



THEME 1.

ART: PERSONAL IDENTITY:

3 ARTISTS: ABDULLAH, COPE,
RICHARDSON



PERSONAL IDENTITY ART

All three artists featured in this theme are highly motivated by personal experiences based on their cultural origins or social and political issues that impact on their lives.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: *DAVID*, sculpture

Megan Cope: *RE FORMATION part 3, DUBBAGULLEE* sculpture

Elvis Richardson: *ELVIS RICHARDSON*, digital drawing

ABDUL-RAHMAN ABDULLAH

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah is an Australian born Muslim who took up his artistic direction late after already having an establishing career as a highly skilled model maker. It was personal issues in his private life, particularly relating to his faith that prompted his move towards art. He needed to find a way to express the feelings which he had carried since his late childhood.

Above: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, *David*, 2018. Photo: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah.
Previous page: Baldasso Cortese Architects, *Tarrawarra Abbey*, (detail) 2016. Photo: Peter Clarke, Latitude.

The work: DAVID

What we see

Abdullah used concrete as his medium for this monumental portrait bust of his friend David as he felt the density of this stone-like material captured some of the strength and uncompromising nature needed by a professional boxer. His friend had been fighting in the ring for 25 years and now owns the boxing gym where Abdullah did his Qantas Award residency. Abdullah has captured all the evidence of David's violent past in his angular features and the boxers trademark broken nose.

The masculinity of this portrait bust is subtly countered by the delicacy of the gold chain around *David's* neck.

David is placed on a plinth to be at eye level looking into the face of the viewer as he would face off his opponent before their fight. Captured staring into the face of his future combatant David, known as '*The Iceman*' in the ring, adopted this steely eyed technique, used by all boxers to break down their opponent's confidence.

The Artist

Born in 1977 in Port Kembla NSW Abdul-Rahman now lives and works in Perth, Western Australia. Primarily a sculptor and installation artist, he is motivated by people and experiences from his own personal history and identity as a Muslim living in Australia. He grew up in a family with a seventh generation Australian father (who converted to Islam) and a Malay mother.

On leaving school Abdullah was involved in a range of creative careers as an illustrator, designer and model maker before enrolling in an art course at university level. Graduating from Curtin University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2012, followed by an Art and Design Masters' degree at UNSW (University of New South Wales) in 2015-17 finally Abdullah felt comfortable calling himself an artist.

"The idea of having a different set of values, identity and beliefs to nearly everybody around me was just part of my existence growing up and it took a while before that sense of difference really became apparent."

www.antidote.org.au/artists/abdul-rahman-abdullah

From this sense of 'being different' as he grew older Abdullah used the term 'outsider' to describe this feeling. As his career developed his artworks ask his audience to have empathy for "the outsider" and to develop understanding and tolerance when confronting difference. When asked the question

"If you could change one thing about the world today, what would it be?" He replied "Give everyone a little dose of empathy"

www.antidote.org.au/artists/abdul-rahman-abdullah

Abdullah explores many positive aspects and challenges of identity through his courageous art which he hopes will deconstruct social stereotypes and cliches.

Context for the work

Abdullah won the Qantas Foundation Encouragement of Australian Contemporary Art Award in late 2013 which allowed him to take up an artist residency in 2014 at the local Gloveworx Boxing Gym. With his mentor, artist Richard Lewer, who at times was also his sparring partner, he developed new works centred around his experiences at the gym.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah was no stranger to the environment of a boxing gym as his younger brother was a trained boxer in an earlier career before also committing himself to a full time artistic career as a painter and photographer. Abdul-Rahman acknowledges the support of his brother, Abdul Abdullah, who helped him successfully complete his residency project at the Gloveworx Boxing Gym.

Before becoming a full-time artist Abdul-Rahman Abdullah developed his model making skill by crafting natural forms from a variety of materials. He adopted this skill to create very life-like humans and animals for other art works like *“Wednesday’s Child”* and *“In the name”* where realism of the forms has been at times quite confronting for viewers.

In his sculpture *David* Abdul-Rahman Abdullah combines two important aspects of his family’s life; boxing and creating art. It was in the environment of a local boxing gym that Abdullah was inspired to make concrete sculptures of the fighting men and their equipment used to harden their bodies and minds to face physical punishment in the ring. *David* pays homage to the men who engage in this masculine sport and acknowledges one of Australia’s national sporting cultures. David was a professional boxer for 25 years and a member of Abdullah’s extended family.

Methods and materials

Abdullah created a bust portrait of his friend’s head using modelling clay, which was allowed to harden. A mould was then made from the original clay bust of David’s head. Abdullah poured fluid concrete into the mould and allowed it to harden, thus recording the clay details of his portrait sculpture. His friend’s mental strength and muscular head and shoulders show along with the detailed gold chain worn by David around his neck. Later Abdullah highlighted the cast chain with gold enamel paint.

Artist’s statement

Abdullah is driven by his responsibility to capture and record the truth about what he sees in the world around him as stated in his own words

“Some projects remind me how big the world outside of art really is and it’s so important to reflect the reality of that world in the work we do.”

As part of his Qantas Award residency he wanted to experience first hand what it was like to fight in the ring before he produced his suite of artworks , one of the pieces was his portrait bust *David*.

“The impact of being hit is like two forces coming together. You see stars and taste metal in your nose; it’s a very strange sensation, not pleasant at all. As long as you’re fit enough, it becomes a mind game; an exhausting out-of-body mind game that feels mostly like throwing up.”

www.antidote.org.au/artists/abdul-rashman-abdullah

¹Margaret Hancock Davis Interview with Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, JamFactory CONCRETE: ART DESIGN ARCHITECTURE exhibition Catalogue 2019

Other perspectives

“While his own experiences as a Muslim Australian of mixed ethnicity provide a starting point, Abdullah negotiates shared understandings of individual identity, new mythologies and marginalised outlooks in a multicultural context. Living and working in rural Western Australia, Abdullah provides a unique perspective across intersecting and disparate communities.”

<http://abdulrahmanabdullah.com/home.html>

“Whether it is the sweat of the boxing gym or a stack of books found in his father’s garage, everyday things from Abdullah’s local environments abound. In his hands these mundane objects and sites become invested with the potency of stories yet to come.”

Margaret Hancock Davis, interview with Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, JamFactory CONCRETE: ART DESIGN ARCHITECTURE Exhibition Catalogue 2019

ART QUESTIONS: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah

1 CULTURAL

Describe how Abdullah’s culture has influenced his artwork.

2 PERSONAL/SUBJECTIVE

Select and explain aspects of Abdullah’s personal life that have contributed to his current artworks.

3 FORMAL/STRUCTURAL

Research the range of materials this artist has used in his artistic career and evaluate the suitability of the material choice for his *David* sculpture.

4 CONTEMPORARY/POSTMODERN

Describe the advantages of Abdullah’s choice of a construction material like concrete for his sculpture instead of working with more traditional materials like wood or stone.

Links to begin your research

www.antidote.org.au/artists/abdul-rashman-abdullah

<http://abdulrahmanabdullah.com/home.html> ,

<http://abdulrahmanabdullah.com/section/393483-Qantas-Award.html>

Video: <http://sculptureatbathers.com/artist/abdul-rahman-abdullah/>, 5 minutes

Sources:

Australia Art Monthly April 2015 Number 278, *Lover, fighter* by Robert Cook, pages 25-31

CONCRETE: ART DESIGN ARCHITECTURE Exhibition Catalogue, JamFactory, 2019



Above: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, Hand building and sculpting *David*. Photo: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah.



Above: CONCRETE: ART DESIGN ARCHITECTURE installation, JamFactory Adelaide. Photo: Rhiannon Slatter.



Megan COPE

Megan Cope is an Indigenous artist whose cultural origins are the basis of her artworks. Cope has investigated the historical colonial treatments of Australia's First People and the injustices which are often overlooked and perpetuated by the white population.

The work: RE FORMATION PART 3 (DUBBAGULLEE)

What we see

Megan Cope's **'midden'** for this exhibition is not made of natural shells but perfectly crafted cast shells made of concrete and **ilmenite**. It is a smaller example of Cope's original 2017 installation called *RE FORMATION part 3 (Dubbagullee)* and it still conveys her original concept of destruction and loss.

The Artist

Born in 1982 Brisbane, Cope is from the Quandamooka region of North Stradbroke Island in South East Queensland. She now works out of Melbourne but is a regular visitor to family on North Stradbroke Island. Cope is an installation artist, video maker and painter who creates her artworks in or around specific indigenous sites. She examines and **debunks** colonial misinformation about indigenous peoples and exposes methods used by colonists to acquire her people's traditional and sacred places.

Context for the work

As an Indigenous woman Megan Cope wants to tell truth her artworks. The core of her practice is to reveal the constant and unashamed acts by colonial administrators of ignoring all signs of **pre-colonial** Aboriginal settlements. Her art alludes to the systematic destruction of sites which were of social and economic importance to local indigenous populations. Another aspect that concerns her is the fact that existing Aboriginal place names are never acknowledged. The ignoring of existing site names by early settlers was another part in the process of removing all signs of original ownership of their newly acquired land.

Above: Megan Cope, RE FORMATION part 3 (Dubbagullee), 2017. Photo: Felicity Jenkins

Throughout the Sydney Harbour region there once existed extensive shell mounds (middens), hard waste from important locally sourced foods, built up through continuous habitation by indigenous people who originally occupied the area for thousands of years. One such midden was located at Dubbagullee, the Gadigal name for the peninsula now known as Bennelong Point. Today this site is the home of the Sydney Opera House.

In her 2017 installation *FORMATION part 3 (Dubbagullee)* Cope recreated destroyed middens which once existed on that site. The destruction of this sacred site by white settlers was to collect the mound of seafood shells for burning to create lime powder (**quiklime**). This essential component of cement was used in the construction of many of Sydney's famous landmark colonial buildings. In this 2017 exhibition Cope's 12,000 hand-made concrete shells are mounded on a bed of fine black ilmenite, to 'return' the lost midden back to its original form and setting.

In a more recent version Cope mounded her concrete shells on a bed of **copper slag**, a bi-product of copper extraction. In this way Cope places the blame on mining companies as being responsible for the decimation of many Indigenous sacred sites. In making such a vast number of shells Cope was aided by individuals who, like herself, mourn the loss of their important Indigenous sites at the hands of early colonial settlers. A great irony for Cope is that the Sydney Opera House is constructed of forms reminiscent of the shells that once were an important part of that site.

Methods and materials

To make the many hundreds of shells needed to recreate her 'midden' installation, Cope hand-cast her shells by pouring concrete into moulds cast from real shells. Once the concrete had set her 'fake' shells were removed from their moulds now much heavier replicas of the original natural specimens.



Above: Megan Cope, RE FORMATION part 3 (Dubbagullee), 2017. Photo: Felicity Jenkins. Megan Cope. Photo: Dominique Eliot.

Artist's statements

"In the arts there is this assumption that Aboriginal people are getting all this attention and more funding than what's available for non indigenous artists. I guess Aboriginal people need to always have a conversation about who we are and where we're going and what's important to us, what kind of works we are going to make and constantly challenge the colonial framework."

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/artist-mrgan-cope-takes-a-fresh>

*"I'm not limited to particular forms or material. In lots of ways I'm a **conceptual artist** and the things that are paramount to or at the forefront of my practice are issues relating to identity, history, politics and, in particular, Aboriginal people's **disposition** in Australia. For me it's more important that the material most accurately **articulates** the point of what I am trying to address or discuss in the work."*

<http://artguide.com.au/megan-cope>

Other perspectives

"Cope thinks of middens as a form of 'Aboriginal architecture'. They are man-made structures that trace a record of occupation and culture over many centuries, debunking the colonial claim that Australia was Terra nullius or unoccupied territory."

<http://thisisnofantast.com/exhibition/the-national-new-australian-art/>

*"Megan Cope has a diverse practice that investigates issues relating to identity, the environment and mapping practices... and through her art, explores **decolonising** methodologies which have become a primary concern in her work."*

<http://www.metroarts.com.au/artist/megan-cope/>

Glossary

Articulates: to speak in clear, distinct messages or speech.

Conceptual artist: an artist who creates artworks where the idea (concept) behind the work is more important than the finished art object.

Copper slag: a bi-product or residue left after the smelting of copper ore

Debunks: exposing the falseness or hollowness of an (idea or belief)

Decolonising: withdrawing from(a colony) leaving it independent.

Dispossession: to deprive someone of property, land or possessions, to eject.

Ilmenite: a black titanium-iron oxide mineral found in igneous rocks and mineral sands.

Midden: a heap of ashes, dung or refuse often associated with past human occupation.

Pre-colonial: before the beginning of English colonial rule in Australia, ie before 1778.

ART QUESTIONS: Megan Cope

1 CULTURAL

Identify and describe cross-cultural influences in Cope's art works.

2 PERSONAL/SUBJECTIVE

Explain some of Cope's life experiences that impacted on her developing career. Use specific art work as examples to support your information.

3 FORMAL/STRUCTURAL

Describe how and why Cope used industrial materials and concrete, to recreate ancient ritual sites.

4 CONTEMPORARY/POSTMODERN

Describe how Cope comments on contemporary issues through her artworks.

Links and sources to begin your research

<http://thisisnofantast.com/exhibition/the-national-new-australian-art/>

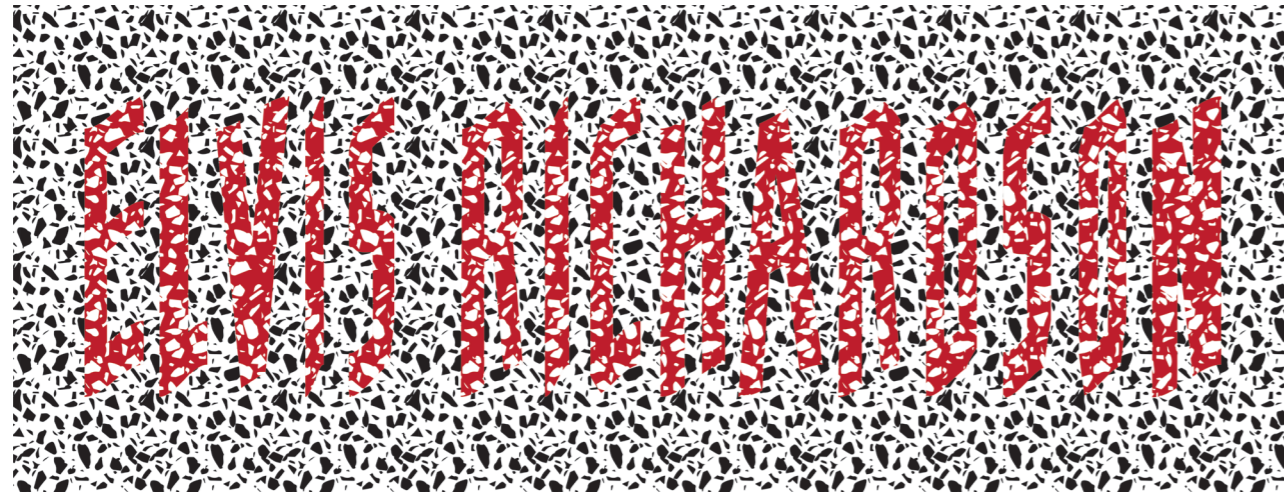
<http://artguide.com.au/megan-cope>

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/artist-mrgan-cope-takes-a-fresh>

<http://runaway.org.au/invisible-agency-an-interview-with-megan-cope/>

Source:

CONCRETE: ART DESIGN ARCHITECTURE Exhibition Catalogue, JamFactory, 2019



Elvis RICHARDSON

Elvis Richardson's personal commitment is to achieve greater equality for women artists, particularly in the highly competitive local and international art worlds. Her art works explore this theme by commenting on how women artists struggle to be recognised.

The work: ELVIS RICHARDSON

What we see

Richardson's digital image mimics Los Angeles footpath **plaques** from a popular practice of commemorating famous movie stars on Hollywood Boulevard's *Walk of Fame*. Names and sometimes hand prints of celebrities are recorded in terrazzo and brass, uniformly designed as a soft pink five-pointed star set into a square pavement plaque made in dark grey.

In her plaque Richardson created an image of her own name as a commemorative plaque, as if she too might gain star status as an artist. However, Richardson's plaque is more visually confronting with her choice of colours and style of lettering. Her background is white concrete imbedded with black stones, while her name is in red letter-shapes flecked with black stones. Fine brass lines separate her colours which adds a linear detail in yellow. Although Terrazzo is full of potential for artists, it is more usually a floor finish, cast insitu.

The artist

Born in Sydney in 1965 and now living in Melbourne, Elvis Richardson is well qualified to comment on society through her art practice. She first gained a BFA (Bachelor of Fine Art) from College of Fine Arts, University of NSW IN 1992 and went on to complete a Master of Arts in 1996. Travelling to

Columbia University in New York, USA, she achieved a Master of Fine Arts in 2002.

In addition to working as an artist and academic Richardson writes the blog *The CoUNTess Report*. Initially she was funded to collate and write the *Countess Report* in 2014, which examined gender inequality in Australia's contemporary art scene at the time. By continuing with CoUNTess Report since then, Richardson now presents compiled and collated data about **gender inequality** in the Arts as an online resource.

Context for the work

Elvis Richardson lives and works in a social context she believes is unfair to women artists. Her art works address this situation by highlighting how uncelebrated women artists are in this society. In her *Trophy Art* series Richardson combined a diversity of found materials in strange assemblages to make her feminist statements. Her *Elvis Richardson* plaque, partly inspired by collected media and historic publicity material around Hollywood stars, connects directly to her larger theme of Trophy Art.

Richardson applies a detective-like approach to her collecting for her artwork by foraging for old photographs and mass media images along with old slides from op-shops, eBay and other recycling sources. Her interest in detective stories began at an early age when she started reading famous stories about detectives like Sherlock Holmes, Poirot and Miss Marple.

The items collected are often determined by issues occurring in her own life. They provide clues into unknown people's lives that inspire her own stories, which are later transformed into works of art. Richardson's adult life has been focussed on analysing social concerns such as inequalities experienced by women and girls. She explores career strategies used by artists for creating success and star-status for themselves.

Methods and materials

Richardson casts her terrazzo slabs in a mould. To achieve her detailed coloured surfaces she employs an old technique by which small multi-coloured stones (aggregate) are imbedded into the fresh surface of coloured concrete.

Richardson explores terrazzo's principle characteristic and technique of highlighting the two elements of concrete: **aggregate** and **cement**. Although mixed together (as with grey concrete), terrazzo uses coloured aggregate (chips of coloured glass or marble, or coloured pebbles) mixed with a coloured cement. A coloured aggregate can contrast with its background concrete. For her work *Elvis Richardson* Richardson chose black stones set in white cement for the background to the words of her name made of red concrete, with black chips.

Terrazzo features both the cement and its aggregate as colour opportunities. Most traditional concrete does not feature the aggregate. By jiggling the mix as it sits in a mould, terrazzo's aggregate is deliberately brought to the surface to show against the background colour. When it is set Richardson grinds and polishes her surface to brighten the colour differences; it is this richness that characterises terrazzo. Divider strips often made of brass are used to separate different colours from each other to prevent colours bleeding.

Terrazzo's highly coloured and polished surfaces have a jewel-like quality which is a favourite finish for Richardson; she has used terrazzo continuously throughout her career.

Artist statement

As a child Richardson was fascinated with a library book called *Unsolved Crimes of Violence in Australia*.

'I kept this book out of the library for years, when I was about eleven', she says. 'It had the Beaumont children (an unsolved disappearance of three Adelaide children in 1966), all these sorts of things'.

Being adopted I sort of melded these stories together in my mind. When I was growing up I knew other people who were adopted and of course you had the Stolen Generation and that culture of removing people...it was about women as well, you know? It switched on a thing when I was young about what it was to be a women, what could happen to you."

<http://artguide.com.au/elvisrichardson>

Other perspectives

*'In the studio, Richardson moves fluidly between collecting, assembling and crafting. Trophies, both found and made anew, are a recurrent object in her work. Richardson's Trophy Art series utilises a range of strategies including melting down and **replating** found trophies to draw out bodily references. The pristine, electroplated exterior of the trophy dissolves and comes to resemble tired, collapsing flesh. Richardson began casting concrete **plinths** for found trophies until the concrete took over. Her work called 'a tough exterior threatened by an unstable footing' involved creating colourful terrazzo trophies that teetered on too-small stands. The nuances of success and failure in personal and sporting arenas come to the fore—all pomp and ceremony, these **anthropomorphised** awards stand proud with the potential to topple.*

*Terrazzo is the most fabulous form of concrete. Known for its durability, pastel colours and bright stone aggregate, it is **synonymous** with the Hollywood Walk of Fame. With its historic roots in Egyptian and Italian building practices, terrazzo gained favour in Australian domestic architecture from the 1920s to 1950s and many brightly coloured bathrooms in the Australian suburbs still stand as a sparkling reminder of that period. Terrazzo elevates the everyday suburban experience towards Hollywood glamour. In Richardson's hands, it speaks materially to identity, recognition and fame within the visual art industry.*

*Elvis Richardson doesn't claim a signature style; she moves from one project to the next with restless intelligence. If her works begin to line up in a tidy sequential narrative, her instinct for nonconformity forces her to rebel. Resistance also takes the form of **feminist activism**: The CoUNTess—a regal form of Elvis—keeps watch over the visual arts industry by tallying up its gender representation. Like her studio works, The CoUNTess Report involves the act of collecting, questioning who is identified as an artist, and examining the mechanics of recognition.*

Margaret Hancock Davis, CONCRETE: ART DESIGN ARCHITECTURE Exhibition Catalogue, JamFactory 2019

Glossary

Anthropomorphised: a no-human object given human qualities, made human.

Cast in-situ, on-site: concrete poured into a mould or formwork in its final position.

Feminist activism: the struggle by women to achieve social and financial equality with men.

Gender equality: a society in which access to rights and opportunities is unaffected by gender.

Plaque: an ornamental tablet typically of metal, porcelain or wood fixed to a footpath or wall, in commemoration of a person or event.

Plating: fine covering of one metal with another more expensive (silver plating, gold plating) or more robust.

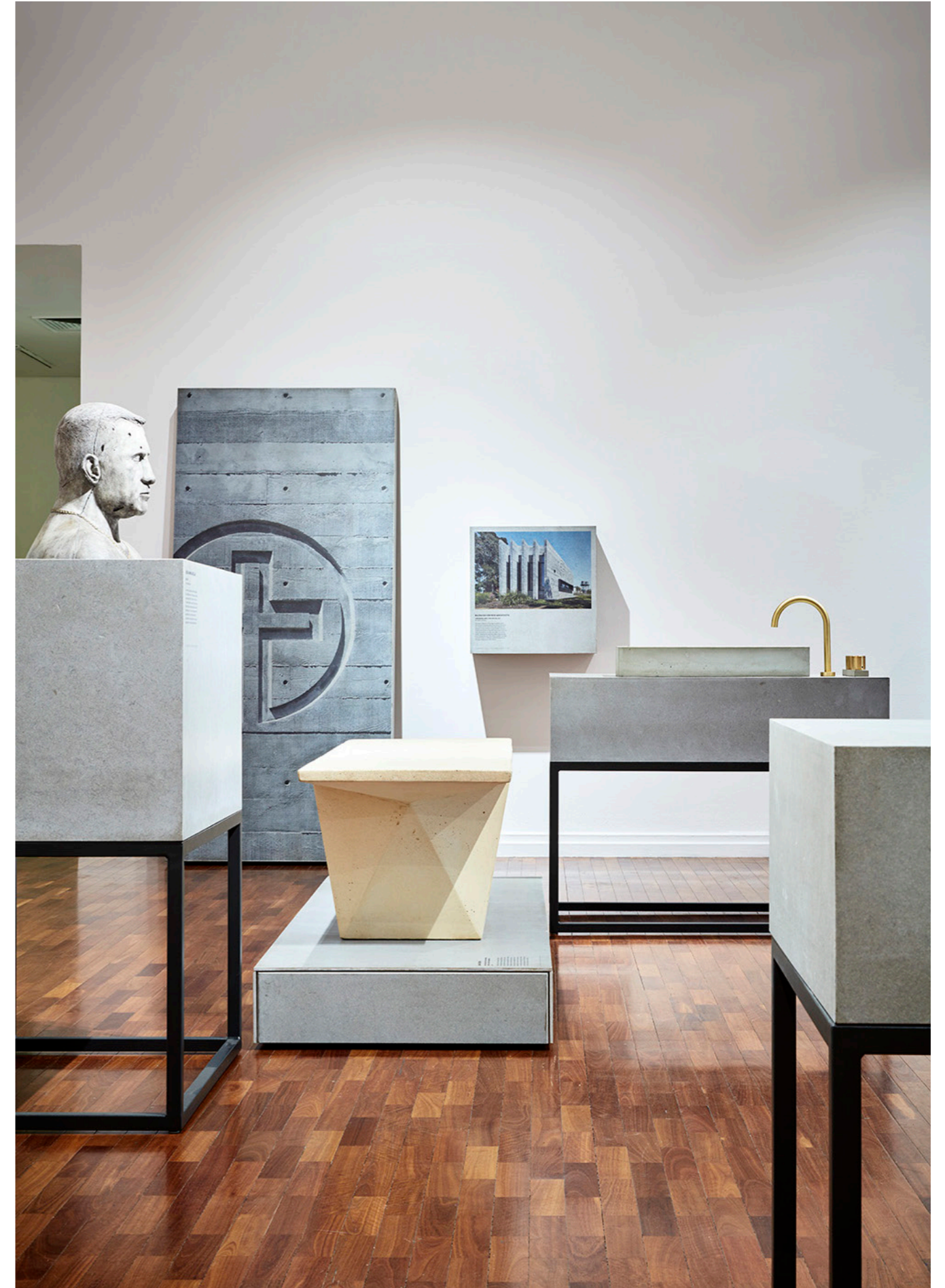
Plinth: a heavy base supporting a statue or vase.

Re-plating: a second or subsequent instance of plating, specifically from the same electrolytic solution.

Stolen Generations: generations of Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their families as children between the 1900s and 1960s, as an act of 'assimilation'. They were taken to other parts of the country and fostered to non-indigenous foster families, or housed in government and church institutions for training as servants for European Australian households.

Synonymous: similar to, having the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language.

Terrazzo: polished coloured cement and concrete floor surface, made with coloured chips of marble or granite embedded into the wet freshly laid surface, thencut and polished when set.



Above: CONCRETE: ART DESIGN ARCHITECTURE installation, JamFactory Adelaide. Photo: Rhiannon Slatter.