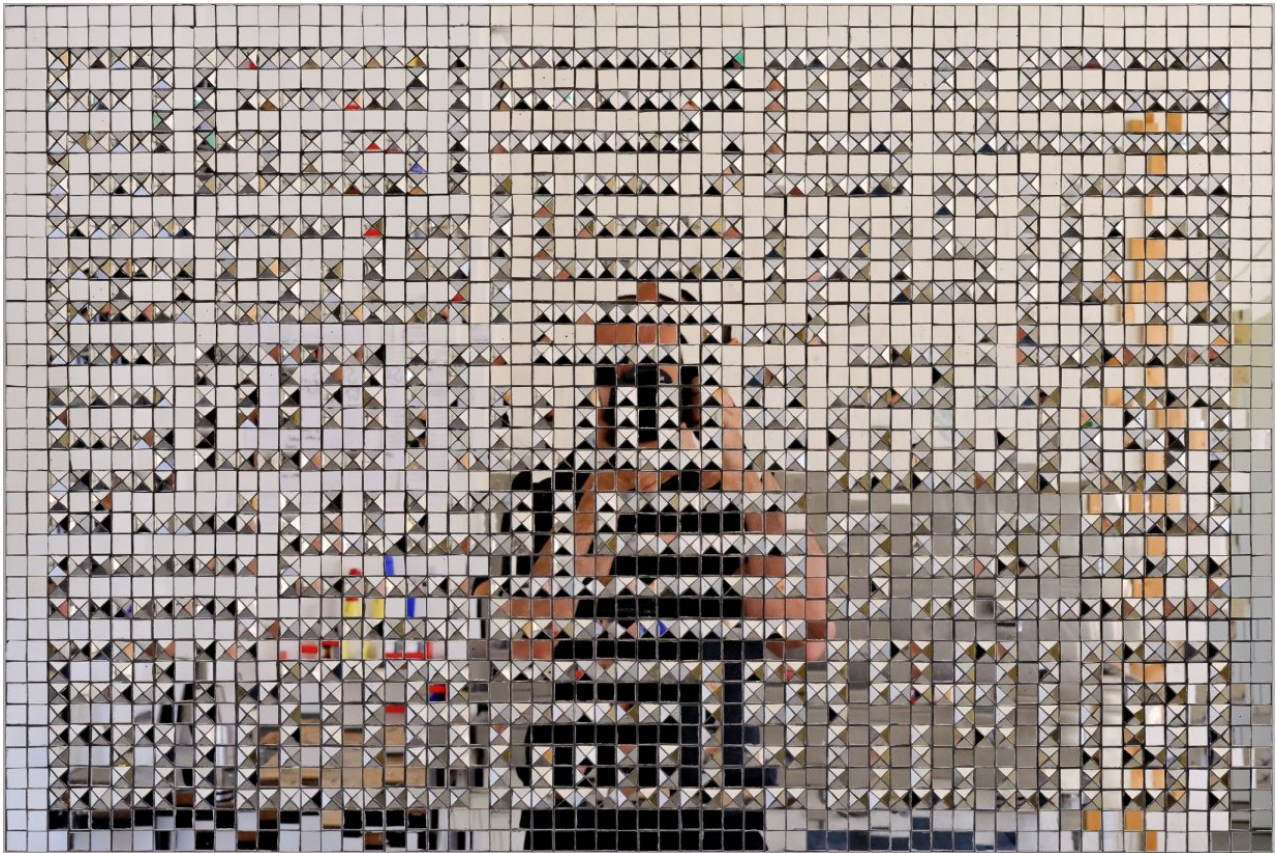


A Rallying Cry for the Kaleidoscopic Diversity of Queer Lives

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Ali Tahayori, *There is no queer in Iran*, 2022, hand-cut mirrors and plaster on timber. Courtesy the artist

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A group show of queer art from the 1960s to today demonstrates that no two experiences within the LGBTQIA+ community are ever the same

The entrance to the National Art School Galleries is almost unrecognisable. What previously appeared as an empty white threshold – an invisible space of permanent transition that one passes through without pause – now presents itself in a very different guise, as a marble shrine. *Thine Shrine, Divine* (2023) is an installation by The ArtHitects (Gary Carsley and Renjie Teoh) that seeks to memorialise the ‘ancestors’ and ‘non-biological genealogies’ of the LGBTQIA+ community. An animated classical bust on a nearby screen incants a spread of names – “Alan Turing”, “Mrs Dalloway”, “Claude Cahun”, “RuPaul Charles” – building a queer pantheon with each new utterance. Of course, there has been no major architectural remodelling here: the installation is actually constructed out of sheets of paper, which only create a flat shallow illusion of the classical facade. Yet despite its kitsch material skin, the intervention that lies beneath this playful surface is driven by the most serious sense of historical consequence.

The choice to begin *Braving Time: Contemporary Art in Queer Australia* with this shrine is progressively justified by the eclectic spread of subsequent artworks. Both the show and the shrine have a catholic, rather than Catholic, doctrine. Tracking the movements of an ever-evolving community, the exhibition is underwritten by a concern with history and the process of history-making. With a breadth that stretches from the present-day back to the 1960s, the exhibition refutes even the slightest murmurs of a singular or essentialised queer experience, through the inherent diversity of artworks that are responding to notably distinct historical circumstances. From Vivienne Binns's pioneering feminist works, to William Yang's intimate documentation of his friend and ex-lover Allan's battle with HIV/AIDS, to Tony Albert's confrontation with colonial legacies, through the repurposing of vintage objects that contain stereotypes of First Nations Australians.



Tony Albert, *Brothers (The Invisible Prodigal Son) 1, 2 and 3*, 2020, glass, lead, photographic decal, steel 180 x 60 cm each. Photo: Mark Pokorny. Courtesy National Art School Galleries

Yet the most compelling work in the exhibition is Ali Tahayori's *There is no Queer in Iran* (2022), which stages the fight for queer identity and recognition. Composed of tiny hand-cut mirrors, which fragment the viewer's reflection into a barely legible kaleidoscopic array, the work's very material form forces one to reckon with the idea of presence. While the mirror is one of the most tired signifiers of identity used in art, Tahayori reworks it into something that hums with complexity and nuance. Mobilising the traditional Iranian craft of *Āina-Kāri* (mirrorworking), Tahayori's work produces a mazelike geometry. Its shape is not, however, idle but filled with meaning. It is, in fact, a mixture of Kufic and Farsi calligraphy that reproduces an excerpt from Wikipedia, which explains that some believe that there is no Farsi equivalent for the word 'queer'. Here, we find echoes of the former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's famous 2007 statement: 'In Iran, we don't

have homosexuals like in your country'. Tahayori's work harbours charged politics within its intentionally illegible form, which does not automatically unfold itself to the viewer. It brilliantly leaves us in a state of both visual and cognitive fragmentation – sensing the presence of meaning and reaching for it, while in the same gesture being denied it.

Braving Time: Contemporary Art in Queer Australia at National Art School Galleries, Sydney, 3 February–18 March 2023