Highly manicured, parks are underpinned by ideals of social and moral improvement. Paths and boundaries regulate the movement of bodies and “domesticated” vistas are at odds with the wild grasses, climbing vines, and existing natural landscapes. In public parks, landscaping, architecture and modes of social control combine to create heterotopias of colonisation.

Simultaneously, these idealised public spaces provide sites in which alternative narratives can be constructed. A park is not a forest brings together artists with intersectional identities. Their work draws on their own cultural heritage and the contemporary realities of living in the diaspora. Using memory, archives, or digital media, these artists critically engage with performed notions of identity and inherited colonial histories.

Tyian Baker’s Head Party reinterprets customs related to gawai ba’ak (which translates to head hunt in English), a welcoming ceremony that follows a headhunt. Headhunting is a traditional practice among Bidayúh and other Indigenous peoples in Borneo, outlawed by the British in the 19th century. Following the headhunt, a ceremony was held to invite the slain enemy into a long-lasting friendship and to appease the spirits of the dead so that they would safeguard the village longhouse. Drawn from her family’s history as durian farmers, Baker replaces skulls with preserved durian and uses community archives, oral histories, and online resources to fill the gaps found in official archives. Creating part of the work in collaboration with her mother, she reimagines gawai ba’ak in a contemporary context to tell a Western narrative of death, enmity, friendship and warfare.

sion_e has_doubts shares its title with the artist’s Instagram account. The collection of images and videos expose Sione Tuivailala Monū’s own fantasies, feelings and connection to people and place. Monū recreates movie moments through the use of framing, continuity editing, soundtrack, costume and performance. Originally filmed and edited on an iPad and disseminated via Instagram, the artist’s collection of videos is grouped into sections and screened as a four-channel work. When watching these snippets there is a feeling they are mimicking a recently viewed film, soap opera or documentary. Music propels the building tension of each vignette, and is suddenly broken when Monū re-performs a pre-dramatic moment. Across the screens, we see Sione watching Sione, Sione alone and Sione’s intimate encounters with loved ones. The reinterpretation of these moments and social performances are contingent on the brown bodies present in the work.

Claudia Nicholson’s practice examines psychic (relating to the soul or mind) and physical connections to place through multidisciplinary forms of art making including painting, installation, performance, and video. The conceptual enquiries in her work are driven by her position as a Colombian-born artist living in Australia. Her practice addresses the diasporic region, and in addition, connects with the varied experiences of the Australian Indigenous community. Recently her research and art making methodology focuses on memory, collective and individual, embodied and emblems. Nicholson considers how the body remembers, and there are two diametrically or re-enforces biological structures.

In 2005, Santiago won the prestigious Sir John Sulman Prize for her work The Divine, which examines the concepts and principles surrounding faith, creation stories, motherhood, cultural heritage and gender roles. Santiago was also a two-time finalist for the Archibald Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a 2019 Sulman Prize finalist, and was shortlisted for Creative NZ’s 2018 Visual Arts Emerging Fellowship. Santiago received the Sam Whitney Commendation Award at the 2018 Churche Emerging Art Prize at the Institute of Modern Art.

In this wordplay, Nicholson alludes to her own name change from her Colombian name to Claudia Nicholson.

The Nguyễn Collection of Anglo-Australian Arts seeks to invert the power dynamics of colonial collecting and collections. Artist Nguyễn says: How do diasporic communities disrupt the ownership and stewardship of nationalistic and oftentimes problematic materials in their places of resettlement? This collection encourages audiences to play and gain unprecedented access to a selection of loaded museum quality materials. The collection, when opened up, is an opportunity to encourage reinvention and iterative narration of Anglo culture and histories and in turn re-explore national narratives of identity.

Marikit Santiago presents a portrait of the infamous First Lady Imelda Marcos, a well-known collector of footwear and conjugal dictator of the Philippines. With oil and acrylic painting on found cardboard, Santiago depicts Marcos, fierce and powerful, foregrounded by sparring zebras, which featured in the exotic menagerie of her private zoo. During her reign, Marcos created The Calauit Safari Park in 1976 under the guise of conservation of endangered animals in response to the destruction of its natural landscapes. In public parks, landscaping, architecture and modes of social control combine to create heterotopias of colonisation.

From the perspective of her Indigenous Fijian and Anglo-Australian heritage, Salote Tawale explores the idea of the natural within collective systems. Examining through self-performance, Tawale draws on personal experiences of race, class, ethnicity and gender formed by growing up in Queensland Australia.

Tawale completed an undergraduate degree in Media Arts and Masters of Art at RMIT University, Melbourne and a Masters of Fine art and Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. She is currently Associate Lecturer of Screen Arts at Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney.

Sione Tuivailala Monū is an artist of the Tongan diaspora. They live between Canberra and Auckland, New Zealand. Their work and research across the mediums of photography, video, painting, performance and drawing, Monū’s short films are an extension of their Instagram-based video practice and present encounters with everyday dilemmas and cultural conflicts. They explore identity, family and the Pasifika queer experience in the diaspora. Featuring themself and their friends and family, videos cast with their friends and family, videos cast with their friends and family, the videos engage between performative and documentary modes to recall a variety of genres, from home movies and video diaries to satires and soaps.
a park is not a forest, curated by Salote Tawale. SCA Gallery, The University of Sydney 24 March – 30 April, 2022

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Marikit Santiago, Ms Malacañang Series (Imelda), 2020, Acrylic, oil, and pyrography on found cardboard. Courtesy the artist and The Something Machine, Bellport NY.


Sione Tuívailala Monū, sione_has_doubts, 2022. Four-Channel HD Video. Courtesy the artist.