



# Look

## Contemporary Australian Portraiture

1 November 2024–12 January 2025

Glen Eira City Council Gallery



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# Lewis Miller

To some degree I approach every portrait as a kind of a performance. From an early age I was very influenced by the line drawings of Matisse and then later in my teens by the drawings of David Hockney. I work from life and do not refer to photos. This creates extreme pressure of concentration.

I do, however, encourage my sitters to talk, while keeping as still as possible as conversation keeps their faces “alive”. At the same time, I will tell them that at any time I am likely to “tune out” from the conversation without warning. The drawn portraits are invariably one offs with the image appearing as if unrolling down the page from the top of the head to the feet like an unrolling tapestry. A painted portrait is quite different in process, requiring many sessions, once again, only from life, with continuity of time of day and wardrobe etc. These portraits are the result of endless painterly decisions, small touches of the brush with additions and subtractions, scraping back and redrawing.

# Curator's essay

*Look* explores the intriguing range of approaches to contemporary Australian portraiture and unpacks themes of identity, diversity and gender, inviting the viewer into the sitter's lives and stories. Featuring compelling works by leading award-winning contemporary Australian artists, Yvette Coppersmith, Julie Dowling, Graeme Drendel, Prudence Flint, Julia Gutman, Lewis Miller, Michael Vale, Peter Wegner and Marcus Wills, the exhibition examines the enduring significance and fascination with this genre.

Portraiture has the capacity to generate empathy, provoke discussion and debate and offer a glimpse into the human condition. Each artist brings their unique vision and diverse perspectives to this exhibition, offering rich opportunities for visitor engagement and layers of interpretation. The intimate relationship, dialogue or collaboration between the artist and sitter is captured in many of the portraits, illuminating their inner worlds and the richness of the shared human experience.

We engage with the artists' sitters — musicians, artists, filmmakers, writers, designers, friends, and family members, and gain insights into their inner circle and lives. The power or dynamics of the gaze (averted or direct), facial expressions and gestures evoke a sense of immediacy, emotional nuances, and psychological dimensions, informing how we as viewers interact with the sitters portrayed in the work.

The traditions of European portraiture and ideas around personal and cultural histories and narratives, female empowerment, storytelling, community, and the legacies of colonisation resonate in selected works. Self-portraiture's capacity to reveal the artist's inner life, experiences, stories, and identity is also examined in the exhibition.

*Look* provides a platform for the investigation of the multi-layered approaches to portraiture informed by direct observation, imagination, and collaboration. From the works by accomplished artists for whom portraiture is an important part of their practice, to those who broaden expected notions of the genre, this exhibition enriches our understanding of the dynamism, potential and power of portraiture in 21st century Australia.

**Diane Soumilas**

**Curator of *Look*. Contemporary Australian Portraiture.**

**Glen Eira City Council Gallery**



## Yvette Coppersmith

There is a rich history of sitters with their pets or with pets of the artist — studio companions. In this vein, I introduced the sitters to my new kittens and quickly captured a moment. The neutral colours of the overall colour scheme were to unify the series of images and translate a somatic sense of calm. Once engaged with the kitten I noticed a dynamic shift in the portrait. In some paintings, the averted gaze conveys a kind of solitude shared with a pet, whereas other works convey the relationship directly with the artist/viewer depending on where the sitter is focused.

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Yvette Coppersmith.  
*Seated portrait feeding cat 2024*  
Oil and sand on jute. 113cm x 97.5cm  
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Melbourne and Sydney  
Photo: Matthew Stanton



## Julie Dowling

Working in a social realist style, Dowling draws on diverse art traditions including European portraiture and Christian icons, mural painting and Badimaya First Nation iconography.

Dowling works like an ethnographer, recording the deep-seated injustices in the Indigenous community. Her pictorial works have a strong political edge, however, she speaks as a de-colonized subject and subverts the traditional power relations between the observer and the observed, the colonizer and the de-colonized.

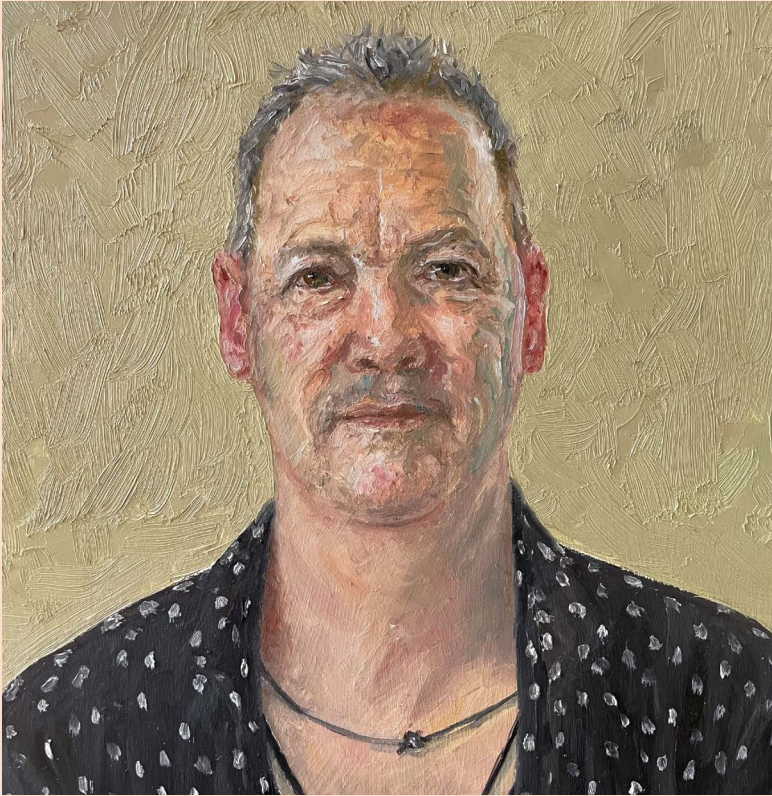
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Julie Dowling  
*Dalwallinu 2023*

Acrylic, plastic polymer and mixed media on canvas. 120 x 90cm

Courtesy the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Artwork photography: Anu Kumar, Private Collection, Melbourne



## Graeme Drendel

The subjects of my portraits are almost exclusively people that I know, very often family members but also fellow painters, musicians and writers that I have got to know over the years. I am very conscious of taking up a sitter's time once they have agreed to pose and consequently I have learnt to paint fairly quickly, and generally, with some exceptions, a single session of two to three hours is sufficient. It is a very intimate experience and can be somewhat intimidating for both the sitter and the painter, but I do like to think something of that intimacy, the close looking and the conversation, reveals itself in the resulting portrait. That being said, being so closely scrutinised is not for the faint hearted.



## Prudence Flint

Over thirty years, I have worked with only five or so models. I don't paint portraits in a traditional sense. I see it more as a collaborative mirroring; a successful projection that invokes recognition. This enlivens a self-connection, that gives the painting ideas free reign. The models I work with bring permission, and an openness to the playful perilous nature of representing femininity.



## Julia Gutman

Where do I end and you begin? And what are we made of if not each other?

The self is a tapestry. Of conversations, of genetics, of love and of loss. This underscores my approach to materiality. My portraits are made from donated clothing from friends and family members, an archive I have been collecting for the past five years. Clothes often become physical artifacts of the past – stand-ins for those we have lost, or relics of who we once were. In this sense, I work with the textures of memory. I think a big part of artistic impulse comes from this desire to express who you are, to make a deeper part of yourself known to the other. Or from an intense curiosity to really see someone else with depth, compassion and complexity. But what we ‘are’ is in constant flux. And how that thing is perceived and transformed by a viewer is completely out of our control. There’s an irony here that I find interesting, this urge to be known, or to see, can be the very thing that flattens us, and makes us unknowable even to ourselves.

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Julia Gutman

*Talking to him and realising I was actually speaking to you 2024*

Found textiles and embroidery on linen. 100 x 120cm

Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Melbourne and Sydney

Private Collection, Sydney. Photo: Kai Wasikowski





## Michael Vale

My aim is always to 'cast' my subject(s) in a setting that reflects their inner world. I also like to build a complete image, where the sitter's face is just part of a much larger scheme. Here I am inspired by the large, theatrical portraits of artists like van Dyke, Max Beckmann and Ivan Albright. I like to build my compositions from equal parts observation, imagination and reference. This allows me a multi-dimensional approach to narrative and composition, often including mysterious, absurd or hallucinogenic elements.

**Sierra Ferrell 2023.** Sierra Ferrell is a rapidly rising star of American 'alt-country' music who has toured here a couple of times. As well as her beautifully crafted songs and elite musicianship, she is known for her extremely flamboyant stage costumes. She encouraged me to go full tilt with the costume and setting, so I have tried to position her in a typically 'gothic Americana' setting, with only a black sheep for company (and/or solidarity).



## Peter Wegner

I realised what I am interested in is the intersection between painting from life and the time capsule of this moment shared. Most of my portraits are of friends and acquaintances. It is such a privilege to spend time in the studio and return to the same subject. I see portraiture as a symbiotic collaboration where two friends meet and spend time together in a tradition that goes back hundreds of years. My work is really about how we live and how we seek out human connection.

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Peter Wegner  
*Chef's Coat* 2020  
Oil on aluminium. 118 x 118cm  
Courtesy the artist and Australian Galleries, Melbourne  
Private Collection



## Marcus Wills

My artwork explores the human condition through movement, often inspired by contemporary dancers. I strive to create dynamic images that reflect the essence of each subject, portraying the body as a lively, expressive form. I favour a tonal approach that I feel enhances the physicality of my figures and invites viewers to connect with their narratives, revealing the richness of the human experience. Ultimately, I hope to convey the vitality and emotional nuances present in each form.

# Glen Eira City Council Gallery

Glen Eira Town Hall

Corner Glen Eira and Hawthorn Roads, Caulfield

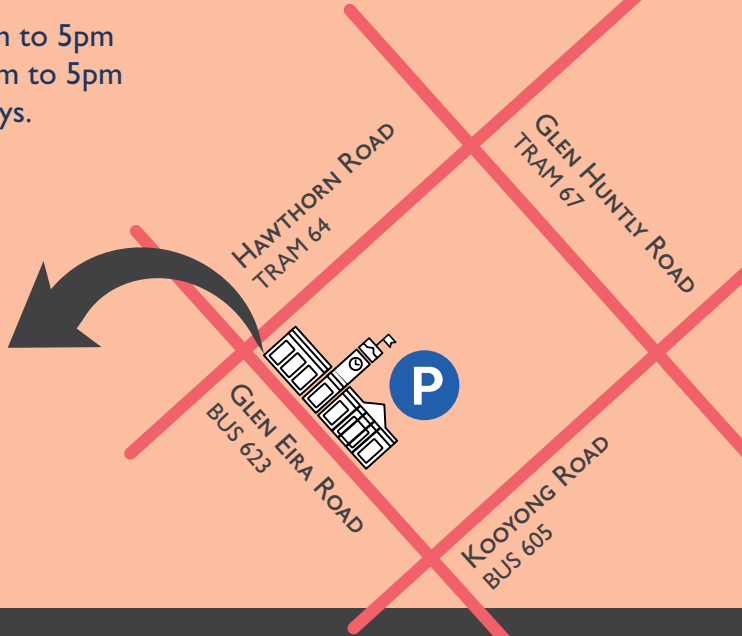
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Opening hours:

Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm

Saturday to Sunday, 1pm to 5pm

Closed all public holidays.



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