



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Fine Arts
and Music

FIRST COMMISSIONS

MEDIA PACK

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Major Australian arts project reimagines original commission for Michelangelo's *David*

Wednesday 3 July 2019 – Melbourne, Australia and Florence, Italy: A major Australian arts project presented by the University of Melbourne launches at the feet of Michelangelo's *David*, the world's most famous statement on physical perfection, ahead of exhibitions in Florence and Melbourne this month.

Entitled *First Commissions*, 30 emerging artists have interpreted briefs inspired by world-changing historical commissions for the present moment – from Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Monkeys* to Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Without knowing what the original briefs related to, the artists have created contemporary works that cast a range of urgent global issues in a stark new light, from feminism through to climate change, grief and loss.

Among the commissions is the brief inspired by Michelangelo's 16th-century masterpiece *David*, lauded for centuries as a symbol of human physical perfection.

Five young Australian artists, including Melbourne visual artist Esther Stewart and Australian Indigenous artist Ashley Perry, have interpreted a brief inspired by the commission for Michelangelo's *David*. They have created works that collectively pose the question: how far have we really come in our understanding of physical perfection?

The artists have created work that challenges any singular idea of human physical perfection and, in very different ways, encourage the viewer to reflect on what is perceived as perfect.

Beyond visual art, the commission inspired by *David* has also been interpreted by artists working in other disciplines including choreographer and dancer Jack Riley, interactive composer Samuel Kreuzler and classical composer Danna Yun. Despite their unique personal histories, perspectives and disciplines, the artists reveal a generation who collectively refuse to subscribe to the homogeny of perfection.

University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Professor Duncan Maskell said the *First Commissions* project takes a fresh perspective on historical commissions to transform timeless social themes into contemporary art and different formats.

"The University of Melbourne believes art can challenge how people feel and see the world. As our world becomes increasingly automated, our creative artists and musicians have the ability to work together to solve problems and meet the challenges that we face in society.

"A fine arts and music education is transformative, encourages confidence and a strong sense of self-belief. It gives students the courage to think independently and critically. It fosters collaboration and creative risk-taking, passion, determination and resilience," Professor Maskell said.

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A juxtaposition of old and new, the exhibition highlights the importance of global institutions of academic excellence such as the Galleria dell' Accademia; Accademia Di Belle Arti Di Firenze and the University of Melbourne to creatively challenge boundaries and create thought-provoking experiences that move others.

Galleria dell' Accademia Director Dr Cecilie Hollberg said: "I am very pleased that the Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze has contributed to the realization of this project which, once again, makes us reflect on how the Renaissance masterpieces kept in our extraordinary museums are still a rich source of inspiration for young talents."

"I am also very happy that First Commissions offered the Galleria the opportunity to renew friendship and collaboration with an institutional historically sister, the Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze."

Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze Director Professor Claudio Rocca said: "Since I was appointed Director of the Fine Arts Academy in Florence two years ago, I have tried to focus my attention on internationalisation that is a key propulsive comparison and growth factor."

"Internationalisation needs to be based on reciprocal exchange principle. This is the reason why I am happy to host the University of Melbourne project and I hope for this initiative to lead to a stronger collaboration with our Academic community."

From Ashley Perry's examination of the role of digital algorithms in perpetuating singular views of perfection, through to Esther Stewart's work which highlights the one-size-fits-all form of architectural structures - the artists highlight society's constraining idea of what perfection is and how we should be striving for it.

Similarly, Jack Riley and Samuel Kreuzler separately argue for the recognition of beauty found in imperfection: Jack Riley's choreographed dance embraces the beauty found in grotesque gestures and the vulnerability of the human body, while Samuel Kreuzler's intentionally 'broken' guitar becomes the source of a series of affecting and playful sounds – reminding viewers of the beauty that exists within our own individual flaws.

Commencing in Florence on 4 July at the Accademia Di Belle Arti Di Firenze, the project culminates in an expansive exhibition of work by all 30 artists on 27 and 28 July at the University of Melbourne's newly transformed Southbank campus.

The entire *First Commissions* series reimagines original commissions inspired by *David*, *Titanic*, Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty*, Bob Dylan's *Hurricane*, Camille Claudel's *Age of Maturity*, Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait with Monkeys* and Susan Hewitt & Penelope Lee's *The Great Petition*.

To explore the University of Melbourne's First Commissions exhibition in full, visit the online gallery [here](#) or via: www.firstcommissions.com.au

About the University of Melbourne

Established in 1853, the University of Melbourne is a public-spirited institution that makes distinctive contributions to society in research, learning and teaching and engagement. It's consistently ranked among the leading universities in the world, with international rankings of world universities placing it as number 1 in Australia and number 32 in the world (Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2017-2018).

About Fine Arts and Music at the University of Melbourne

The [Faculty of Fine Arts and Music](#) at the University of Melbourne brings together all the artistic disciplines within a tier-one research university. Leveraging the combined strengths of the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, the Faculty has its home in the centre of Melbourne's Arts Precinct. Students build their knowledge and skill within cutting-edge facilities and earn a world-class education, designed to challenge and enhance their creativity.

About the Melbourne Exhibition Launch

The *First Commissions* exhibition will take place over Open House weekend (27-28 July) in the Martyn Myer Arena on the University of Melbourne's Southbank campus. Curated by Sabrina Baker, the exhibition will include 30 works responding to the 7 commissions and involve over 100 emerging artists and students working across film, dance, theatre, music, music theatre, visual art and design & production.

About The Virtual Gallery

The Virtual Gallery curates all 30 works from our emerging artists, making them accessible to a global audience. Their responses to the seven briefs range from performance pieces, short film, animation, orchestral compositions and visual art pieces. Covering such themes as climate change, refugee asylum, terrorism and rape culture, the artists have presented their pieces within the virtual gallery space in a way they feel best conveys their artistic vision.

FIRST COMMISSIONS

Artists give new life to the themes that inspired history's great works

Throughout history, artists have received commissions that have led to some of the world's influential works. In 2019, the University of Melbourne gave 29 emerging artists their first commission. The 30th artist in this exhibition is established contemporary artist and university alumna, Esther Stewart. Her inclusion in the project highlights the evolution of an artistic career.

Each commission was inspired by themes found in some of the world's most iconic works. At the time of receiving the commission, the artists had no knowledge of its origin.

Five of these artists received arguably the most iconic commission, inspired by the brief given to Michelangelo in 1501 for the creation of *David*.

Through each of their five disciplines, Esther Stewart, Aboriginal Australian visual artist Ashley Perry choreographer and dancer Jack Riley, interactive composer Samuel Kreisler and classical composer Danna Yun, explore the nature of human perfection in contemporary society.

A juxtaposition of old and new, the exhibition highlights the importance of global institutions of academic excellence such as the Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze; Accademia Di Belle Arti Di Firenze and the University of Melbourne to creatively challenge boundaries and create thought-provoking experiences that move others.

In a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence and data, the University of Melbourne argues for the power of the artistic mind and the importance of a fine arts and music education to propel society forward.

First Commissions, a global project that brings together more than 100 emerging artists across three sites on two continents to present 30 unique responses.

All works are being displayed in the *First Commissions* Online Gallery.

The other historical commissions

The University of Melbourne also commissioned 25 additional students to interpret briefs inspired by other world-changing historical commissions. Without knowing what the original briefs related to, the artists have created contemporary works that cast a range of urgent global issues in a stark new light from feminism through to climate change, grief and loss.



Camille Claudel, *The Age of Maturity*, c. 1902

The provocation: Examine the inevitability of the passing of time, as well as the desire to hold onto youth.



Bob Dylan, *Hurricane*, 1975

The provocation: Create a work that rails against social injustice through its clarion call to freedom.

Listen to Bob Dylan's, *Hurricane* (1976) on Spotify: <https://spoti.fi/31OUUp5>



Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Monkeys*, 1943

The provocation: Create a work that divulges a deeply personal, yet unattainable desire

Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Monkeys* (detail), 1943

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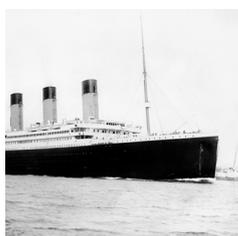
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *The Sleeping Beauty*, 1889

The provocation: Create a work depicting an extravagant political figure, alive or dead, using fantastic characters, settings and ideas



Susan Hewitt & Penelope Lee, *The Great Petition*, 2008

The provocation: Create a work that examines debates in your society about an ongoing struggle to give voice to the powerless.



Thomas Andrews, *RMS Titanic*, 1911

The provocation: Create the impossible in a work that pushes the boundaries of your discipline to the extreme.

About the Works in First Commissions, Florence



Samuel Kreuzler, interactive composer and musician

IT'S NOT FAIR HAVING 13 STRINGS, 2019

“Limitations are universal, but if harnessed, can lead to triumphs of the imagination.”

Samuel was initially inspired by individuals who have all used commonly perceived imperfections to their advantage: Paralympian Aimee Mullens, guitarist composer Django Reinhardt, and professional rock climber Tommy Caldwell. Limitations are universal, but if harnessed can lead to triumphs of the imagination.

Using these stories of triumph over adversity as his starting point, Samuel challenged himself to think beyond the traditional in order to reinvent the classic.

It's not fair having 13 strings is performed on a classical guitar with the A, G and E strings removed. The piece is an exploration of the contrast of tone, colour and range between the remaining strings, leading to the introduction of unorthodox hand tapping, manipulation of the fret board and silent finger movements around the instrument developing a synergetic relationship to external sound. An original piece of instrumentation, this work sees the reimagining of a traditional instrument.



Esther Stewart, visual artist

THE SPACE HAS BEEN CREATED FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN 1:2 (FLOOR PLAN), 2019

“Perfection is contextual.”

Esther Stewart is an Australian artist whose practice interrogates historical, social and political ideas and implications pertaining to architecture. Stewart's paintings, sculptures, textiles, and installations aggregate art- and design-historical precedents, mapping and collating different genealogies, each representative of contextual and evolving ideologies.

Her installation responds directly to the context of the Florence Fine Arts Academy. Quite literally softening architecture, Stewart's textile floor plan offers a counter to the rigidity traditionally associated with the construction and historicising of architecture. As a result, the installation becomes a site that is responsive to each engagement - the fabric form echoing individual movement - and thus forges pluralistic and collaborative historical narratives.

About the Works in First Commissions, Florence



Jack Riley, choreographer and dancer

DUPLEX, 2019

Nikki Tarling - Dancer
Robert Downie - Musical Composition
Andrew Treloar - Costume Design

“Perfection is a paradox. One can only achieve a perfect or fulfilled state of being whilst in the pursuit of perfection.”

Jack proposes that human physical perfection is both implausible and achievable. Like in dance, it can be found in the visceral and raw struggle as one pursues the desire to be more than one’s self. So, to achieve perfection one must hold onto a duality between who they are and what they want to be.

Duplex is an expression of balance and paradox. It presents a male and female subject as they move through states of independence and physical connection. Their humanness purposely stripped back through a futuristic aesthetic, to allow ambiguity in the masculine and feminine qualities in their movements.



Ashley Perry, visual artist

ANTHOLOGY OF HUMAN PHYSICAL PERFECTION, 2019

“Human physical perfection is whatever you want it be, not what you are told it is.”

Ashley Perry began his interrogation into the brief by asking the internet a question: what is human physical perfection? His search results led him down a path that has culminated in a work that exposes how search-engine algorithms reinforce and shape ideals of physical perfection.

Inspired by his recent travels in Nepal, the Aboriginal Australian artist observed how commercial brands, specifically beauty brands, communicate to different cultures and ethnicities using images that perpetuate a singular beauty based on dominant ideals. This led the artist to consider the broader impact algorithm-led image searches for beauty and human perfection has on broader society. Anthology of human physical perfection began with an initial Google search for ‘Human’, ‘Physical’ and ‘Perfection’.

Through the process of repeating these searches and engaging with the content, new search parameters were returned, further opening up ideas around human perfection. The representation of these images relative to one another teases out the society’s complex relationship with human physical perfection, with a focus on the internet’s contribution in pushing out a homogenised notion of what it is to be perfect.

Ultimately however, through his work Ashley finds that human physical perfection can be whatever you want it be, not what you are told it is. The audio-visual sculpture comprises digital screens that project thousands of images, encouraging the viewer to reflect on the extent to which perceptions of physical perfection are increasingly narrowing in the age of the algorithm.

About the Works in First Commissions, Florence



Danna Yun, classical composer and musician

“RIDDLE” FOR STRING ENSEMBLE, 2019

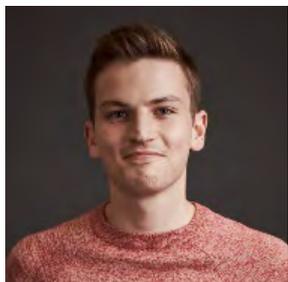
“The pursuit of perfection is ever-expanding. It’s only in reaching one horizon that the next becomes visible.”

Danna Yun was initially challenged by the brief, before she became inspired by her own struggle with perfectionism within her musical practice: she notes a moment in which she went beyond the pursuit of technical perfection in order to better understand why. This spirit of inquiry was important in her evolution as a musician and composer.

Reflecting on this, Danna has composed a work that plays with traditional modes of composition to provide an accessible experience of classical music to contemporary audiences. *Riddle for String Ensemble* (2019) is a 12-minute classical composition inspired from gods and deities found in religion and mythology. Historically immortalised as perfect beings in the form of painting and statues, her work investigates their stories and discovers they too share many of our human imperfections and flaws.

The piece (a reference to the Sphinx’s riddle from Greek mythology) depicts glimpses of deities as ethereal, still paintings as if you were walking among them. Tamer harmonic beginnings evoke a sense of tradition and respect, progressing to a mood of eccentricity, hinting that below the surface these gods consist of character at odds to their depiction. This juxtaposition pushes and pulls, until finally the gods fail to break free from the canvas – as this is only a representation of a vision.

About the Artists in First Commissions, Florence



Samuel Kreuzler, interactive composer and musician

Samuel Kreuzler is a contemporary composer and performer who predominantly focuses on the interaction of music/sound with theatre and film projects.

Works of his commonly seek to blend the lines of a theatrical and music performance utilising both classical instrumental and electroacoustic techniques.

Beyond this, Classical guitar is his most prominent instrument of choice in both compositional and performance contexts through which he explores a wide range of styles and approaches.

Samuel completed his Bachelor of Music and Honours Degree majoring in Interactive Composition at the University of Melbourne's Conservatorium. He has since participated in multiple theatre shows, film projects, an ACMI X residency, and the Annual Pacific Alliance of Music Schools Summit in Singapore.



Ashley Perry, visual artist

Ashley Perry is an interdisciplinary artist and Goenpul person from Quandamooka country. His recent works come from research into Quandamooka cultural practices, focusing on material culture held in museum, university and private collections. This research is used to produce works that uncover and question the discrepancies embedded in these archives.

Drawn from a number of sources from firsthand accounts to historical documents, these varied and often differing accounts are interrogated, compared and are used to produce his works. The works enter a dialogue, questioning of the certainty around some of these accounts and engaging in a speculative potential. He is Interested in decolonising theories as a way of understanding materials, histories, and artistic practice and examining knowledge structures and methods around collections.

Ashley works across sculpture, drawing, printmaking and new media utilising a wide variety of materials, from traditional processes such as copperplate etching to more contemporary such as .html programming.

He completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Visual Art) with Honours at the University of Melbourne, Victorian College of the Arts. Perry has exhibited across Melbourne in galleries including Margaret Lawrence Gallery, West Space, and the McClelland Gallery & Sculpture Park. He was the winner of the Mary and Lou Senini Prize in sculpture (2017) and the Fiona Myer Award (2017) and was shortlisted for the Majlis Travelling scholarship (2016). In 2017 Ashley was awarded an exchange to the Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta as a part of the New Colombo Plan scholarship.

About the Artists in First Commissions, Florence



Jack Riley, choreographer and dancer

After graduating from the University of Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in 2016 Jack has been able to work for, Tasdance, Australian Opera, Australian Dance Party, and James Batchelor as part of Chunky Moves Next Move program.

He has presented two major works since graduating, Contact in Canberra (QL2 Theatre), and Melbourne (Dancehouse) where he was nominated for best dance award as part of Melbourne Fringe. The Second Alone in Canberra (Canberra Theatre Centre), Melbourne (Chunky Move Studios), and Perth (State Theatre Centre).

He also had the opportunity to work for QL2 as one of the choreographers in their Chaos project, and previously to that was the recipient of The Ralph Wilson Residency where he performed his duet work with a musician in Canberra.

Jack hopes to further himself as a dancer, artist and person through an ongoing practice of his related interests, such as combining athleticism, Martial Arts, minimalism and postmodern ideologies.



Danna Yun, classical composer and musician

Danna graduated from the University of Melbourne's Conservatorium of Music with a Bachelor of Music majoring in Composition and is now studying Honours. She is the youngest of our champion artists and an exceptional musical talent, particularly at piano. Danna is also a very talented cello player.

Danna's dream in life is to create classical music for videogames – she believes there is a place for traditional music in the lives of younger generations, and wants to bridge this gap.

About the Artists in First Commissions, Florence



Esther Stewart, visual artist

Esther Stewart (b. 1988 Katherine, Australia. Lives and works Melbourne, Australia) creates paintings and installations that examine the endless possibilities offered by the visual language of architecture, design and geometry. In her hands, the axioms of Euclidian geometry result in new and utopian interiors that are both impenetrable and inviting. Stewart's practice makes use of paintings, carpets, flags, screens and sculptures in her construction of architectural experience, establishing a space between form and function, art and design. Stewart's hard-edged geometric abstractions invoke a complex genealogy of historical references, simultaneously calling upon the techniques of Islamic mosaic, Russian Suprematism and Constructivism, and Neo Geo & Memphis Group design from the 1980s. This extensive visual vocabulary is harnessed to describe a unique fictional space that references different ideas, times and cultures to construct new work. Working at the nexus of art and design, Stewart explores ways to reimagine, collapse and expand spaces through painting and architecture, while examining these historical influences and the social and political implications they offer. Recently, Stewart has collaborated with architects and craftspeople to extend the spatial and material possibilities within her practice.

In 2015, Italian designer Valentino engaged Stewart to collaborate on the translation of her paintings into the Autumn/Winter 2015-2016 menswear collection. This very successful collaboration illustrates Stewart's ability to push boundaries and play sophisticated games with the elastic relationship between art and design. In 2016, Stewart was commissioned to produce a new wall painting at Bendigo Hospital, which made use of her hard-edged painting compositions to recontextualise the interior architecture of the building. Stewart subsequently completed another ambitious wall mural as part of a major residential redevelopment in Sydney in 2017.

Esther Stewart completed a Bachelor with First Class Honours at the University of Melbourne (VCA) in 2010, where she now lectures in the School of Sculpture and Spatial Practice. She is represented by Sarah Cottier Gallery, and recently exhibited new work in a solo presentation at the Melbourne Art Fair 2018. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at galleries and art fairs, including at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne. In 2016, Stewart was the winner of the Sir John Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney.