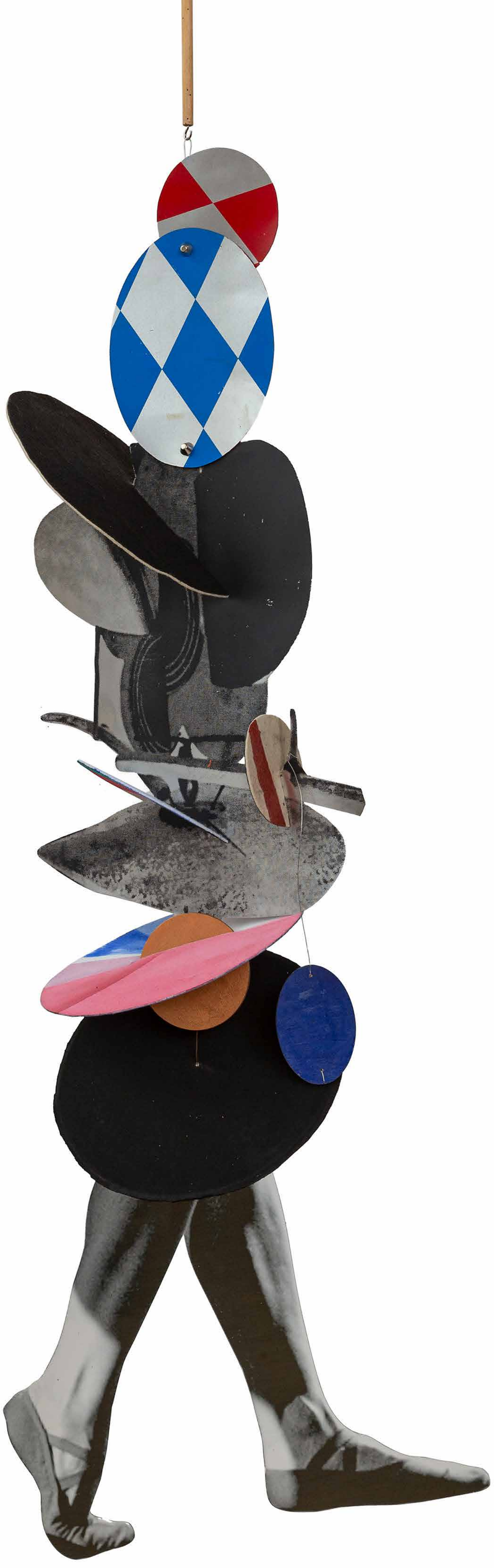


Beyond the Ballerina

9 Oct – 21 Dec 2025

Joel Bray / Zoë Croggon / Anne Ferran / John McCormick and Adam Nash / Sally Smart / Leyla Stevens / Anne Scott Wilson

Front:

Sally Smart, *The Artist's Ballet Puppet (Dancer Brut)#1*. Image courtesy of Sally Smart and Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert

Top to bottom, left to right:

Leyla Stevens, *Patiwangi, the death of fragrance*

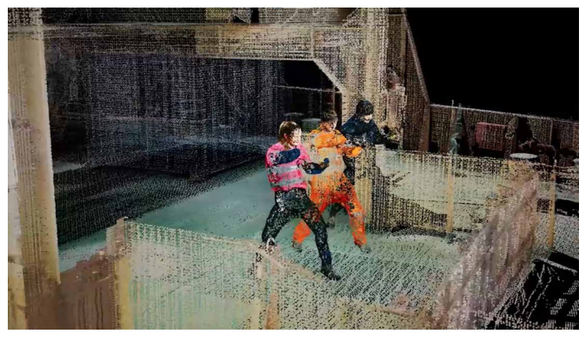
Anne Scott Wilson, *Lift*

Zoë Croggon, *Eclipse*

Joel Bray, *GIRARU GALING GANHAGIRRI (The Wind Will Bring the Rain)*

Anne Ferran, *White against Red #5*

John McCormick and Adam Nash, *Last Dance Orange Roughy*



Ballet, long symbolised by the poised, ethereal figure of the ballerina, carries with it centuries of aesthetic tradition, formal discipline, and symbolic weight. Yet beneath the tulle and tiaras lies a complex history shaped by power, politics, and shifting cultural values. As Jennifer Homans notes in *Apollo's Angels*, ballet's early formation under Louis XIV was not primarily an artistic pursuit but a political tool. At Versailles, the Sun King used dance to manifest his divine authority, placing himself at the center of a choreographed universe.[1] By founding the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661, he laid the foundation for a codified system that translated social hierarchy into movement.

From these formal beginnings, ballet has shown remarkable elasticity. It has travelled far from royal courts, evolving through encounters with modernism, state ideologies, and postcolonial narratives. Institutions like the Chinese National Ballet exemplify this adaptability negotiating national identity, global aesthetics, and political messaging in a single repertoire.[2]

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In the West, ballet's appeal has expanded beyond the professional sphere, finding new life in adult beginner classes across urban and suburban studios. Once reserved for those with 'perfect' bodies and early training, ballet is now approached as a form of wellness, discipline, and even therapy. As Bessel van der Kolk observes in *The Body Keeps the Score*, "Movement is the foundation of awareness."[3] Ballet, in this light, becomes not just a performance tradition but a method of reconnection to the self, to others, and to history.

But to go 'beyond the ballerina' is not to abandon ballet, it is to reframe it. It is to understand ballet as a structure from which contemporary practices have grown, and against which many have also rebelled. One of the most significant moments of such rebellion occurred in the 1960s and 70s, with the rise of conceptual dance practices in the United States. Figures such as Robert Morris and the Trisha Brown Dance Company radically shifted the relationship between movement, space, and meaning. Rejecting the spectacle of virtuosic display, these artists explored task-based movement, gravity, and improvisation foregrounding the dancer's presence as a thinking, sensing body rather than a silent, idealised form.[4]

These frameworks made space for other kinds of bodies and cultural perspectives to enter the dance world. In Australia, contemporary dance and visual art are increasingly informed by Indigenous, migrant, and diasporic practices that bring diverse systems of embodiment to the foreground. These range from First Nations storytelling and ceremony to South Asian classical forms and African diasporic rhythms. What unites these expressions is a recognition that the body is a vessel of memory, identity, and resistance.

This pluralism finds precedent in the early 20th-century innovations of the Ballets Russes. Under Sergei Diaghilev's visionary leadership, ballet became a site of radical interdisciplinary experimentation. Collaborating with painters like Picasso, composers such as Stravinsky, and designers like Coco Chanel, the Ballets Russes shattered classical norms and embraced eroticism, violence, and abstraction. Homans notes that the company "shattered the classical mold," creating a new model of avant-garde performance.

Contemporary choreographers like Crystal Pite and William Forsythe continue this lineage of reinvention. Pite's emotionally charged works echo classical training, while Forsythe deconstructs ballet's spatial logic to reimagine it entirely. Both demonstrate that ballet's legacy is not something to escape, but something to converse with - a fluent structure from which to question, build, and improvise.

Across cultures, classical dance forms share this duality: they are repositories of heritage and instruments of innovation. In Bharatanatyam, the precise use of mudras and rhythm mirrors ballet's technical rigour. In West African traditions, collective movement and oral transmission create a living archive of memory. Ballet's survival must be understood within this wider ecosystem of embodied knowledge.

Joel Bray, a Wiradjuri choreographer and performer, embodies this ethos in works like *Biladurang*, which use contemporary dance to interrogate colonial legacies and explore Indigenous identity. Merging monologue, humour, and traditional movement, Bray reclaims the theatre space as one of cultural renewal and resistance - his body becoming both archive and agitator.[5]

Similarly, Anne Ferran's photographic and installation-based practice interrogates the gaps in Australia's colonial record, especially in relation to women. Her use of empty landscapes and historical sites allows absence itself to speak, suggesting a choreography of silence and forgetting that is both haunting and politically charged.[6]

Leyla Stevens, working in lens-based media and performance, explores the interweaving of ritual, memory, and diasporic identity. In works such as *Labours for Colour*, Stevens examines postcolonial Balinese identity through durational video performance, creating quiet, powerful gestures that recall ballet's ceremonial origins while dismantling its Eurocentric narrative frames.[7]

Zoë Croggon constructs photomontages that splice the human form into built and natural environments. Her work, often drawing from ballet archives, questions the role of the idealised body by reconfiguring it into fragmented, abstract compositions. The ballerina becomes a study in form - disassembled, recomposed, and placed into unexpected terrains.[8]

In the work of John McCormick and Adam Nash, technology becomes a partner in choreography. Blurring the boundaries between dancer and machine, McCormick and Nash's interactive performances use motion capture, robotics, and AI to reimagine presence itself. Here, ballet's technical heritage meets a post-human future, reinterpreted through algorithmic logic and cybernetic motion.[9]

Sally Smart's mixed media installations cut and reassemble the female figure, drawing on ballet, folk dance, and avant-garde theatre. Her works often feature fragmented costumes and limbs, suggesting a disassembled ballerina caught in a matrix of cultural codes. With references to Ballets Russes and Dada, Smart exposes how dance is inscribed by histories of gender, politics, and performance.[10]

Anne Scott Wilson explores embodied memory through video and installation, often capturing slow, repetitive gestures that resist spectacle. Her works consider how the body navigates time and place, creating a meditative counterpoint to ballet's emphasis on precision and elevation. In her *Generation IV Modular Series*, featured in the *Oscilloforms* exhibition at Project8 Gallery, Wilson employs techniques like montage, cutting, and reshaping to transform photographs, emphasizing surfaces and their interaction with light and movement.[11]

This exhibition, Beyond the Ballerina, responds to this expanded field. The works acknowledge ballet's enduring influence - its posture, its discipline, its symbolic resonance but stretch far beyond it. The ballerina appears not just as an icon of tradition, but as a ghost, a question, and a point of departure. Many children in Australia still train in church halls and suburban studios every Saturday morning, chasing a dream that is part fantasy, part cultural inheritance. And every Christmas, generations return to the theatre to watch *The Nutcracker*, enchanted by the music, the snow, and the romance. These rituals, though familiar, are constantly being reinterpreted by the cultures that surround them.

The artists in this exhibition take that inherited vocabulary and remix it through video, performance, sculpture, and installation. Some investigate how surveillance technologies and AI interact with movement, reconfiguring choreography as a dialogue between human and machine. Others draw on street dance, Indigenous performance, or diasporic aesthetics to reframe the very act of moving in space. The influence of ballet is there, but it is layered with contradiction, critique, and transformation.

To go beyond the ballerina is to embrace a wider field of possibility to see the body not as a perfected symbol, but as a living, expressive form shaped by history, culture, and imagination. It is an invitation to move poised, vulnerable, and always becoming.

Dr. Anne Scott Wilson

1 Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010), 5–10.

2 "Chinese National Ballet," *South China Morning Post*, 2024.

3 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 274.

4 Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 145–155.

5 Joel Bray, *Biladurang*, Performance Space, Sydney, 2018.

6 Anne Ferran, *Scenes on the Death of Nature*, Monash Gallery of Art, 2002.

7 Leyla Stevens, *Labours for Colour*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2021.

8 Zoë Croggon, "Collage Works," National Gallery of Victoria, 2016.

9 John McCormick and Adam Nash, *Neuron Conductor*, RMIT Design Hub, 2020.

10 Sally Smart, *The Choreography of Cutting*, UNSW Galleries, 2017.

11 Anne Scott Wilson, *Generation IV Modular Series*, in *Oscilloforms*, Project8 Gallery, 2024. See also: "Texts," Anne Scott Wilson, accessed May 8, 2025, https://www.annescottwilson.com/texts.

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