

# A neighbourhood endures

## Woolloomooloo's vivid stories and art revisited in 25th Biennale

Story MERCEDES MAGUIRE

**T**ake a walk through Woolloomooloo today and you will no longer see the migrant markets selling fresh seafood and produce. You also won't see the waterside workers making their way home after a tough day on the wharves, or the children playing on the street outside their social housing homes.

A tough working class suburb for much of the 20th century, Woolloomooloo may have changed in the past few decades with five-star hotels, high-end waterfront apartments and trendy restaurants moving in. But what you also won't see today is the high rise office towers once planned for the neighbourhood, thanks to resident and union activists who successfully fought against the redevelopment of their beloved neighbourhood.

Scenes depicting Woolloomooloo's working class roots were painted on eight massive murals unveiled in 1982 on the pylons of the eastern suburbs railway viaduct on Cathedral St.

Now, the artists who created those murals more than 40 years ago – Marilyn Fairskye and Michiel Dolk – have revisited the historic public artwork in a newly-commissioned installation at the Art Gallery of NSW as part of the 25th Biennale of Sydney.

The installation features a video mural called Person to Person, which explores the juxtaposition of the suburb's working class roots and its modern-day gentrification, as well as portraits of Woolloomooloo residents shown on two illuminated bus shelters on Bourke St between the pylons where the historic murals are featured.

"Colin James, the housing advocate, sought to put architecture at the social service of people. He and local residents



Workers installing the History of the Waterfront mural in 1982; and the BLF Green Bans mural.

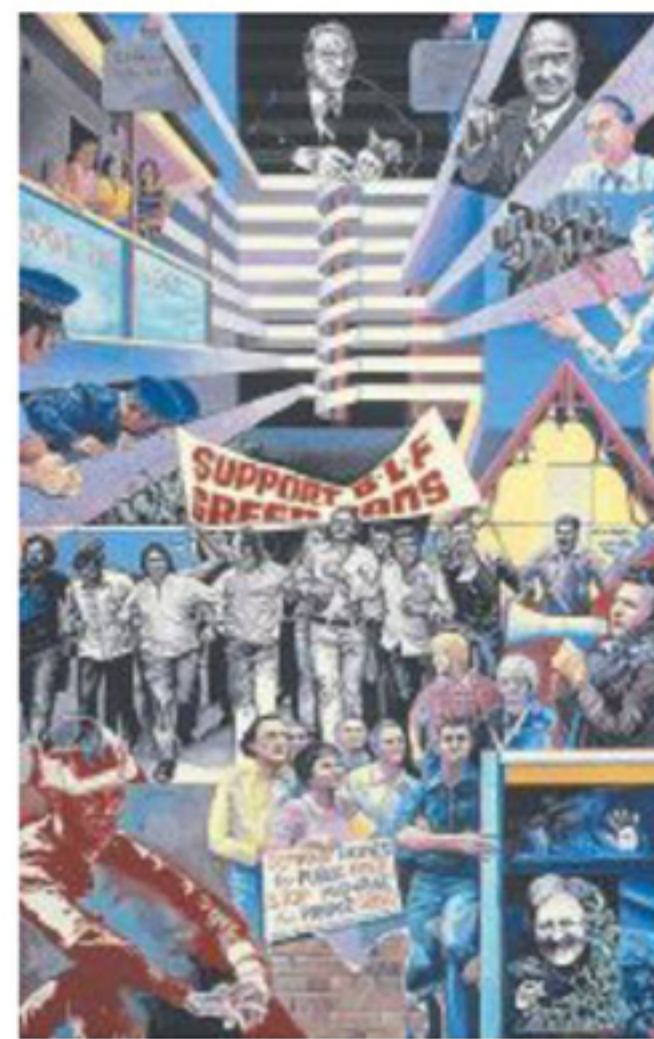
expected the same from us as artists," says Fairskye of the origins of the historic murals. "So, we tried to put public art at the service of local popular history, to commemorate the people and recent events that reshaped Woolloomooloo.

"We translated photographic documentation and graphic source material into painting a montage of portraits and events that unfold as stories. For the history murals, painting was the only durable option but we didn't expect these to last beyond a decade or two at the most.

"By putting art to social ends, the murals did succeed in becoming part of the social identity and place of Woolloomooloo."

There are eight historic murals which depict important elements of Woolloomooloo's history.

**Mural 1 - History of the Waterfront:** Depicts the workers and unions of the wharves.



**Mural 2 - Wallamullah Place of Plenty:** Highlights the area's Indigenous past and present.

**Mural 3 - Victoria Street:** Shows those who resisted development, such as Juanita Nielsen.

**Mural 4 - A Balcony View 1882-1982:** Portrays a century of vibrant street life.

**Mural 5 - FEDFA Green Bans:** Focuses on the Federated Engine Drivers and Fireman's Association's involvement in the Green Bans.

**Mural 6 - BLF Green Bans:** Illustrates the Builders' Labourers Federation support in the Green Bans.

**Mural 7 - Passing Through Customs:** Commemorates the immigrant contribution.

**Mural 8 - Women in Woolloomooloo:** Depicts the women of the suburb.

"Some aspects of Woolloomooloo's past remain today, like generations of past residents, some Indigenous residents and there is still some public housing left," says Kate Denny, a heritage consultant with architectural firm Lucas Stapleton Johnson and Partners.

"But, through gentrification, you have lost a lot of the diversity that was once there, like a lot of Sydney.

"But Woolloomooloo is interesting because there were so many diverse stories in one little pocket, a lot of different people and cultures were brought together on the waterfront. There's one quite moving story attached to the murals; there's an image of a young girl and her family on one of them, and she's still living in Woolloomooloo but she's homeless."

Dolk, who lived on Victoria St in 1975 when Juanita Nielsen went missing, says Woolloomooloo still retains a community spirit. "Though Woolloomooloo today is a very different place from the 1970s and 80s, maybe more fragmented, it remains a place where working people, pensioners and those supported by welfare, the homeless and hostel residents continue to coexist," he says. "Forms of social solidarity persist among neighbours."

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## SUBURBANTALES

### The 25th Biennale of Sydney

The 25th Biennale of Sydney – the largest contemporary art event of its kind in Australia – will run from March 14 to June 16 across five major exhibition sites: White Bay Power Station, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Chau Chak Wing Museum at the University of Sydney, Campbelltown Arts Centre and Penrith Regional Gallery. This year's theme is Rememory

and will explore the intersection of memory and history as a means of revisiting, reconstructing and reclaiming histories that have been erased or repressed. "The Biennale of Sydney is a platform for art and ideas that inspire, challenge and connect us," says Biennale of Sydney CEO Barbara Moore. See [biennaleofsydney.art](http://biennaleofsydney.art)



Juanita Nielsen.

### Juanita Nielsen

When conservationist and heiress, Juanita Nielsen, walked into Kings Cross nightclub The Carousel Club on July 4, 1975, it was the last time she would ever be seen. To this day, the body of the woman who fought against the development of Victoria St has not been found. Nielsen, who was also a newspaper publisher, opposed the large-scale bulldozing proposed by developer Frank Theeman on Victoria St and nearby Woolloomooloo and it has long been believed this opposition was behind her death. Her disappearance has also long been linked to underworld boss, Abe Saffron, who owned The Carousel Club. But the case remains cold.