



# NEW26 by Cameron Hurst

26 Sep 2026

NEW26, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) 18 SEP – 22 NOV 2026



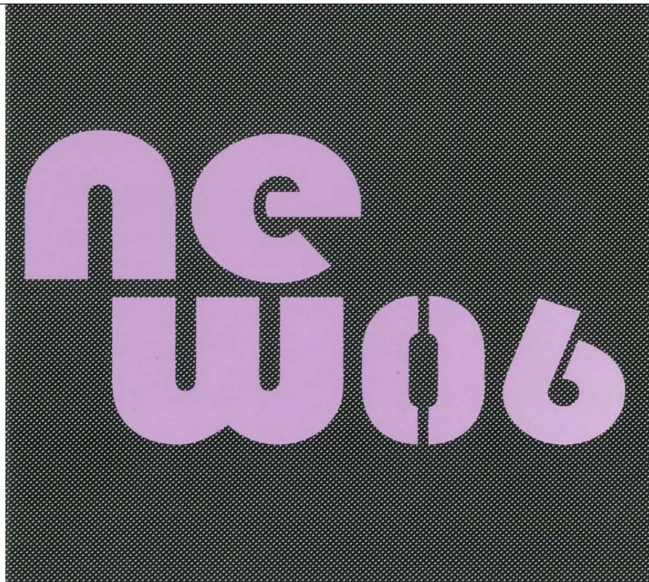
Installation view of EJ Son, *Eggverse*, 2026, NEW26, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne. Photograph: Carmen Zammit

There is nothing new under the sun. That is, unless you go to ACCA, where everything is “Always new. Always now. Always free.” The show that has just opened is even newer than most: it is NEW26, the revived iteration of a series of exhibitions that ran from 2003 to 2016. Originally devised by ACCA’s long-term Artistic Director Juliana Engberg, and later guest-curated, NEW was envisioned as a themeless group show of new works made

about it: artists aren't forced into making work that will fit into a theme, but there is no real governing logic or idea that narrates what goes in it. Each show functions as a slightly miscellaneous index of tendencies, tics, scenes, and institutional norms of a given year. 2026's edition was curated in-house by Shelley McSpedden and Sophie Prince, working under the leadership of the gallery's (relatively) new Artistic Director and CEO Myles Russell-Cook. The seven artists plucked from the masses are Amanda Bell, Amanda Bennetts, Nicholas Currie, Naveed Farro, Caesar Florence-Howard, Diego Ramírez, and EJ Son. So, what is actually "new" about this NEW?

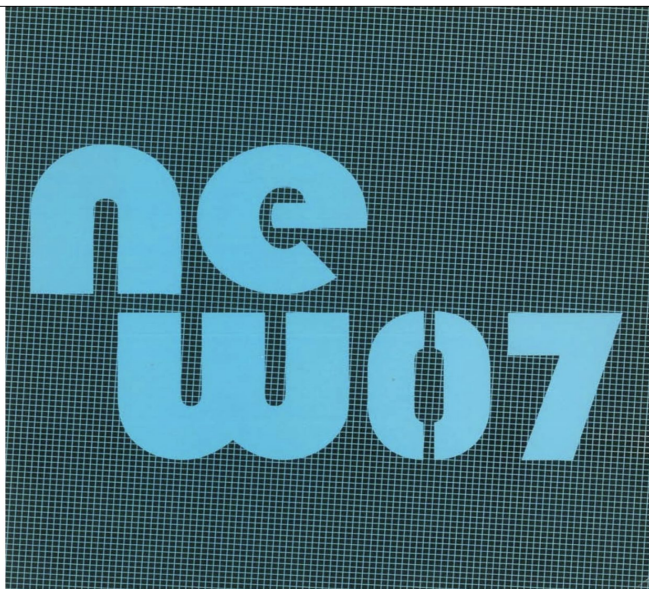
In an attempt to find some answers to this question, I scanned a bunch of the old catalogues, with their ghosts of art worlds past. Some things have changed: Bauhaus is, sadly, no longer an acceptable font for a serious catalogue cover; Gabrielle de Vietri, once an artist who asked people to stare at a bare section of ACCA's wall as if it were an art object, part of a "broader exploration of the negotiation of subjectivity within collective social encounters," is now a politician. A total shift in place-naming conventions happened between 2016 and today. None of the old catalogues use Indigenous names for the cities and regions that the artists come from and work on, whereas the 2026 catalogue uniformly includes this information. This small semantic shift reflects greater attempts to address Indigenous history, presence, and knowledge as a central concern for all artists working in settler colonial Australia. It also raises questions about superficial, ritualised engagements, without accompanying deep-rooted changes (though even this contrast, between surface-level and structural, has the ring of cliché about it).





NEW06 catalogue cover. Scan: ACCA





NEW07 catalogue cover. Scan: ACCA

Looking through the old NEWs, it is also clear that many things are not so



Looking through the old NEWS, it is also clear that many things are not so different between then and now. Institutional critique just won't die. People obsess over time—how it passes, and whether it's linear or cyclical, Indigenous or Western or capitalist. Agnostic liberal mysticism abounds. As the 2000s and 2010s progressed, perhaps *the* theme of the long Y2K century emerged: “technology.” More and more, it seemed that grappling with the effects of technology (meaning computers, phones, the internet, and, now, the dreaded and amorphous AI) became as de facto for a portion of ACCA-affiliated artists as grappling with medium-specificity had been in modernism, or as Christianity had been in the Renaissance. This could be quite literal. In NEW04, Stephen Honegger and Anthony Hunt installed a 4.8 metre high replica of a central processing unit (CPU) at the entrance of the gallery, at a moment when that type of computer hardware was becoming obsolete. “Beige is now being replaced by black and silver, the blocky tower by more streamlined or integrated models, and the CPU, monitor, keyboard combination by the increasing affordability and portability of laptops,” a curatorial essay shared breathlessly, in a passage that now reads as though it could have been copy-pasted straight from a JB Hi-Fi catalogue.

In NEW26, Amanda Bennetts has installed a towering server rack, bringing the architecture of a data centre into the gallery. Unlike the replicated CPU of 04, this techno-monolith, titled *Axis Mundi*, has been interfered with: pierced with hand rails like a “machinic Saint Sebastian” (per catalogue writer Emily Martin), which links to Bennetts' experience of chronic illness and disability; and decked out with blurred screens which play found footage related to themes of ascension and descension. In a steel-and-cable seat nearby, viewers can listen to an audio recording of a prayer-like utterance. “... And every morning in the dark with glowing palms we say yes.” There are many ideas embedded in this artwork, some triggering



average; technology promises us optimisation but delivers degradation; ephemeral data and algorithms have material bases. Yes, yes, this is all true. Each idea is thought-provoking in its own right, but there is a slightly overstuffed density to the way in which they are threaded through the two objects in the installation.





Installation view of Amanda Bennetts. *Axis Mundi*. 2026. *NEW26*. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne. Photograph: Carmen Zammit

In another darkened room, Amanda Bell has made a 10:55 minute video work titled *Feel it all. Then let it go.*, shown alongside a poem. Bell is a Badimia Tamatji and Yued Noongar artist who had a career in the public service, including as a social worker, before beginning to make art while caring for her elderly mother. She started exhibiting in galleries a few years ago. Her trajectory makes her an outlier in this cohort of artists, who all otherwise followed more conventional paths through art schools. Reading Michael Gentle's catalogue essay and listening to Bell's artist talk, I was interested in her perspective on the world, which was peppered with gonzo, vivid images: walking through the bush recently, she thought she saw a statue of an Aboriginal man holding a spear, only for it to be transformed, on closer inspection, into a monument to a white man with a saw; speaking about the miserable recent news stories about Jason Arday, a Cambridge professor who

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*Feel it all. Then let it go.*, the video fills the entire gallery wall. It's black and white. Hands sort through what looks like a pile of letters. There are layered textures, sometimes an image within an image. It turns red-tinted. Overlapping sounds play: droning, bubbling, a bird croaking, a human grunting, panting, what sounded like wind-chimes. The rectangular projection gets smaller and smaller on the wall. There is monochrome footage of hands, which seem to be tying ropes to trees. There is rustling sound, and laughter, and echoed, inaudible talking. The projection disappears, and then the film starts again. The didactic mentions Bell was looking into Elizabeth Durack, a white woman artist who entered Aboriginal art competitions pretending to be an Aboriginal man, as well as contested narratives about the Tuart Forest, on Noongar Boodja (Country), but these subjects appear as flashes. The main effect is disorientation.





Installation view of Amanda Bell, *Feel it all. Then let it go.*, 2026, NEW26, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne. Photograph: Carmen Zammit

One thing that was new—or at least an intensified continuation of old—in the 2026 exhibition was the depth of engagement with questions about the identity of the artist. Now more than ever, artists who are recognised by mainstream institutions are required to create and perform public personas. It is the norm for an artist to maintain a professional Instagram account and, ideally, it should also appear casually unprofessional, giving a relaxed and voyeuristic insight into everyday creative life. It is also common for biographical information to be directly linked with the content of an artist’s work, a tendency that is especially pronounced for artists from diverse backgrounds, whether that means race, sexuality, ability, or other vectors (though rarely class). The promotion for NEW26 featured solo portraits of the chosen seven, and the metallic, glossy catalogue is full of BTS “work in progress” shots in their studios. They were made into ACCA micro-celebrities. This general state of affairs is not necessarily one that has been pursued by artists themselves. It can be a mindfuck when an institution starts paying attention to you, when “you” start becoming institutionalised, interpellated through the apparatus of a system outside of your, or any one person’s, control. This id-polatry could be sidelined—focus on the work! Ignore the marketing!—except that a number of the artists in the show are dealing, either explicitly or obliquely, with the institutional desire for “authentic” artistic identity.

Diego Ramírez’s *Bureausis* is on the more explicit end of the spectrum. It is a surrealist, satirical novel about an Australia-based artist/writer/administrator on a residency in the fictional town of Cuidadela.



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Mexico, to write a bureaucratic handbook for an ARI called Workforce 2000. *Bureausis* also appears in ACCA in the form of an office-like installation that displays copies of the book and replicates scenes and images from the novel. The protagonist's father is ill, an intrusion from a world of obligations outside of grant acquittals and gallery dinners. Magical realist intrusions also keep stymying his progress; at one point, he is accused of being a changeling.



Installation view of Diego Ramírez, *Bureausis*, 2026. NEW26, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne. Photograph: Carmen Zammit



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Ramírez is closer to being an “emerged” artist/writer/administrator than a completely tadpole-like “emerging” one, in that he has spent over a decade intimately involved with small artist-run organisations and projects. This is intrinsic to why he is able to produce a work like this—a transcendently bitter excoriation of a milieu marked by courtly and competitive social dynamics, botched attempts at non-hierarchical governance, egomania, low risk tolerance precipitated by reams of paperwork, personal trauma leveraged for professional advancement, cancellations, cringe performance art, and a constant patter of rumours about the ethically dubious ways that artists’ distant relatives made their money. The book also chronicles the contradictory experiences of the diasporic artist, wherein one can be fetishised as a historically marginalised voice in one location and considered an out-of-touch unc in another. It’s very funny.

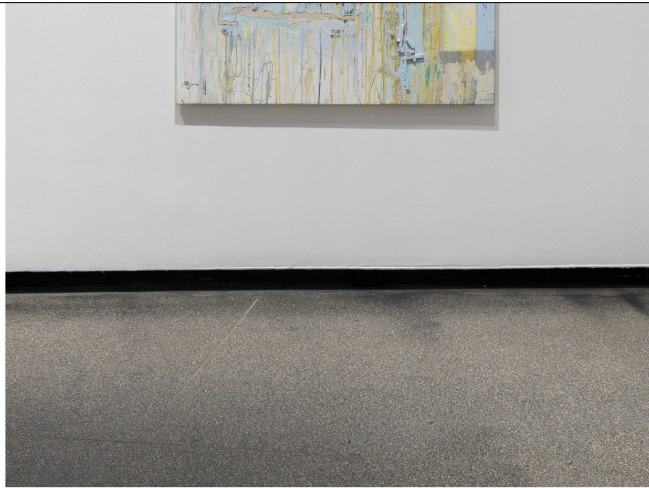
Ramírez used tarot (specifically the Tarot de Marseille) to guide his writing process, and McSpedden and Prince suggest in their curatorial essay that tarot could be a metaphor for NEW’s ability to predict the future: to foretell great careers for its participants. A more nihilistic reading could be that there is something kind of random, governed by chance, about who ends up in shows and lands opportunities more broadly. Actually, the professional success of curators involved in NEW is one of the most consistent things that becomes evident across the old catalogues. While many of the artists and writers who participated are now mostly forgotten, nearly all the curators went on to major appointments in other institutions. If we were living in the world of *Bureausis*, NEW would actually be a blood sacrifice ritual for a shadowy curator cabal.

Two painters were selected for NEW26—one abstract, one figurative, both tasked with filling gargantuan walls in an airplane hangar of a building, designed more with Expansive Contemporary Art in mind than with works



produced in a trad, humble studio practice. Caesar Florence-Howard's paintings are operating in a tradition of modernist painting that stretches back through Germany and America, past Dieter Roth to Greenberg etc. He has left the small rooms of Strawberry, his studio and gallery in Brunswick, and expanded and contracted to meet the demands of ACCA. His delicate, mostly pastel-coloured canvasses are concerned with an internal logic of grids, layered surfaces, and scraping and peeling processes—palimpsestic effects achieved over time and structured by inscrutable aesthetic judgements. "A scribble in felt-tip marker can succeed in pushing the picture from irredeemable to the elusive zone where it suddenly works," Francis Plagne observes in the catalogue.





Caesar Florence—Howard, *untitled*, 2026, *NEW26*. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne. Photograph: Carmen Zammit

Nicholas Currie, who is a part of the Mununjali clan of the Yugambeh language group, with connections to Kuku Yalanji, makes paintings described by the curators as “slacker.” They are loose, sparse, iconic, ironic, not trying hard to look complicated or schmick. On one wall in the gallery, there are five lined up on a raised shelf: a ghost with Philip Gustonesque feet; an X and an appliqued t-shirt that says “I <3 Melbourne”; the word “POXYMORON” in a speech bubble and two deflated plastic croc pool toys

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GAMMIN.” “Gammin” is First Nations slang for fake, bullshit, inauthentic. Is it? What is “it”? What does Currie think? Is this trollish bluster, genuine insecurity, a response to a sense that hollowness pervades contemporary art institutions, a hedge against judgement? In the public artist talks, Currie, who is charismatic, a charmer, skilled at welcoming people into the gallery, said that he completed his paintings so quickly that they could be considered to be “performances.” Later, I wondered what he was getting at with this off-the-cuff remark—how seriously he wants his audiences to take his paintings as paintings. And what is a successful figurative painting now?



Nicholas Currie, left to right: *I wonder if its all gammin.*, 2026; *witchway.*, 2026; *(P)oxymoron.*, 2026; *bia X.*, 2026; *self again.*, 2026. NFW26, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

This line of questioning made me think about Guston (1913–80), the American painter now best known for his eerily cheerful, bloody marshmallow-hued depictions of Klu Klux Klan members. If you stretch the definition, you could say Guston was a “performer,” insofar as anyone participating in a cultural arena is performing; but I would argue that at the core of his enduring appeal is his oeuvre of exceptionally good figurative paintings, which can stand at some distance from his persona. They are of their time, but they also function as archetypal images of racism, resonating beyond their immediate context. Decades after their creation, Guston’s intricately composed, funny, and serious canvases reward extended looking and thought (the same goes for the work of Gordon Bennett, who ripped Guston in *Horizon* (1996)). In Guston’s *Edge of Town* (1969), for example, two hooded Klansmen trundle along in a vehicle, chuffing fat cigars, their vertical eye slits looking outside the edge of the frame. They are going somewhere, looking somewhere that we can’t. This sense of motion is replicated in the background, which transitions from a smeared pale blue to a thin passage of pale pink. The figures have a jovial camaraderie, but there are disconcerting hints of violence in the image too; planks of wood poked with nails are stuffed in the back of the car. In Currie’s ghost painting, the patchily translucent white figure is central and depicted facing straight forward on a scuffy black and brown background, unpainted canvas visible at the edges. Its arms are raised, its legs are tattooed, and it has big, round eyes—it looks harmless, a bit blank. The texts about the work speak to the general ghost’s symbolic connection to theories of hauntology and colonial violence. Yet compared to the Guston, there is less implied narrative and tension in the painting itself, less character to this specific ghost.

wall, a frieze replicating one from the Apadana complex in Persepolis shows a lion feasting on the hind of a bull, a brutal image of imperial power that has been defaced with violet paint. Another wall hosts three moody black and white photographs Yusefzadeh took at an archaeological dig site in Iran. An evocative, languidly-paced black and white film shows the same site, lit brightly from above, with pools of glistening water, rubble, and Persian artifacts. Yusefzadeh ruminates in Farsi on themes of conservation, destruction, and war. On the floor, two fragmentary ancient Persian bull heads lie majestic and silent on a mirrored surface. The work uses new technologies—the bull heads, for example, are scanned from bonafide objects, then 3D-printed, plastered, and painted—but it is not about these technologies; they are used in service of the content.

Nineteenth-century archaeological images are projected on a laptop screen in one part of the film, and chunks are missing from the bull heads. These connect to the story of the French archaeologist and cross-dresser Jane Dieulafoy (1851–1916). Dieulafoy, alongside her husband and other archaeologists, excavated many of the ancient Persian objects now in the collection of the Louvre, a project undertaken with the collaboration of the Persian authorities. Dieulafoy had destructive tendencies, documented in her diary. When she realised that one enormous stone bull could not be brought back to Paris, she picked up a sledgehammer: “I hit it with a savage blow.” It broke, in perhaps the most perfectly grim anecdote for illustrating the thwarted possessive instincts of the late nineteenth-century European pillager. Yet this read must be weighed up against Dieulafoy’s contributions towards conservation. Farro’s parents are from Iran, but came to Australia as refugees, fleeing persecution of the Bahá’í faith; he was born here and has not, and currently cannot, visit. For all Dieulafoy’s bull-bashing, if she had not preserved the priceless Persian objects now in the Louvre, Farro and

scanning objects that can then be turned into digitally-mediated facsimiles, is another.



Installation view of Naveed Farro, *The Palace* series (ACCA iteration), 2025–26, *NEW26*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Naarm/Melbourne. Photograph: Carmen Zammit

Except Yusefzadeh doesn't exist. Farro made him up. He is a character, an "authentic" figure whose biography does not go much deeper than what is offered in the scant text of didactic. Yusefzadeh is like a shadow self, an alter-ego reminiscent of Amy Stuart's faux-forger Mari Matsumoto. "Art becomes

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Except Yusefzadeh doesn't exist. Farro made him up. He is a character, an "authentic" figure whose biography does not go much deeper than what is offered in the scant text of didactic. Yusefzadeh is like a shadow self, an alter-ego reminiscent of Amy Stuart's faux-forger Mari Matsumoto. "Art becomes a socially acceptable pretext for asking difficult questions ...," writes Taous Dahmani in the catalogue. "It grants permission to learn what perhaps should have already been yours: a language, a history, a set of cultural references, fragments of a family." The dig site depicted in sharp resolution in the film and photographs is fake too, a composite scene rendered in a game design platform. Farro is like the Nathan Fielder of Iranian-Australian diaspora art (he even graduated from one of Melbourne's top art schools with really good grades); sometimes via processes of reenactment, roleplaying, and fictionalisation, we can get closer to something that rings true.

Why did NEW go on hiatus after 2016? The answer isn't that dramatic. There's no conspiracy. The "formidable" Juliana Engberg left. Engberg's curatorial approach has been described as "emotional conceptualism." Max Delany took over the director role and, in a landscape with increasingly reduced funding, ACCA's programming shifted from five to four shows a year. NEW was resource-intensive, and Delany had ideas for shows that spoke to a different agenda, evident in the more archival, political, and community activism-oriented *Sovereignty* (2016–17) and *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism* (2017). The biannual Macfarlane Commissions, four themeless showcases of new work by early to mid-career artists, served a very similar function to NEW. McSpedden curated the last one in 2024. That same year, Delany left. Russell-Cook moved from the big Southbank house to the little one, bringing some NGV methods and a penchant for diva worship along with him. And now we're at NEW redux.

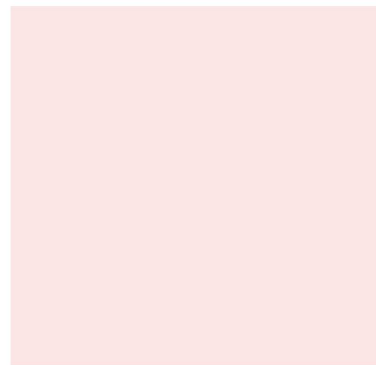
An enormous egg floats in the centre of the gallery. It is part of EJ

grandeur and almost endless symbolic potential. A Korean proverb that describes a hopeless situation: “to strike a rock with an egg.” A trans person who doesn’t yet know they’re trans: egg. The egg is versatile, able to be shamelessly repurposed as a metaphor for anything—like, ahem, a period of institutional rebirth and reorientation. The ACCA of the late 2020s, the Russell-Cook era, is hatching. If you stand really close, and listen really hard, you might be able to hear Kylie playing.

ARTISTS: AMANDA BELL, AMANDA BENNETTS, NICHOLAS CURRIE, NAVEED FARRO, CAESAR FLORENCE-HOWARD, DIEGO RAMÍREZ, EJ SON

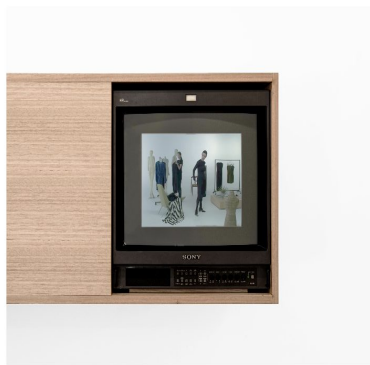
Cameron Hurst is a writer and art historian. She is an editor of The Paris End newsletter and is currently doing a PhD on Northern European Renaissance art at the University of Melbourne.

## FROM THE MAGAZINE



## What We Inherited

by **Verónica Tello**, Issue 1



## Tim Hardy: Love Is a Crowded Theatre

by **Cameron Hurst**, Issue 5



## Alchemy—Material Transformations

Geelong Gallery

by **Ella Howells**, 3 Sep 2026



## Avatar: Forms of Vishnu

Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW)

by **Simryn Gill**, 26 Sep 2026