



New Hobart exhibition sees artists taking liberties

Tim Martain, Mercury
March 13, 2021 6:00am
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7 minute read





📷 Brigita Ozolins and her installation which spells out “I raise up my voice”, is a visually impressive part of the Hobart Current: Liberty exhibition; Picture: Chris Kidd

It replaces the 27-year-old City of Hobart Art Prize.

Its theme will change every two years.

Tasmanian artists Sinsa Mansell, Brigita Ozolins, James Newitt, Jacob Leary, Dexter Rosengrave and Nadege Philippe-Janon feature in Hobart Current: Liberty, alongside interstate and international talent Uncle Wes Marne, Suryo Herlambang, Jagath Dheerasekara and Sarah Jane Pell, all creating new works in the media of film, installation, performance and visual art.

And to assist in the recovery of the local arts sector, the six Tasmanian artists were each awarded a \$15,000 grant for the creation of their new work.

Dennis’s background includes creating large-scale, intercultural, place-based experiences through her recent roles as artistic director of Urban Theatre Projects, in Sydney, and as director of BLEACH festival, Gold Coast.

After settling on the inaugural theme of “Liberty”, Dennis said her goal was to make sure the exhibition was both well represented by Tasmanian artists but also featuring enough voices from outside the state to ensure the theme was interpreted from a variety of perspectives.

“I wanted to cast that net really wide and there were hundreds of artists expressing their interest,” she says.

“I wanted to use the theme of Liberty right from the beginning, when I was first working on the concept a few years ago, but the world we live in now is already very different from the world of three-and-a-half years ago!

“The issues that were dominating the headlines then were the marriage equality debate, the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal people, a lot of debate about migration and refugees,

Donald Trump was talking about building his border wall, so migration was part of this global conversation.

“Since then we’ve seen this pandemic, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the US election, and the Liberty theme is all the more relevant and I wanted to create a global conversation about it from this amazing city of ours.”

In embracing that theme, it was always the intention to ensure some of the works would be housed at locations outside of TMAG, to encourage public engagement as well as the creation of public art spaces.

There is a definite shade of irony to Brigita Ozolins’s nervousness as she watches her enormous art installation being installed across the upper windows of the office building at 85 Macquarie Street, directly opposite TMAG.

The letters spell out “I raise up my voice” in honour of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, who was a teenager in Pakistan when she was shot in the face for daring to advocate for women having the right to education.

She survived the attack and went on to become even more vocal in her cause, more fearless and visible.

And yet, as Ozolins watches those words being splashed across one of the city’s most prominent buildings, the Hobart artist feels nervous.

“I do feel a bit nervous about it going up, about making a big statement like that,” she says with a laugh.

“I’ve done big installations before but usually in a gallery setting. In 2010 and 2008 I put big text installations up on the National Library of Latvia and on the windows of the Government Library as well, but I haven’t done anything like that in Australia.

“And I think many of us can remember a time when it was really difficult to raise your voice and speak up for a personal injustice or something that happened to a friend or family member. It can be difficult to speak out against the status quo, it takes courage to raise up your voice, and I’m asking people to do that.”



📷 Hobart Current: Liberty’s creative director, Rosie Dennis, centre, with some of the other artists involved in contributing to the city’s latest artistic offering – Nadege Philippe-Janon, Jacob Leary, Sinsa Mansell and Brigita Ozolins. Picture: RICHARD JUPE



📷 Artist Jacob Leary puts the finishing touches to his piece in the Hobart Current: Liberty exhibition. Picture: EDDIE SAFARIK

A multimedia artist, Ozolins creates a lot of work that deals with our relationship with language and codification, so she was particularly drawn to the idea of how liberty is controlled and shaped through language.

“When we talk about freedom, you do still need to live within certain laws and bounds,” she says. “But it’s when those laws become overly restrictive, like in a dictatorship, that personal liberty is at risk.

“A powerful way of controlling individual thought and freedom is through the use of language, controlling the voice of people. Using your voice is a powerful way to fight back against that.

“I was inspired by Malala Yousafzai, who was only a teenager when the Taliban put out a fatwa on her and she was shot in the face. Miraculously she survived, although disfigured as a result.

“They shot her because she was giving a voice to girls who were silenced in countries where educational opportunities for girls were limited or non-existent. And she kept on being an activist for the educational rights of children in all countries where those opportunities are limited.

“In 2013, at a youth takeover of the UN, she said: ‘I raise up my voice, not so I can shout, but so those without a voice can be heard.’ It’s a wonderful statement about the power of speaking up, giving a voice to the voiceless, empowering the individual for the collective good, standing against oppression and control.”

Ozolins says she took that first phrase, I raise up my voice, to use in isolation for her installation because on its own it broadened the idea, taking the core message and allowing it to be applicable in myriad ways.

“I’m hoping it will raise some curiosity among people who go by and will ask questions like: Whose voice? Yours? Mine? Ours? Why should it be raised up?”

“In these dramatic times I feel those words are so relevant in terms of so many current events, the ability to use your voice and speak up for those who are rendered powerless and voiceless.

“And I’m hoping people will see the global and national significance of those words, but it might just as easily relate to something more individual.”



📷 Sinisa Mansell says the installation she created for the Hobart Current exhibition aims to spread her message that all Tasmanians should stop and acknowledge the spirit of the country we live on. Picture: RICHARD JUPE

Aboriginal artist Sinisa Mansell has injected a deeply personal perspective into the theme of Liberty, with her public audio installation serving to spread her message calling for all Tasmanians to stop and acknowledge the spirit of the country we live on.

“All of the works I do have an underlying acknowledgment of the culture, country and history of lutruwita (Tasmania), which is why I chose Liberation of Country as the title of my work here,” she says.

Liberation of Country is a powerful and original song written and performed by Mansell in the palawa kani language, played across three sites: Franklin Square, the TMAG Courtyard, and TMAG’s Salon Gallery.

“The sound piece situated in Franklin Square is the start, taking you on a journey through to the TMAG outdoor courtyard space and then to the final works inside a gallery space, where there is a visual of me representing the spirit of mother country,” Mansell says.

“The body of work itself isn’t actually the end product. The end product is created when people engage with the work. The true work is that the public themselves are the liberation of country, calling people to stop, listen and acknowledge this place and, in that process, hopefully taking that time to listen and understand nipaluna (Hobart), the deep knowledge held within the country, and we all need to work for her.

“And the work is, in part, also a way to reclaim not only Franklin Square, which is a significant site, but also the statues that are erected there, and highlight what they mean to our history that isn’t broadly known.”

And while Mansell’s work is using an artistic exhibition to make a statement, the work created by Hobart installation artist Jacob Leary is seeking to subvert the whole idea of art as commentary.

“My art is not really very conceptually driven,” Leary says. “I’m more interested in thinking about aesthetics and the nature of art as the creation of aesthetic objects.

“I have an interest in re-engaging with formalism, which has to do with an artwork’s autonomy, having independence from the artist’s intentions. Once produced, it is disconnected from the artist and exists in the world as an artwork, it performs its function independently of the artist’s discourse or context around it.”



📷 Artist Jacob Leary with his work Excessssssssscape 2021 that is part of the Hobart Current: Liberty exhibition.

Picture: NIKKI DAVIS- JONES

In layman's terms, his work deliberately avoids being a statement about a particular concept, rather it is created simply to be something aesthetically appealing and interesting in its own right, and open to whatever interpretation the viewers sees fit to make — if any at all.

And Leary's sculptural installation for Hobart Current: Liberty, called Excessssssscape, takes the idea one step further, intentionally exaggerating the visually appealing elements of the work, twisting them into something that is almost a parody of pretty.


"These pieces are a really excessive collage-y mashup of a diversity of objects," he says. "There's a lot of bling and diamentes and highly reflective surfaces that create a sense of artificiality, a hyper-aesthetic. I wanted to push everything to that extreme to produce parallels between these aesthetics and where I think contemporary conceptual art perception is at.

"I think people generally are very aesthetically evolved and have their own complex ways to relate to aesthetic phenomena but often don't have the vocabulary to express it."

Hobart Current: Liberty is now open at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, as well as at Franklin Square and 85 Macquarie Street, and runs until May 9. Visit tmag.tas.gov.au for full details.

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