

BAZAAR MUSE

Natalie King OAM is one of Australia's foremost curators, who has spent her three-decade career cultivating lifelong relationships with artists. She recently pulled off a rare feat: curating her second Venice Biennale

Words by ALEXANDRA ENGLISH Photographed by JUSTIN RIDLER



Natalie King in her office, which features a Fiona Lynch-designed desk and artworks (clockwise from top left) *Australian Shawl* by The Huxleys, 2017; *YOU'LL NEVER find another WOMAN Like ME* by Nell, 2018; *Carol Jerrems, Mozart St* by Rennie Ellis, 1970; *I made a camera* by Tracey Moffatt, 2003; *Passage* by Tracey Moffatt, 2017; *Shaken up* by Destiny Deacon, 2007 (just seen); *Kylie Arranged: Posing Birthday Version* by Kathy Temin, 2002; and *The Siblings (Kumbakarna)* by Val Wens, 2016.

NATALIE KING AND I ARE INTRODUCING ourselves and settling in for our interview, but I am distracted. She's sitting at her purple Fiona Lynch-designed desk, and behind her is a wall of framed artworks. Either sensing my interest — we are here to talk art, after all — or seeing my eyes darting around her, she points and names: this one is Kaylene Whiskey's *Dolly on Country*; that one is Tracey Moffatt's *I made a camera*; here is Destiny Deacon's *Shaken up*, which features King's son, Woody; and there is Yuki Kihara's *Moana Lisa (after da Vinci)*. There are others — by Nell, Nan Goldin, Val Wens and more.

As one of Australia's leading curators, who received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2020 for “services to the contemporary visual arts”, of course King has applied her practice to her office wall, highlighting some of the most significant artist-curator relationships of her career. Since 2017, King has been an enterprise professor of visual arts at the University of Melbourne's art school, the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA). The university introduced the senior academic position a year earlier to strengthen the institution's connection with industry and business. It's easy to see why she's the woman for the job: King has spent three decades working in multiple roles in Australia's art scene, including chief curator of Melbourne Biennial Lab, co-curator of the 2014 TarraWarra Biennial, visual arts reporter for the ABC, and a mentor at Mentor Walks for Women. In November, she will be a curatorial contributor to the Experimenter Curators' Hub in India.

For King, though, her career has not been about job titles. It's the building of relationships with artists — the lifelong kind in which your baby even appears in an artwork — that matter. The word ‘curator’ comes from the Latin *cūrāre*, a verb meaning “to take care of”. King has turned the etymology into her modus operandi. “It's a very active role, very much intertwined with the notion of care,” she explains as she holds up the book she's currently reading, *The Care Manifesto*. “[I am there] to care for artists' ideas and their imaginations, rather than [focusing on] their output.”

Some of King's most significant artist-curator relationships are with First Nations artists. In addition to Whiskey, Deacon and Moffatt, King has worked with Michael Cook, Michael Riley and Christian Thompson. She also had an ongoing co-curatorial collaboration with Djon Mundine. The likelihood of these relationships not only being instigated but also flourishing and lasting is something King has been thinking about lately. She was born in 1966, far from any Indigenous culture, growing up in a Jewish household in Melbourne's Balwyn North, where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations shrank from 0.06 and 0.03 per cent, respectively, in the 1971 census to 0.02 and 0 per cent, respectively, by 1981.

Each half of King's artist-curator relationships has seemingly so little in common with the other's lived experience, and yet, here she is. “I have been thinking, *How is it that I have worked so closely with Aboriginal artists? How do two people from very different cultural backgrounds and values come together?*” King posits, before adding that she thinks she's figured it out: it's the politics of difference, she reasons, “that ignites something special”. King, a voracious reader, also has on her desk a copy of *To Become Two*, by her VCA colleague Alex Martinis Roe. “She writes about ‘solidarity-in-difference’ — a way of being and acting together that does not demand consensus or same identity,” King explains. “She says it involves ‘a very attentive approach to interpersonal relationships, where a love, care and respect for the difference and singularity of the one you have a relationship with, as well as a true value for your own difference.’”

While embracing their differences, King did find something in common with the photographer Destiny Deacon. The pair met in 1994 at one of King's first exhibitions, *Bad Toys*, where she included one of Deacon's works. As King told *Tonic* magazine in 2021, “We talked about how we are such an unlikely match because I'm from a Jewish

migrant background and Destiny is the daughter of an Aboriginal activist,” she said. “What binds us is a history of genocide, a sense of humour and a commitment to family and community.” Nearly 30 years later, King tells me, they've “forged a lifelong friendship. We've travelled everywhere from Tokyo to Taiwan together.”

King's relationships double as career highlights. Take Tracey Moffatt. King long admired the photographer and video artist's work and featured Moffatt in a 2004 group exhibition called *Supernatural Artificial* in Tokyo. From there, they “formed an alliance”, and, in 2017, King curated Moffatt's exhibition for the Venice Biennale, titled *My Horizon*. Moffatt was the first solo Indigenous artist to represent Australia at the world's most prestigious art fair — and it was a hit. In the lead-up, King worked closely with Moffatt. “My role shifts depending on the needs of the artist,” King explains. Moffatt had an overwhelming amount of work ahead of her — she needed to create two new photographic sequences and two new films. So King shifted gears. “The biggest gift I could give her was time, so I managed a lot of the white noise around Venice,” she explains. She also produced and edited the accompanying anthology of essays.

In 2021, King pulled a rare double act: she curated her second Venice Biennale exhibition, this time with Yuki Kihara, who was the first transgender *Fa'afafine* indigenous Pacific artist to represent Aotearoa/New Zealand at the Biennale, with her exhibition *Paradise Camp*. “It's rare for a curator to curate two Venice Biennales because they're epic, unremitting, exhausting — but also exhilarating,” King says. She pursued Kihara and presented the idea of entering the

Biennale. “I was a fan girl,” King says. “I reached out to her on social media, and she was resistant at first, but with some persistence, we forged a duo.” It was another roaring success. More than half a million people visited the Biennale, including Tilda Swinton, who saw Kihara's exhibition and wept. *Paradise Camp* has been touring since 2021 and is currently on display at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum until December 23. “I'm proud that we could continue to bring audiences from the Global South to see *Paradise Camp*,” King says. As with Moffatt, King edited

and produced an accompanying book: part exhibition catalogue, part monolith, ensuring *Paradise Camp* exists beyond the closing date. “It's always important to think about what might happen after the Venice Biennale because it's such a peak,” she says.

Writing books about artists is another aspect of King's practice — an act of care for fans who want more of the creatives they love. She's interviewed Ai Wei Wei, Bill Henson and Tacita Dean, to name a few. “Hearing an artist's story is endlessly fascinating. What is their mythology? What are they reading? What films are they watching? Sometimes [these things] are challenging to translate into an exhibition setting, which is about tangible artwork,” she says.

One recent interview turned out to be more revealing than she had anticipated. King had travelled to the remote, closed community of Indulkana, in the APY Lands in South Australia, to visit Kaylene Whiskey at Iwantja Arts centre. Whiskey, who incorporates pop culture icons such as Dolly Parton and Cher into her paintings of life in Indulkana, is largely non-verbal. “I went to visit her thinking I would interview her, but the result was actually sitting beside her for three days, watching her paint and making her cups of tea,” King says. “It was a profound experience to be in proximity to an artist at the time of making. [In cities], studio visits are more about looking at an artist's private studio, but this one was about listening and watching, and the arts centre is very much infiltrated with daily life — there were dogs running around, music, tea,” she says. It's an experience that sums up King's curatorial philosophy perfectly: “It's a very dynamic and exuberant way of working side-by-side,” she says, “and there was such a sense of togetherness.”

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Hair and makeup by Ashleigh Carpenter at Hart & Co. Justin Ridler is also at Hart & Co.