

***Spirit Wave* exhibition**  
**Opening Night speech by Tom Isaacs**  
**Thursday 4 May 2023**

Thank you, Linda.

Good evening everyone,

In an exhibition on contemporary spirituality in Australia I believe it is vitally important that we acknowledge and pay our respects to the traditional owners of the lands on which we live and that we acknowledge the enduring physical and spiritual connections that our First Nations people have with Country. Thank you Susan for your acknowledgement of the Gamaragal people. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where I live—the Wallumedegal people—and the lands where I work—the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I pay my respects to first nations elders, past, present and emerging.

Next, I'd like to thank the team here at Art Space on the Concourse for all their hard work putting together this show. Thank you to Matthew, Zac, Simone, and my fellow Spirit Wave artist Miguel for installing the show. Thank you Miriam for all your admin and curatorial assistance. Thank you to both Rachiel Kiang and Imogen Mason for our wonderful catalogue essays. And of course a big thank you to our curator Cassandra.

I'd also like to congratulate my fellow artists on their amazing work in this show. It's a pleasure to be exhibiting alongside you all.

And lastly, I'd like to thank Willoughby City Council for their ongoing support for the arts.

My relationship with the spiritual has been somewhat circuitous. I was initially raised Catholic, but resisted strenuously. When I was in high school I started attending a Christian youth group with some of my friends and eventually committed my life to God. I had a difficult and inconsistent faith, and I would often express my complex relationship to God and faith through art, but I was fighting a losing battle. When I renounced my faith I went through a period of hardcore atheism; perhaps a necessary stage in my apostasy. But over the years my lack of faith has mellowed into a gentle, agnostic curiosity.

Is there something more to the world and life than what I experience with my senses? Invisible flows of energy, unseen vibrations, complex webs of relationships, or spiritual beings? Is there something greater than myself? Are we part of a larger cosmic or divine reality? I don't know the answer, but they're good questions.

Contemporary spirituality in Australia is informed by a number of different cultures, religions and traditions. People have migrated here from all around the world, bringing their various cultural and religious beliefs with them, many of which are represented in this exhibition. Over time those different worldviews have entered into dialogue with one another, morphing and shifting,

sometimes harmoniously and at other times clashing. Our contemporary worldviews have also been shaped by economic, political, social, technological, and generational changes.

This exhibition brings together artists of diverse backgrounds, each of whom brings their own relationship to spirituality and their unique ways of communicating that relationship through art.

Some of the artists in the exhibition have explicitly drawn from recognisable religious and spiritual traditions in unconventional, and sometimes subversive, ways. In his installation *Aggro and Onkgray (Demon study: model pit bull)*, Kalanjay Dhir has combined the South and Southeast Asian tradition of the Dvarapala or door guardian with the pitbull—a symbol of aggression and toxic masculinity. Edwina Green is a proud First Nations artist and her piece *I'll Carry My Own Water* combines new media elements with Bull Kelp, a material traditionally used by her Trawlwoolway ancestors to make water carriers. Kathie Najar's work *Red Gum Infinity Pool* evokes Islamic geometric art, but is generated from her watercolour painting of a river red gum. Tym Yee has represented three figures from Chinese folklore, obscured to different degrees, and given them the cheeky title *Huey, Dewey, and Louie* taken from popular culture. My performance piece *Pieta* references traditional Catholic depictions of the Virgin Mary, expressing desire on the one hand, but also questioning the origins and nature of spirituality.

This exhibition also includes artists that have worked with more esoteric or syncretic forms of spirituality. Beric Henderson's *Tree of Life* is an exploration of the mystery of life and the interconnectedness of all things. Blending scientific and esoteric worldviews this painting evokes both the phylogenetic interest in mapping evolutionary trees and the spiritual symbolism of the tree of life. Aaron McGarry's work *sumbállō* plays on the Ancient Greek origins of the word symbol, throwing together scientific, sculptural and mystical forms from various points in human history.

Several artists in the exhibition have made work which evokes a vague or nebulous spirituality characterised by unseen vibrations and connections. Gary Dermendjian's work *sensorium* is in the reflection pool outside. The rods in the water respond to imperceptible movements in the water and air around it, evoking sensitivity to unseen flows of energy. Similarly, Jo Ernst's *Orb* captures ideas of impulses, frequencies and vibrations through the accumulation of marks. It really reminds me of the image of a blackhole that was released last year. Miho Watanabe's work is an investigation of Between-ness and the reciprocal flow of energy that may take place across the gap between two points in time or between two subjects. Miho has invited you to use the blank wall behind her work as a space to explore your own 'Between-ness'.

Lastly, we have artists that are working from a non-religious understanding of the spiritual as an ethical or philosophical category. For Carla Gottgens spirituality seems to be a question of ethics, how should we behave in the world? Her work, *Voyage of the Lost Children*, powerfully evokes the vulnerability of children as little boats tossed on the waves of life. But as you look into the work you may see your face reflected in the black waters. At one level you are implicated; you are a part of the sea of life that others experience and you can make it better or worse for them. At another level, you are also a little boat journeying through life. Miguel Olmo has approached the question of the spiritual from a Humanist perspective, using his art as a tool of inquiry. For me, there is a really

productive discord between the title of the work *meaninglesswithoutfinality* and the way that the text appears to recede into the infinite.

All of these artists have approached the question of spirituality in a highly personal and idiosyncratic fashion. The great thing about art is that it can engage with these issues in a way that is explorative, critical, and generative. It can provoke us to think about our own relation to the spiritual. These works are highly individual responses to spirituality, but they also embody a desire to communicate, to connect. We are all co-creating the world that we live in, and communication with each other is a vitally important part of this co-creation. Through communication, which involves both speaking and listening, we can take note of the diverse experiences and needs of the people we live alongside. And, hopefully, we can create a world that is better for all of us.

Thank you all for coming and hearing what we have to say. Be good to each other!