



## **Tarnanthi Artistic Director Nici Cumpston OAM takes on new role as the Director of Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection**

**Adelaide, Australia:** The Art Gallery of South Australia's Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Artistic Director of Tarnanthi, Nici Cumpston OAM today announced that after seventeen years at AGSA, she will take up the position as Director of Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA in May 2025.

A proud Barkandji artist, curator, writer and educator, Cumpston was appointed as the inaugural Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at AGSA in 2008, and, since then, has contributed to the curation of sixteen major exhibitions and accompanying publications. In 2014, she was appointed as the inaugural Artistic Director of Tarnanthi – AGSA's acclaimed platform for contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, which, in 2025, will celebrate its tenth anniversary when it launches on 17 October.

Her leadership and contribution have been recognised with an Order of Australia medal for outstanding service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art (2020), the South Australian Government's Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith Memorial Award (2019), and the South Australian Premier's NAIDOC Award (2013).

Nici Cumpston OAM says, 'I am deeply honoured to be stepping into the role of Director of Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia. I see this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me to extend the work I have been doing for the past seventeen years at AGSA into an international context. I will be

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forever grateful to all the artists I have worked with who have put their faith in me to support them to deliver their outstanding vision. I am excited to continue the relationships I have built across Australia through Tarnanthi and look forward to showcasing their work to international audiences in the US and beyond.'

Acting AGSA Director Emma Fey says, 'Under Nici's direction, Tarnanthi has set a benchmark in best practice with its commitment to working with First Nations artists and communities respectfully, ethically and in culturally appropriate ways. Her contribution to AGSA has been transformative; the growth in scope and scale of AGSA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art collection under Nici's care has positioned AGSA as a leader internationally.'

Chair of AGSA's First Nations Advisory Council Dr Ali Gumillya Baker says, 'We acknowledge Nici's boundless ambition, passion and commitment to celebrating First Nations art and artists in Australia and to positioning Tarnanthi to be the extraordinary success that it is today, ten years on.'

The Hon Andrea Michaels MP, Minister for the Arts says, 'Tarnanthi's international recognition is the result of the excellent programming and relationships fostered by Nici Cumpston OAM and I congratulate her on her new role. She has done an excellent job supporting AGSA to be a leader in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curatorial space and will do a fantastic job sharing that knowledge with the people of Virginia.'

Cumpston will depart for Kluge-Ruhe in March while continuing as Tarnanthi's Artistic Director for the 2025 festival ahead of a nationwide search. Recently appointed as Tarnanthi Producer, Tyme Childs will produce the upcoming festival, with Cumpston's artistic direction. A First Nations woman of Bibbulmun, Palyku, Bunuba, Walmajarri and English heritage, Childs joins AGSA from SA Film Corporation where she worked with First Nations filmmakers and the broader screen sector to raise profiles and foster opportunities.

Tarnanthi presents exhibitions at AGSA and on tour, an art fair, artist talks, performances, workshops, education programs, and the much-anticipated statewide Tarnanthi Festival which is held every two years with the support of Principal Partner BHP. Since its inception, over 2 million people have attended Tarnanthi exhibitions, and 9,373 artists have exhibited their work in Tarnanthi exhibitions across the state, generating \$126.5 million in economic expenditure. Tarnanthi Art Fairs have been attended by more than 95,600 people and more than 6,500 artists have been represented, with \$8.1 million generated in sales and all proceeds going directly to the artists, art centres and Purple House Foundation.

Cumpston will take up the role as Director of Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, which includes more than 3,600 artworks, and is the only museum outside of Australia dedicated to the exhibition and study of Indigenous Australian art. The result of a seven-year collaboration, Kluge-Ruhe recently toured *Maḡayin: Eight Decades of Aboriginal Australian Bark Painting from Yirrkala*, an exhibition of 90 iconic bark paintings from Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Centre. These newly commissioned barks were first displayed at AGSA as part of Tarnanthi 2019 before travelling to Kluge-Ruhe for this exhibition. *Maḡayin* toured across the US from 2022 – 2025, with esteemed Yolŋu artist and cultural leader, Djambawa Marawili AM as the lead curator.

Cumpston is a Barkandji artist, curator, writer and educator, whose family are of Afghan, Irish and English descent. Barkandji people belong to the Barka, which is the name in their language for the Darling River, situated in western New South Wales. Prior to her appointment at AGSA, Cumpston studied fine arts, specialising in Photography at the University of South Australia. Cumpston worked as a photographic lecturer at Tauondi Aboriginal Community College, Port Adelaide, as well as at the University of South Australia. She wrote and delivered the inaugural course Indigenous Art, Culture and Design at the South Australian School of Art.

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**Nici Cumpston's key achievements at AGSA include:**

- AGSA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Collection grew by over 1,000 works under Cumpston's curatorial leadership over seventeen years.
- *Desert Country*, 2010, which featured AGSA's collection of paintings from the desert regions across Australia including pivotal works by leading artists from the early 1970s as well as documenting the remarkable recent development in Aboriginal art from the South Australian Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. Following its season at AGSA, *Desert Country* toured nationally from 2011 – 2013.
- *Riverland: Yvonne Koolmatrie* was the first major survey exhibition of the works of master Ngarrindjeri weaver, and internationally esteemed artist, Yvonne Koolmatrie. Co-curated with Hetti Perkins, Jonathan Jones and Genevieve O'Callaghan, the exhibition was presented at AGSA in Tarnanthi 2015.
- *John Mawurndjul: I am the old and the new*, was developed and co-presented by the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and Maningrida Arts and Culture. A major survey exhibition, the exhibition was included in Tarnanthi 2018 at AGSA ahead of a national tour from 2019 - 2020.
- *Kulata Tjuta (Many Spears)*, was the first international offering as part of Tarnanthi in 2020, presented in collaboration with APY Art Centre Collective at the Musée des Beaux-Art, in Rennes, the capital of the French region of Brittany. It was then included at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Le Havre, Normandy, France and a selection of major works were then shown at the Australian Embassies in Berlin and Paris. Accompanying the exhibition was the publication, *Kulata Tjuta (Many Spears)* a trilingual publication in Pitjantjatjara, English and French, produced by AGSA.
- *Naomi Hobson: Adolescent Wonderland*, presented as part of Tarnanthi 2020, before touring regional South Australia with Country Arts SA 2022 – 2024, and touring Musée National de la Photographie, Rabat, Morocco in 2024 with further venues in Morocco planned for 2025.
- *Kungka Kunpu: Strong Women*, co-curated with APY Art Centre Collective, Dr Lisa Slade and Gloria Strzelecki toured nationally between 2022 – 2024.

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**IMAGES**

<https://agsa.sa.gov.au/media/nicicumpston>

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

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## **ABOUT TARNANTHI**

The name Tarnanthi (pronounced *tar-nan-dee*) comes from the language of the Kaurna people, the Traditional Owners of the Adelaide Plains. It means to come forth or appear – like the sun and the first emergence of light.

Tarnanthi is a platform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists from across the country to share important stories through artistic excellence, illuminating the diversity and depth of art and culture in communities nationwide. It encourages new beginnings by providing artists with opportunities to create significant new work and to extend their practice.

Tarnanthi presents exhibitions at AGSA and on tour, an art fair, artist talks, performances, workshops and a groundbreaking education program. A major highlight is the Tarnanthi Festival, held every two years in Adelaide and across South Australia. Since beginning as a one-off event in 2015, Tarnanthi has developed from delivering acclaimed annual exhibitions in Adelaide into a continuous celebration of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, reaching national and international audiences.

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**Image caption:** Nici Cumpston OAM in Tarnanthi 2020: *Open Hands*, with works by Lena Yarinkura and Yolanda Rostron, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, © the artists/Maningrida Arts and Culture/Copyright Agency, photo: Saul Steed