

Culture Art & design Arts

Love, solidarity, resilience: Why this extraordinary exhibition is a must-see



Kerrie O'Brien

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Despite it feeling like the world has gone mad, politically at least, there are always examples of love in our midst. It's an idea that inspired Dr Nur Shkempi's extraordinary new show, *Five Acts of Love*.

"In this current moment, it is difficult not to see love in proximity to the tumult and turmoil of the world," she says. "We see love manifesting in great numbers, as solidarity between friends, communities and between complete strangers in various movements across the globe. We also see the love of individuals, and of humanity, or even nature, as a form of resistance, ever evolving, anew."



Senior curator at ACCA Shelley McSpedden, with guest curator Dr Nur Shkempi, whose new show is all about love.

WAYNE TAYLOR

Walking into the cavernous, darkened space at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, featuring each work spotlit with the light creating shapes and shadows on the floor, it feels almost like theatre.

That's precisely what Shkembi intended. "Even your eyes having to adjust, it takes a moment. So you do slow down in the space and kind of immerse [yourself]. That's the magic of exhibition-making," she says. "You have to move your body and move to engage with [the works]; it changes the way you move through the gallery."

An extraordinary array of art is featured, some new, some old, made by many of this country's top artists: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, Hoda Afshar, Megan Cope, Eugenia Flynn, D Harding, Saodat Ismailova, [Khaled Sabsabi](#), Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, Yhonnie Scarce, Ali Tahayori and the late Hossein Valamanesh.

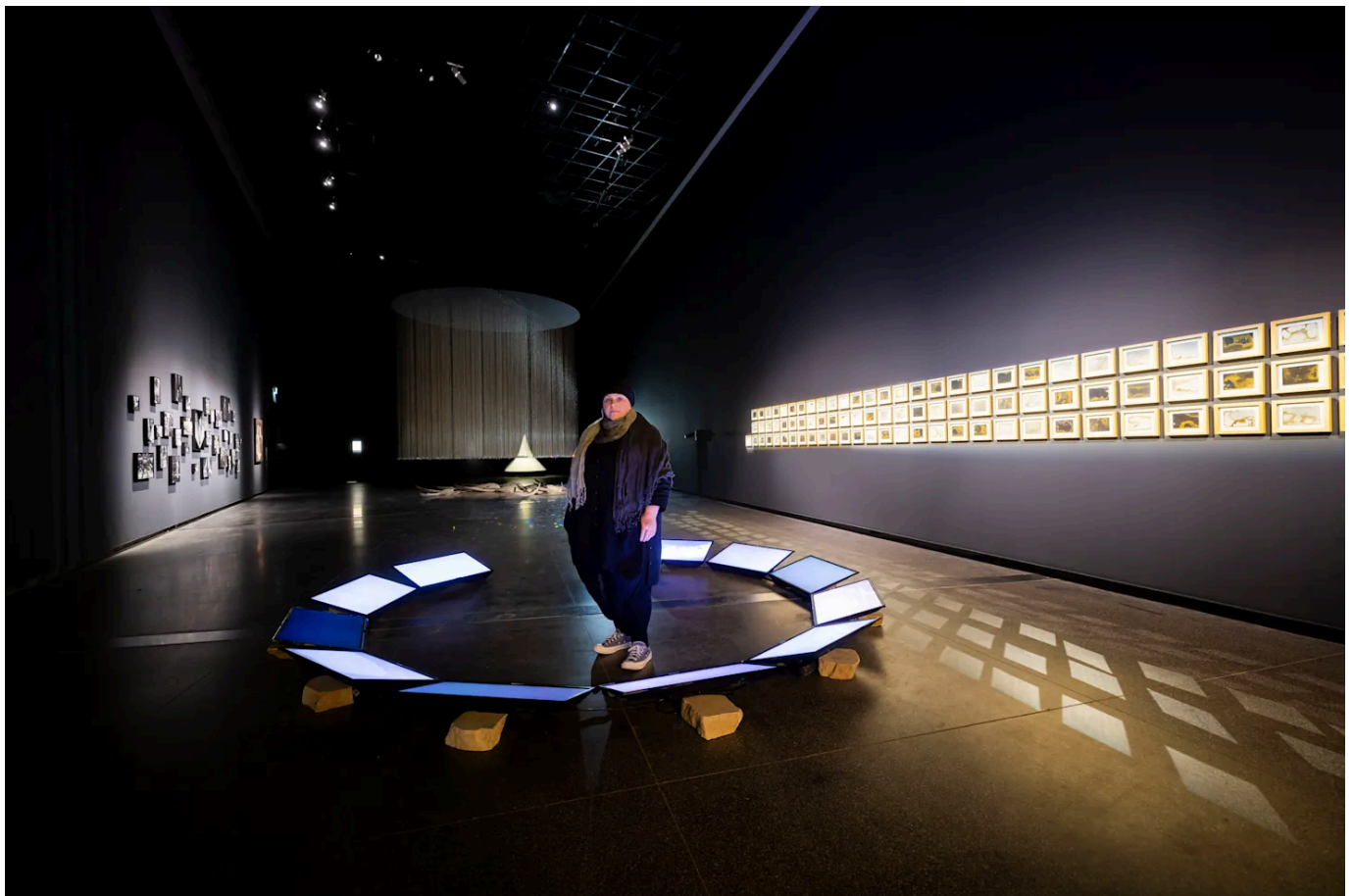
"There is a lot of vulnerability; the artists are sharing very deeply personal histories, personal struggles, speaking to identity and also different forms of intimacy," Shkembi says. The works speak about family, memory, grief, yearning and resilience.

The fact Shkembi works regularly with many of the artists adds another dimension, according to Shelley McSpedden, senior curator at ACCA.

Shkembi, who received an OAM for outstanding service to visual arts this year, worked with McSpedden and Dr Emma Clarke, then ACCA's First Nations curator, to create the exhibition. Clarke has since moved to the NGV as head of Indigenous art.

Five Acts of Love revolves around five acts: resistance, revolution, intimacy, memory and annihilation, and is in part inspired by the poetry of 13th century poet and Sufi mystic, Rumi.

Asked how she approached creating the show, Shkembi says it's many layered. "It's your environment, it's your deepest thoughts, it's your vulnerabilities, it's your concerns, it's all of these things, plus, of course ... as a curator, it's also that love of making beautiful things, the aesthetic of the work, the narrative of the work, the creative threads between artists," she says. "Curating is a deeply creative process."



Dr Nur Shkembi at ACCA. WAYNE TAYLOR

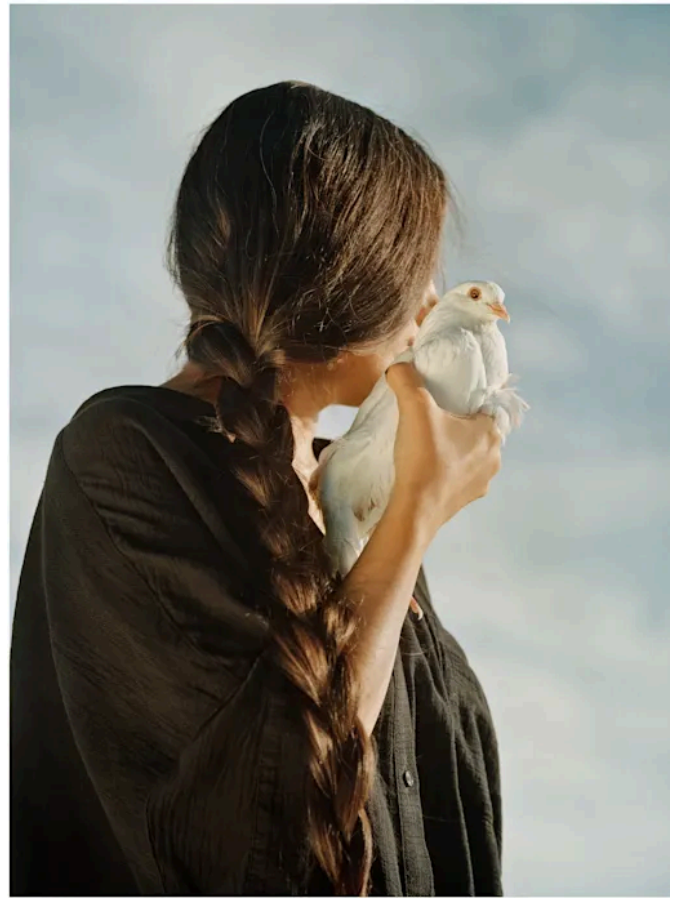
Her starting point is always the artists she wants to see in a space. Then, she turns her mind to the physical context: in this instance, the unique architecture of ACCA and what might work best in that setting.

Pretty Beach by WA-based Abdul-Rahman Abdullah – a stunning tribute to his grandfather featuring 2500 hand-carved crystals suspended over a group of wooden stingrays – was a no-brainer, she says. It was the same with *The Lover Circles His Own Heart*, 1993 (Paris edition 2017) by the late Hossein Valamanesh, which spins in an endless, mesmerising loop, reminiscent of whirling dervishes.

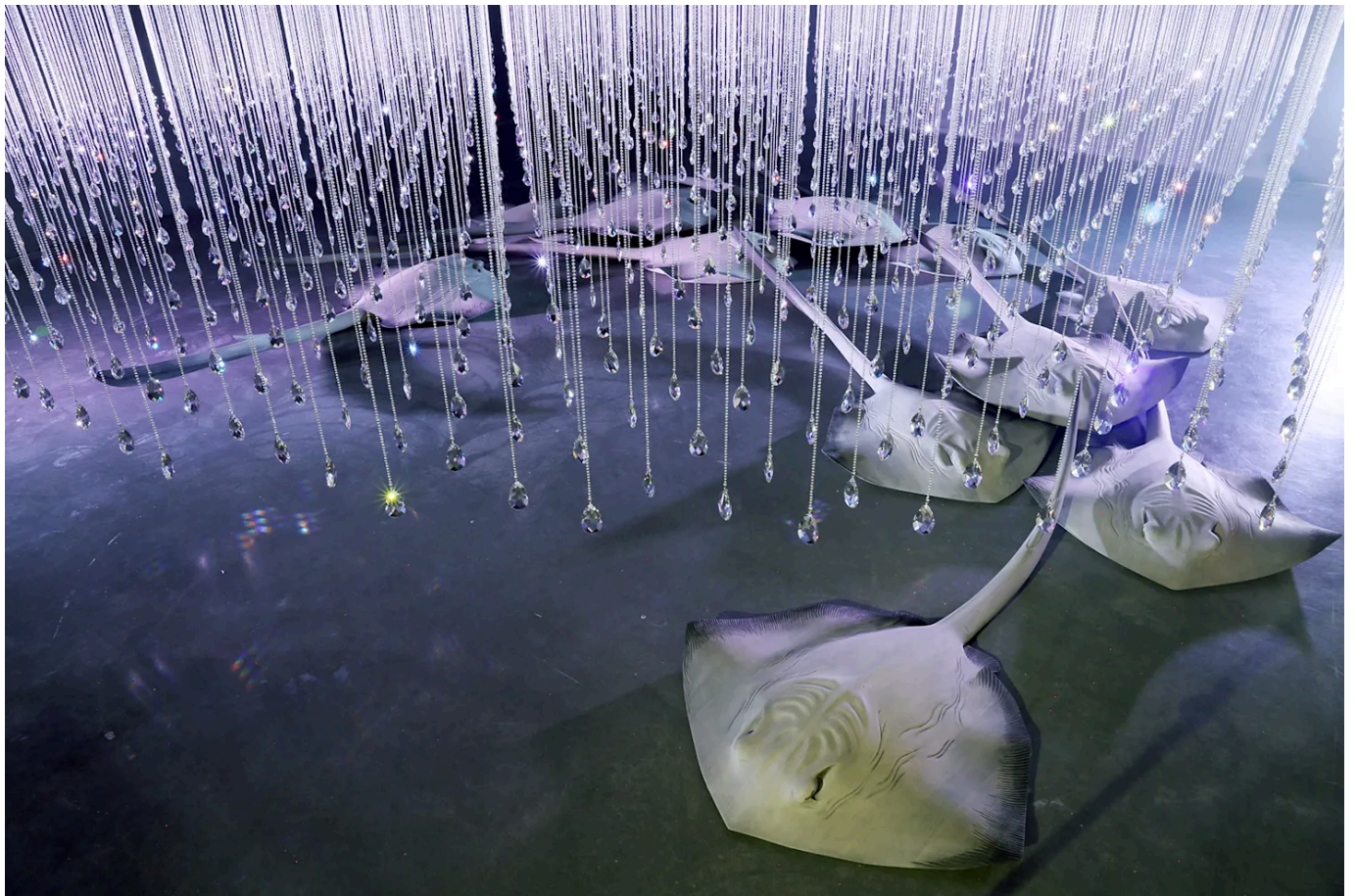
“What I really love about what Nur has done are these conceptual threads like memory, love, loss, grief, the intergenerational histories which run through them,” McSpedden says. “But also these incredible material connections: this use of light in the works, this use of symmetry in the circles, these gorgeous aesthetics and material links, as well as these conceptual links all around these ideas of love and connection and shared humanity.”

Many of the artworks seem designed for the space, testimony to Shkembi’s vision. “I call this the corridor of power,” she says, looking down through three of the gallery’s main rooms. The “corridor” takes in remarkable work by several of the country’s top female artists.

On two walls are images from Hoda Afshar’s photographic series *In Turn* – created in 2023 in response to the feminist uprising that began in Iran in 2022, following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini, who was arrested by Iran’s morality police for not wearing the hijab properly. It features Iranian-Australian women in an act of love, braiding each other’s hair, mirroring something some Kurdish women do as an act of solidarity and resistance.



Detail of Hoda Afshar’s *Untitled 1*, from her series *In Turn* (2023). COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MILANI GALLERY



Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, *Pretty Beach*, 2019. ABDUL-RAHMAN ABDULLAH

In the final room is *Witness* (2025), another work by Abdullah. A life-size sculpture of the Palestinian mountain gazelle, it seems to watch passers-by. According to the artist, the gazelle “embodies a sense of resilience, populating poetry with elegance in the face of adversity. Highly endangered and relying on vigilance and speed for survival, they cling to a precarious existence in the Levant”.

Five Acts of Love is at ACCA and runs until August 24.

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