

MEDIA RELEASE
EMBARGOED
FOR RELEASE WEDNESDAY 4 DECEMBER 2049



Artists speak out against censorship of work dealing with the emotional toll of war

As the nationally touring exhibition *Violent Salt* prepares for its second opening this Friday evening in Noosa, NAVA welcomes Noosa Regional Gallery's leadership on artistic expression following the politicised misrepresentation of artists' work – and artists and arts leaders are speaking out against the censorship of two works in Mackay as the result of that misrepresentation.

Violent Salt brings together contemporary artists from across Australia representing diverse cultural heritage. Co-curated by Yhannie Scarce and Claire Watson, the exhibition reflects on the experiences of the marginalised, the underrepresented and the silenced. It questions how we can repair deep wounds, re-connect across culture, and assert and celebrate cultural identities.

During the exhibition's first presentation at Artspace Mackay, two works by internationally renowned artist Abdul Abdullah, 'For we are young and free' and 'All let us rejoice', were removed without his consent. The two works deal with the emotional toll of war as experienced by veterans across a lifetime. Gallery owner Mackay Regional Council withdrew the works following media reports quoting local politicians. Without seeing the work or speaking to the artists, local politicians had claimed that the works disrespected or attacked Australia's armed services and veterans of war.

In response, NAVA has supported the artists, curators and gallery, all of whom are NAVA Members, as well as facilitating a roundtable discussion on 19 November 2019 with the Mayor of Mackay Regional Council, a senior Council staff member, the curators and the artist. The meeting resolved to broker the relationships that would have prevented the removal of the work, and outlined industry standard protocols for dealing with such complex issues as outlined in the NAVA Code of Practice. "It was a constructive meeting and I thank Mayor Williamson for his initial strong public support of Abdul Abdullah and his work," said NAVA Executive Director Esther Anatolitis.

Artist Abdul Abdullah said: "I fully understand that people have strong views about people representing our nation and I have nothing but the greatest respect for Australian Service men and women. It saddens me that the works have been interpreted to suggest otherwise. I have always been here to talk through my creative intent and remain so. Let's not censor art that provokes important discussions about what matters to all of us who care about what makes us who we are as a nation."

"My work, while regularly critical of government, is never an attack on the men and women who serve. I come from a family lineage of veterans, and I'm not going to disrespect their sacrifices and memory by attacking soldiers for the actions of the governments who send them to war and don't look after them when they get back."

"What's happened here is so unfair," said Esther Anatolitis. "It's deeply unfair to the veterans and veterans' groups who've been misled on work they never saw by an artist they never met. It's unfair to the public gallery professionals who expertly facilitate sensitive arts experiences for community members every day. It's unfair to Abdul Abdullah's career and reputation, and it's unfair to all of the artists in this important exhibition.

"Art has an extraordinary power to search our emotions and focus meaningful responses to the most difficult challenges we face. Politicised attacks on art are a lazy way of preventing careful, sophisticated engagement with those issues – and with one another.

"I applaud the cultural leadership shown by Noosa Regional Gallery in preparing for Friday's opening. In line with best practice, the public program will involve veterans' groups alongside other community groups and the artists. *Violent Salt* is all about the marginalised, the underrepresented and the silenced. These are issues we should all be talking about – together."

ARTS LEADERS SPEAK OUT

Institute of Modern Art

For thousands of years, the arts have led difficult conversations in our society. Artists have and continue to poetically express that which we often cannot put words too: Abdul Abdullah's work is no different and generously offers an opportunity to come together, to have those difficult conversations, to explore all perspectives, and most importantly to respect one another's opinions in that process.

Liz Nowell, Director, IMA

University of Queensland Art Museum

The University of Queensland Art Museum has recently acquired Abdul Abdullah's work for the UQ Art Collection, and we offer our solidarity to the artist, and our colleagues at Artspace Mackay.

Abdullah's intricately made tapestries employ emoji symbols, or popular cultural forms, because they are recognisable to most people. They are used as a daily part of our experience and interaction with one another – a short hand, if you will – that we can all connect with, across language barriers and generations. Moreover, Abdullah's works offer us a moment to speak with one another, so we can heal and educate younger generations about the plight and harsh circumstances our armed forces face in our changing world.

We believe Abdullah's works included in the *Violent Salt* exhibition give space for multiple voices to be heard, and for communities to have conversations about difficult social issues that affect us all. We also believe museums and galleries should be safe spaces where we can have tough conversations that at times may make us uncomfortable, and alter our perspectives. We believe that learning occurs when we become uncertain about what we think we know to be true.

As a society we must also remember that artists are not ‘companies’ or ‘institutions’ and they bare the weight of institutional and public opinion largely on their own.

“None of us are well, until all of us are well.”

Peta Rake, Senior Curator, UQ Art Museum
Holly Arden, Associate Director, UQ Art Museum
Campbell Gray, Director, UQ Art Museum

Jemima Wyman

As an exhibiting artist in *Violent Salt*, I would like to flag my deep concern over the misrepresentation, censorship and removal of Abdul Abdullah’s artworks. *Violent Salt* provides a platform for work that addresses the historical ‘silencing’ of marginalized voices. It is therefore ironic that Abdul’s works would be attacked and ‘silenced’ through censorship by a governing authority. *Violent Salt* offered a wonderful opportunity to reflect in conversation on the historical cycle of violence and injustice through thoughtful public engagement. Often violence and injustice is perpetuated when difficult ideas and experiences are not processed publicly in a complex and open-minded way; hence the importance of Abdul’s art practice and the need for this timely exhibition. I am saddened that Abdul’s work is being attacked and censored. It is my hope that future venues include the exhibition in its entirety so that local communities can benefit from the freedom to see, think and talk about complex representations of difficult topics.

Tony Birch

The exhibition *Violent Salt* takes its name from Tony Birch’s preface to *Broken Teeth*, a book of his incisive poetry that was published in 2016:

“Any dictator worth his violent salt executes the poets first.”

Birch, Tony. *Broken Teeth* (2016) Cordite Books

Abdul Abdullah

In the last few weeks my works ‘For we are young and free’ and ‘All let us rejoice’ were removed from the exhibition ‘Violent Salt’ at Artspace Mackay. I believe the intention of the work was misinterpreted and mischaracterised by the politicians involved, and this misinformation was disseminated to Veterans’ groups who then took issue with the images.

The following is my statement to the media: “I fully understand that people have strong views about people representing our nation and I have nothing but the greatest respect for Australian Service men and women. It saddens me that the works have been interpreted to suggest otherwise. I have always been here to talk through my creative intent and remain so. Let’s not censor art that provokes important discussions about what matters to all of us who care about what makes us who we are as a nation.”

My work, while regularly critical of government, is never an attack on the men and women who serve. I come from a family lineage of veterans, and I'm not going to disrespect their sacrifices and memory, by attacking soldiers for the reprehensible action of the governments who send them to war and don't look after them when they get back.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Violent Salt brings together contemporary artists from across Australia representing diverse cultural heritage. Co-curated by Yhannie Scarce and Claire Watson, the exhibition reflects on the experiences of the marginalised, the underrepresented and the silenced. The exhibition discusses issues surrounding racism and discrimination against First Nations peoples and minority groups as well as the lack of respect for, and desecration of culture and the natural environment. *Violent Salt* invites artists to speak their truths about these experiences and offers an opportunity for understanding and connection, whilst seeking to celebrate and honour Australia's unique multiculturalism and landscape.

The works presented in *Violent Salt* reflect on a social, physical and geographical landscape that has been witness to violence and oppression. It questions how we can repair deep wounds, re-connect across culture and assert and celebrate cultural identities meaningfully and transformatively.

The featured artists are Abdul Abdullah (NSW), Vernon Ah Kee (QLD), Richard Bell (QLD), Daniel Boyd (NSW), Megan Cope (QLD), Karla Dickens (NSW), S.J. Norman (VIC), Yhannie Scarce (VIC/SA) and Jemima Wyman (QLD).

Violent Salt is an ArtSpace Mackay Touring Exhibition and includes two major new commissions created especially for the exhibition. It will be at Noosa Regional Gallery from 6 December 2019 to 26 January 2020. Entry to the Gallery is free.

Violent Salt has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

To organise an interview with Abdul Abdullah or Esther Anatolitis, contact:

Jane Morey
Morey Media
t: 02 9929 9922
e: info@moreymedia.com.au