

# Arts

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## 'Fabulous 50' named and framed

Don't expect a stuffy, historical exhibition, writes Steve Meacham.

They're "the fabulous 50".

From the thousands of painters, sculptors, photographers, print-makers and digital media artists who studied at the National Art School, they have been chosen to represent the institution's impact on Australian culture over seven decades.

But for those former students miffed at not making the cut, all is not lost.

Steven Alderton, the school's chief executive, said this was the first of an intended series of biennial exhibitions. "We have so many significant alumni, it doesn't stop here."

This time, 55 alumni were invited to contribute a significant work from their private collection to *National Art: Part One*.

No one declined, though five did not make the deadline.

The list of those who donated to the school's permanent collection reads like a who's who of Australian art.

Charles Blackman, 90, has the oldest work - a drawing from 1947 when he was studying at night school. Reg Mombassa and Garry Shead are among four former students who gave 2018 works, the paint barely dry.

Tim Storrier donated a rare sculpture from 2016, revisiting his 2012 Archibald Prize-winning faceless self-portrait, *The Histrionic Wayfarer*.

Guy Warren, still working at 98, is the oldest artist represented; Dani McKenzie, 28, the youngest.

Elisabeth Cummings, Luke Sciberras, Ken Done, Guy Maestri, Lucy Culliton, Fiona Lowry, Kevin Connor and Michael Johnson also contributed.

One noticeable absentee is the



Anne Zahalka with her works at the NAS gallery. Photo: Nick Moir

school's 2008 Fellow, John Olsen ("We have other plans for John," Alderton said).

The school's permanent collection dates to 1843, when drawing classes began at the former Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts.

Archivist Deborah Beck catalogued the collection, which had suffered years of neglect.

This inaugural exhibition is designed to expand that legacy.

"We wanted to celebrate our alumni, and what the NAS has meant to them," Alderton said.

"We asked them to donate work from a pivotal time in their practice. That moment when they said: 'I get it!' That moment of

clarity. Some artists donated works they created while they were here. Others from their formative years."

More than 160 works feature in the show (an average of three an artist), which will benefit present and future students, Alderton said. "It's very

important for students to realise that pivotal moment may come later."

Each different artistic practice, which has been a feature of the school's "studio-based" tradition since it opened, is represented.

But don't expect a stuffy, historical show.

"There were all sorts of thoughtful responses," Judith Blackall, the school's curatorial manager, said.

Todd Fuller donated an animated film about Captain Moonlight, the bushranger who was hanged at

Darlinghurst Gaol - now the site of the NAS.

Then there's Marie McMahon's simple 1984 plea, long before the Mabo ruling (*You are on Aboriginal land*) and Fiona Foley's challenging 2017 photographic

work, *Opiate of opulence*.

One piece that perhaps best sums up the 70-year span of the exhibition comes from Anne Zahalka, Sydney-born daughter of a Jewish Austrian mother and a Catholic Czech father.

Zahalka is best known for her ironic reinterpretations of famous Australian artworks, revisited through the lens of multiculturalism.

"*Outlawed* shows a Muslim woman in a burkini, astride a horse," Blackall said. "It's a challenging take on Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly* series."

*National Art: Part One*, National Art School Gallery. Until October 27.

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