps hope for the few mangroves remaining in Kurna Country.

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A similar thread of concern runs through proud pakana artist of the Trawlwoolway people, Vicki West's *kalikina brayly* (2023), which transforms the gallery floor into a pond of reflection. It speaks to the responsibility towards creation and material, acknowledging that artistic practices are deeply intertwined with these ecological currents.

Works by Phuong Ngo and David Sequeira offer more tongue-in-cheek critiques. Ngo's *Remastered* (2023) challenges the value (or de-value) of the Asia-made with text engravings onto a table that recall eBay descriptions celebrating 'white-only labour'.

Sequeira's astronomical (both literally and metaphorically) wall-based installation depicts him and his partner, Ben. First the turban-wearing men appear in their frames individually, face-to-face, and then in a kiss under glistening crystals that combine their star signs.



David Sequeira, 'You and I, we're like diamonds in the sky (after Rihanna)', 2023 and 'Looking to the stars for answers', 2023. Installation view, TarraWarra Biennial 2023: ua usiusifa'ava'asavili, courtesy the artist. Photo: Andrew Curtis.

Place and memory seep through the photographic installations of Elyas Alavi and Hoda Afshar, which sit opposite each other in dialogue.

Cheshme-e Jaan (The Spirit Spring) (2023) draws viewers into a sea of blue neon with phrases by the great Persian poet Mawlānā from Balkh (aka Rumi) while Afshar presents her documentary series *Speak the Wind* (2015-21) in expanded format, aligning with the Biennial's title and its reference to the canoe obeying the wind.

These works by 15 artists – compared to 25 in the 2021 iteration – carry this message in myriad forms. Together, they call for us to listen closely to natural and ecological, as well as social, forces, rather than working blindly against them.

The TarraWarra Biennial this year falls in the same calendar week as *The National*, and it's worth mentioning Eshrāghi's participating work, *afiafi* (2023).

In the words of James Gatt who wrote the artist text for *afiafi*, 'Eshrāghi revives the queer heterogeneity of interpersonal connection' where 'socio-political, collaborative and speculative works envisage Indigenous futurity in a context still enduring imperialist consequences'.

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The same could be said of Eshrāghi's curatorial approach in this year's TarraWarra Biennial. While recognising that it may take some time to sink in, Eshrāghi poses an invitation for visitors to uncover these very embedded artistic practices that take Indigenuity to heart.

TarraWarra Biennial 2023: ua usiusi fa'ava'asavili presents a much cherished pocket of time and space where meaningful engagement with our surroundings, art and each other take place – with hopes that it stays with us on the journey home.

TarraWarra Biennial 2023: ua usiusi fa'ava'asavili is on view at TarraWarra Museum of Art until 16 July.

The artists participating in TarraWarra Biennial 2023 are:

Regina Pilawuk Wilson (Ngan'gikurunggurr, Marrithyel), Vicki West (trawlwoolway), Sonja Carmichael (Quandamooka) and Elisa Jane Carmichael (Quandamooka), The Unbound Collective: Ali Gumillya Baker (Mirning), Faye Rosas Blanch (Mbararam, Yidinyji), Natalie Harkin (Narungga), Simone Ulalka Tur (Yankunytjatjara), Jenna Lee (Gulumerridjin, Wardaman, KarraJarri), Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, Hoda Afshar, Elyas Alavi, Torika Bolatagici, Dr Kirsten Lyttle (Tainui Waikato), Phuong Ngo, Bhenji Ra, David Sequeira, Sancintya Mohini Simpson and Dr Leyla Stevens.



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