

National Photography Prize 2024 finalists

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Alannah Le Cross



When you live in an utterly image-saturated culture, it can be all too easy to underestimate the power of the photograph, as well as the skills and processes behind the creation of an impactful image. Add the fact that practically all of us walk around with a device fitted with a camera in our pocket at all times, and the ominously growing prevalence of AI-generated imagery, and this muddies the waters even further. Freshen up your perspective by checking out the 2024 finalists of the **National Photography Prize**, Australia's longest-running acquisitive photographic award. Established in 1983 at the **Murray Art Museum Albury** (MAMA) on Wiradjuri Country, where it is still hosted to this day, the biennial award and exhibition is a snapshot (pardon the pun) of where photography is at as a medium.

From traditional film stills to digital imagery, unassuming smartphone snaps and camera-less imprints – when does a photographic piece count as art? Likewise, what qualifies a photograph as an important piece of documentation? The finalists of the National Photography Prize might just have the answers – these artists are pushing the boundaries of the photographic medium, and challenging existing languages and techniques. MAMA is a fresh and experimental gallery with a strong focus on photography, and Time Out's **Alannah Le Cross** (that's me) headed out there to explore the 2024 National Photography Prize exhibition (*showing 'til September 1 2024, free entry*) with some guidance from MAMA's Senior Curator **Nanette Orly**. Check out her findings.

Check out all 12 finalists of the National Photography Prize



Photograph: MAMA/Jeremy Weihrauch | National Photography Prize winner Ellen Dahl stands with 'Four Days Before Winter'

Ellen Dahl: '*Four Days Before Winter*' [PRIZE WINNER]

Selected from 12 finalists to receive the \$30,000 prize, **Ellen Dahl's** winning work explores the fastest-warming place on Earth: the peripheral Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard. On first impression, it looks like a darker, sort-of sinister doppelgänger of the type of stock landscape imagery you'd find on your new laptop's home screen. Look closer, and you can start to see why Ellen is regarded as such a talented photographer. The four-part work, which is part of the ongoing project ***Field Notes from the Edge***, presents close-up details of the rugged terrain which is collapsing due to melting permafrost, as a result of ongoing coal mining in the region.

Nanette says that Ellen's work is so impressive because, even though she has been working with landscape photography for a long time now, she continues to push the development of her practice. This shines through in the presentation of '***Four Days Before Winter***' – a large, suspended work on fabric is positioned at the centre of the display, hemmed by an illuminated print in a more demure-sized light box, while a perpendicular two-way image presentation protrudes from a wall. The artist is inviting us to look at the world from a new perspective, in more ways than one. The series not only brings into question the devastating effects of climate change, but also considers

photography's intrinsic involvement in how we see and feel about the world around us. Originally from arctic Norway and of Sámi descent, Ellen now lives on Gadigal Land, Sydney.



Photograph: MAMA/Courtesy the artist
| Olga Svyatova, 'They/Они', 2022.

Olga Svyatova: 'Они/They' [FELLOWSHIP WINNER]

Olga Svyatova took out the **\$5000 John and Margaret Baker Fellowship** for this sweetly nostalgic entry, which is also the only finalist work that incorporates iPhone photography. '**Они/They**' is part of an ongoing photographic project that explores multiple connections between time, relationships, and archival images. Originally from Russia, Olga has drawn on their Babushka's photo collection, discovering striking similarities between images from the family archive and seemingly random snaps from their own smartphone. It all began with a black and white photo of a family picnic in 1962, which looks spookily similar to a snap Olga took of a backyard gathering with their friends in Sydney. Appropriating their own personal experience of differing cultures and histories, Olga invites reflections on the intricate connections that sustain our lives across time and space. There is also something quite heartwarming about seeing a young queer artist simultaneously honouring the lineage of their born family and celebrating their chosen family, presenting both groups as equally important and essential to their being. Moving from Russia, where they grew up, to Thailand, Olga is now based on Gadigal Land (Sydney) where they have lived for six years. Their experience of cultural, geographic, and personal journeying drives their practice.



Photograph: MAMA/Jack Ball | Installation view of 'A Puzzlement' by Nathan Beard (Courtesy of the artist and sweet pea, Perth)

Nathan Beard: 'A Puzzlement'

Showcased against a custom-painted royal blue and gold wall in the airy entrance foyer of MAMA, the alluring twinkle of the 92,000 Swarovski crystals that embellish **Nathan Beard's** four-part entry into the National Photography Prize is the first thing that will catch your eye. The next element that draws you in is the eyes: piercing, regal, and knowing stares emanate from these reclaimed portraits. Nathan is a multidisciplinary artist who draws on his Thai-Australian heritage, and '**A Puzzlement**' showcases four composite photographs drawn from ethnographic and botanical collections, alongside promotional imagery from *The King and I*. The striking bejewelled layers on these archival collages are painstakingly arranged in ombré patterns of blue, red, and purple – these shades contain Siam in their name: an antiquated term for Thailand now commodified for Western consumption, suggesting an exotic beauty. Nanette describes this project as “a reclamation of Thai-ness”. With an immediately-captivating visual presence and an intriguing historic backstory that challenges Western colonial conceptions, this is hands down our favourite work in the exhibition.



Photograph: MAMA/Courtesy the artist | Close up view of 'Troubles Melt Like Lemon Drops', Ali McCann, 2022.

Ali McCann: 'Joy'

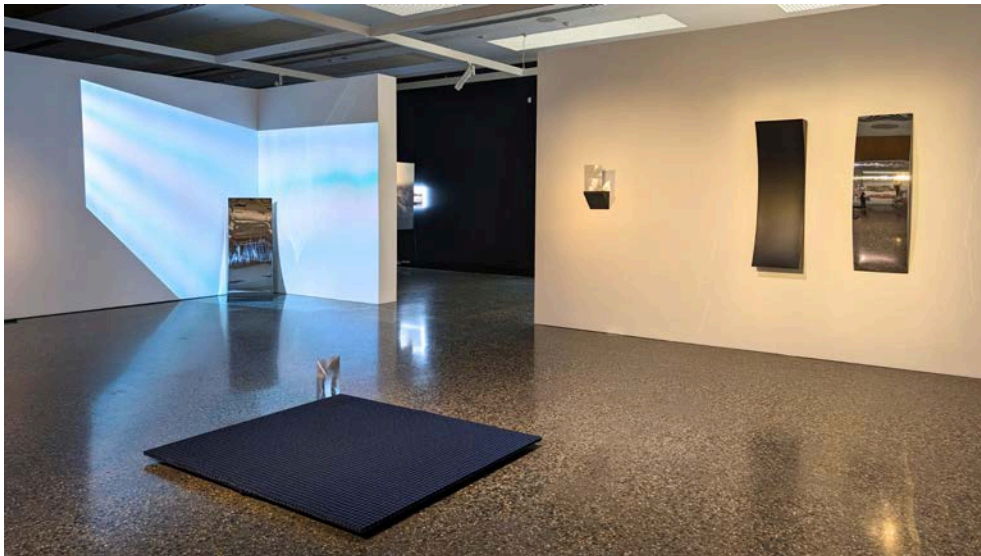
A vibrant and playful utilisation of the still life genre, **'Joy'** is an ongoing project that explores adolescent fantasy. This is also Narrm/Melbourne-based artist **Ali McCann's** ode to *The Joy of Photography* – a beginner's guide to the medium published by Eastman Kodak in 1979. McCann deploys vaguely-early-'80s-inspired aesthetics and various modes of appropriation in order to explore the illusionary, sentimental, and nostalgic tendencies of the photographic medium. You can practically feel the hypothetical vaseline smeared over the camera lens (and I mean that in the best way possible). This project also gets props from me for its similarities with the album art for the recently released debut album from indie pop star Chappell Roan, whose fans have been inspired by her clown-like, hyper feminine aesthetics. Ali is a repeat finalist, who also had work selected for the 2020 edition of the National Photography Prize.



Photograph: MAMA/Jeremy Weihrauch | Installation view of 'Material Resonance [beyond the veil]', Sammy Hawker.

Sammy Hawker: *'Material Resonance [beyond the veil]'*

Sammy Hawker's ephemeral images call to mind the visual echoes of planets, galaxies, and Victorian era 'aura photography'. The ACT-based artist (Ngunawal/Ngunnawal/Ngambri Country) uses Chromatography, a photographic process invented in 1900 that is primarily used by scientists to understand the chemical makeup of soil. However, Hawker uses the process to create abstract "portraits" from ash or 'dead' matter – recording the vibrancy of sources as disparate as drowned caterpillars, a real human placenta, and soil from a grave. Sammy also receives requests from people who wish to memorialise their lost loved ones, and with permission, a Chromatogram created from the ashes of a stillborn baby is included in the body of work displayed at MAMA. Merging the scientific with the emotional and spiritual, *'Material Resonance [beyond the veil]'* speaks to the energy or memory inscribed within materials; yielding vivid, striking, and eerie results.



Photograph: MAMA/Sebastian Kainey | Installation view of 'Anti-lens', Alex Walker and Daniel O'Toole, 2023.

Alex Walker & Daniel O'Toole: *'Anti-lens'*

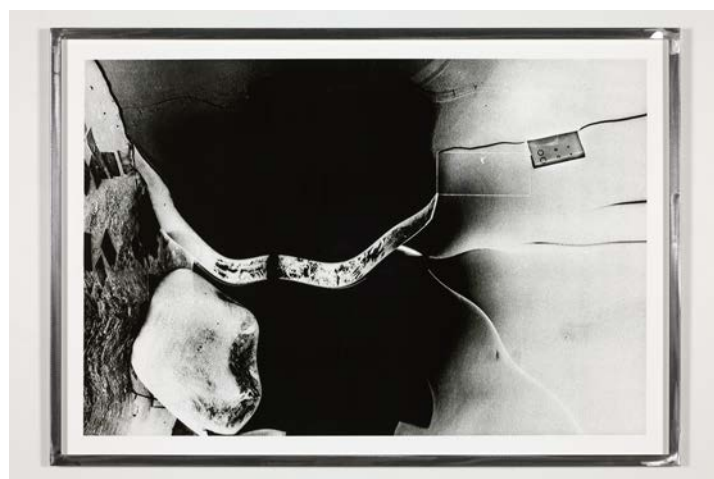
The product of a first-time collaboration between these Naarm/Melbourne based artists, this sculptural installation from **Alex Walker** and **Daniel O'Toole** might not immediately make sense to you as a photographic work, but lean in. The pair has used industrial methods of fabrication to create objects that illustrate the visual language of lenses *and* their antithesis – an approach that distorts rather than focuses an image – leading us to question the act of perception. A rather tongue-in-cheek entry, *Anti-lens* consists of two steel wall sculptures (one mirror-finished and the other black powder coated) as well as curved mirror-finished floor sculpture that refracts a projected video of oscillating in colours and gradients.



Photograph: MAMA/Jeremy Weihrauch | Installation view of 'IMPOSSIBLE DESIRE', Ali Tahayori, 2023.

Ali Tahayori: *'IMPOSSIBLE DESIRE'*

Ali Tahayori's intimate black and white series is pungent with queer longing and the messiness of sexual discovery – as well as that particular universal brand of melancholy that can arise when you revisit the site of a formative moment from your youth, only to be confronted with its ordinariness. *'IMPOSSIBLE DESIRE'* features a video work and a series of hand-painted photographs (containing a bodily fluid – we'll let you guess which one) captured inside a public toilet in the artists' hometown of Shiraz, Iran, where he had his first intimate experience as a teenager. Living and working on Gadigal Land, Sydney, Ali translates the traditional Iranian craft of Āine-Kāri (mirror-works) into a contemporary visual vocabulary. Working with images captured on his behalf by a friend, Ali poignantly combines a discourse about diaspora and displacement with an exploration of same-sex attraction.



Photograph: MAMA/Robin Hearfield | 'Packed Matter IX', Ioulia Panoutsopoulos, 2022.

Ioulia Panoutsopoulos: '*Packed Matter*'

Adelaide-born, Sydney-based artist **Ioulia Panoutsopoulos**' body of work is an abstracted "inception" of photographic processes and studio practice that embraces both the analogue and digital realms. The works aim for an expanded pictorial nervous system, recording a digital transformation, processed, and captured through an analogue medium. Ioulia was also a finalist in the 2018 National Photography Prize, and she also won the John and Margaret Baker Fellowship for that year. The work she presents here is less about documenting a certain subject or telling a certain story, but rather it is focussed on experimenting with the photographic medium and pushing it in new ways.



Photograph: MAMA/Jeremy Weihrauch | Installation view of '*Shadowing*', Izabela Pluta.

Izabela Pluta: '*Shadowing*'

Izabela Pluta's large-scale photographs explore the aesthetic sensibilities of found ephemera lifted and collaged from numerous copies of genre-specific publications by the Reader's Digest, which includes a 1980's "*Scenic Wonders of the World*" book. Izabela is a Polish-born Australian artist based in Sydney, and her work examines the role of photography and the function of images to explore the concept of 'place' as informed by her migrant experience. '***Shadowing***' calls to attention the impermanence and mutability of geographical boundaries and broader considerations of the effects of globalisation on culture, politics, and the environment.



Photograph: MAMA/Jeremy Weihrauch | Installation view of 'Bounded in a nutshell / King of infinite space', Kai Wasikowski.

Kai Wasikowski: '*Bounded in a nutshell / King of infinite space*'

Combining archival images from NSW National Parks and experimentation with 3D spatial modelling software, this work began as a research project concerned with 19th century landscape photography, environmental conservation, and the way they have both served the settler colonialist agenda. With a focus on the conservation ideologies developed in New South Wales and New England (USA), Gadigal/Sydney based artist **Kai Wasikowski** draws links between spatial modelling's crude flattening of space to the 19th century Australian colonial photographic agenda, which created a "blankness" of place that implied it was previously uninhabited.



Photograph: MAMA/Courtesy of the artists | Installation view of 'Here's what we know', Rebecca McCauley & Aaron Claringbold, at Hillvale Gallery, 2023.

Rebecca McCauley & Aaron Claringbold: *'Here's what we know'*

In creating this work, artists **Rebecca McCauley** and **Aaron Claringbold** were inspired by road trips between their homes in Victoria and Western Australia. It features a photographic slideshow looping on an old-school projector with accompanying sound work and narration, as well two sculptures fitted with screens to play digital slideshows (embedded into carseat headrests set at the artists' heights, cute!). The work speaks to the vernacular of contemporary leisure, tourism, and car culture. With a critical lens, *'Here's what we know'* goes beyond the well-trodden territory of tourist commercials to question what it means to live in and move through places on a colonised land. This is certainly a work that you could sit with for hours.



Photograph: MAMA/Courtesy the artist | Detail of 'Before Orange Peel, After Loose Teeth, Now Peanuts', Skye Wagner.

Skye Wagner: 'Before Orange Peel, After Loose Teeth, Now Peanuts'

This large-scale photographic assemblage by Sydney-based artist **Skye Wagner** sprawls six-and-a-half-metres wide across the gallery wall. It aims to confuse your spatial understandings, and succeeds. This loosely curated chaos layers together found and made images, domestic objects, kitchen snacks, cherry pies and strings of pearls. I can't quite articulate why, but it's giving "girlhood is a spectrum". You'll also notice postage stamps and imprints of packing tape. Why is that? Well, the suite of photographs was produced during a research residency in Rome at the end of 2022, so Skye bundled up and posted over her existing work with some of it on the exterior of the package, so it would collect markings and incidental embellishments on the journey. Wagner has been a photomedia lecturer at the National Art School in Sydney since 2012, and she also holds multiple qualifications including a Master of Fine Arts from UNSW Art & Design.

[FYI: The National Photography Prize is showing for free at MAMA, Albury, until September 1. Find out more about the exhibition [here](#). Albury is a 5.5-hour drive from Sydney, and a 4-hour drive from Melbourne. It can also fairly easily be reached by plane or train, and you can score train fare from Melbourne for as little as \$8 – a bargain!]

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