

# Exhibition review: Five Acts of Love, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

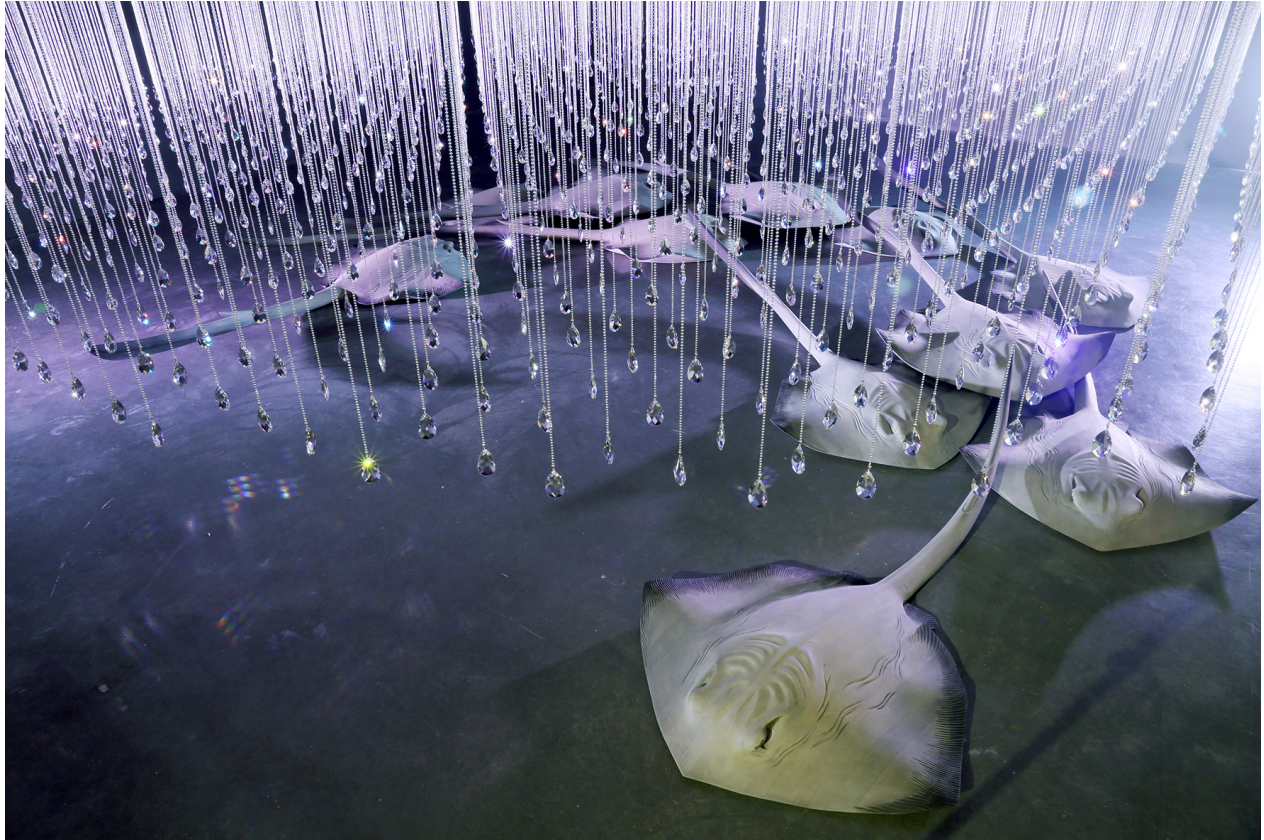
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A group exhibition featuring local and international artists with artworks that shine like beacons.



## Visual Arts

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah's 'Pretty Beach'. Photo: Supplied.

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Palestinian artist and filmmaker Larissa Sansour and her Danish director/scriptwriter partner Søren Lind use the metaphor of the mansion as 'the seat of memory' in this experimental documentary *Familiar Phantoms*, 2023. Interweaving threads of family, history, trauma, memory and identity from both a personal and a national perspective, it beautifully captures the underlying tone of this group exhibition *Five Acts of Love*, currently showing at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne.

We follow the eye of the camera upwards, ascending the staircase of a derelict mansion, walls of peeling paint speaking of a past. The old wooden balustrade curving above its wrought iron lacing feels familiar, evoking long forgotten memories that bring with them a sense of comfort, loss and longing. It is a place to tell stories real and imagined.

On a large screen in the second of the gallery's four spacious viewing rooms, Sansour explores, in this 42-minute film, her own family history and childhood in Bethlehem through a fragmented visual narrative. Presenting sculptural installations such as suspended love bird cages as stills next to recreated vignettes of family history shot in super 8 footage, she builds a montage that captures a deep connection to people and place.

These fragmented threads of culture and identity are explored in Iranian-born, Sydney-based artist Ali Tahayori's work *Archive of Longing*, 2024. Using cropped family photographs and hand-cut glass, the artist draws on the traditional Iranian craft of [Aine-Kāri](#), in which carefully cut and patterned pieces of glass – many reflecting elements of cultural patterning and design – overlay familial images.

Yhonnie Scarce's work also makes use of fractured glass to speak of displacement and obscuring of truth in her sculptural pieces *NOOO, N2359, N2351, N2402* (2014). An Indigenous artist now living in Naarm/Melbourne, she uses blown glass domes and archive photographs to reference the containment of her ancestors, like specimens in jars of a natural history museum. The photographs, with their original reference numbers serving as the title are taken from South Australian Government archives.

Curated by Dr Nur Shkembi OAM, the exhibition brings together 12 national and international artists to explore ways love can manifest: the five acts revolving around notions of resistance, revolution, intimacy, memory and annihilation. Working across a range of mediums from works on paper to photographs, film, sculptural and installation pieces, the concept of love is interrogated through bonds of friendship to the familial, resistance to ecstasy. The works are newly commissioned, recent or older.

The circle, an age-old symbol, represents ideas of wholeness and eternity – a connectedness between all things. Throughout the exhibition the circular form is drawn upon as an expression of connection and love.

The late Iranian Australian artist, Hossein Valamanesh's work *The lover circles his own heart* (1993), takes its title from a verse by Persian poet Rumi, and is a wonderful metaphor for love and connection. Drawing from the ancient Sufi spiritual ritual of 'whirling' as a form of active meditation, the artist uses a white silk sheet draped around a supporting wire structure, and a modal and electric motor, to evoke the circular trance-like dance of the whirling dervishes.

At the opposite end of the first room from Valamanesh's work, Lebanese born, Sydney-based artist Khaled Sabsabi's 2016 piece, *At the Speed of Light*, greets visitors as they enter the exhibition. An 11- channelled video sculptural piece, it features 18 hours of footage compressed into a single second of video time to explore the pursuit and perception of divine love.

*Pretty Beach* (2019) by Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, a Muslim Australian from Western Australia, is a circular sculptural installation piece that beautifully crystallises a childhood memory of visiting his grandfather in his old boat shed home on the waterfront of the

NSW Central Coast. Using silver plated ball chains from which pearls of dangling glass denote a curtain of rain above a fever of sculpted circling stingrays, it recreates a child's sense of awe and wonder with a shared family experience.

**Read:** [Exhibition review: Auto-Photo: A Life in Portraits, RMIT Gallery](#).

Megan Cope, an Indigenous artist from Meanjin/Brisbane, also draws on the symbol of the circle in her piece *The Tide Waits for No One* (2020-21). Using kiln cast TV glass, mineral sand and a light box, she alludes to the hunting and processing of dugong as a successful commercial enterprise at the expense of the environment and Traditional Owners, and the destruction of nature's web of connectedness.

In the last of the gallery spaces, the first of a series of large-scale photographic images depicts a young woman dressed in black clutching a dove, her dark braided hair hanging loosely over her torso. This image, that speaks of peace, love and hope, is part of the series *In Turn* 2023, the works untitled (from left to right) #5, #7, #1, #3, #6, #2, #4 by Iranian born, Melbourne-based artist Hoda Afshar. The series is a response to the feminist uprising in Iran in 2022 when 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini was arrested and killed for not wearing her hijab properly. A tribute to the larger collective grief over her senseless death, the subjects of the photographs discard their veils and braid each other's hair, a symbol of resistance, resilience and connection.

Despite the dimmed lighting, the extensive text labels are worth the read, fleshing out and giving greater context to the works on display. Further support material for this exhibition can be sourced online, in which details of artist talks and family art-making programs are also available. This is a finely curated exhibition, the artworks shining like beacons of light in the darkness of difficult times.

'we came whirling  
out of nothingness  
scattering stars  
like dust...' – Rumi, Persian Sufi poet (1207-1273)

**[Five Acts of Love](#) will be exhibited at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) until 24 August 2025. Guest Curator: Dr Nur Shkembi OAM; free entry.**