

Raafat Ishak:
Eye Looking at
Large Glass Broken



Heide Modern, exterior image of Eye Looking at Large Glass Broken, 2023



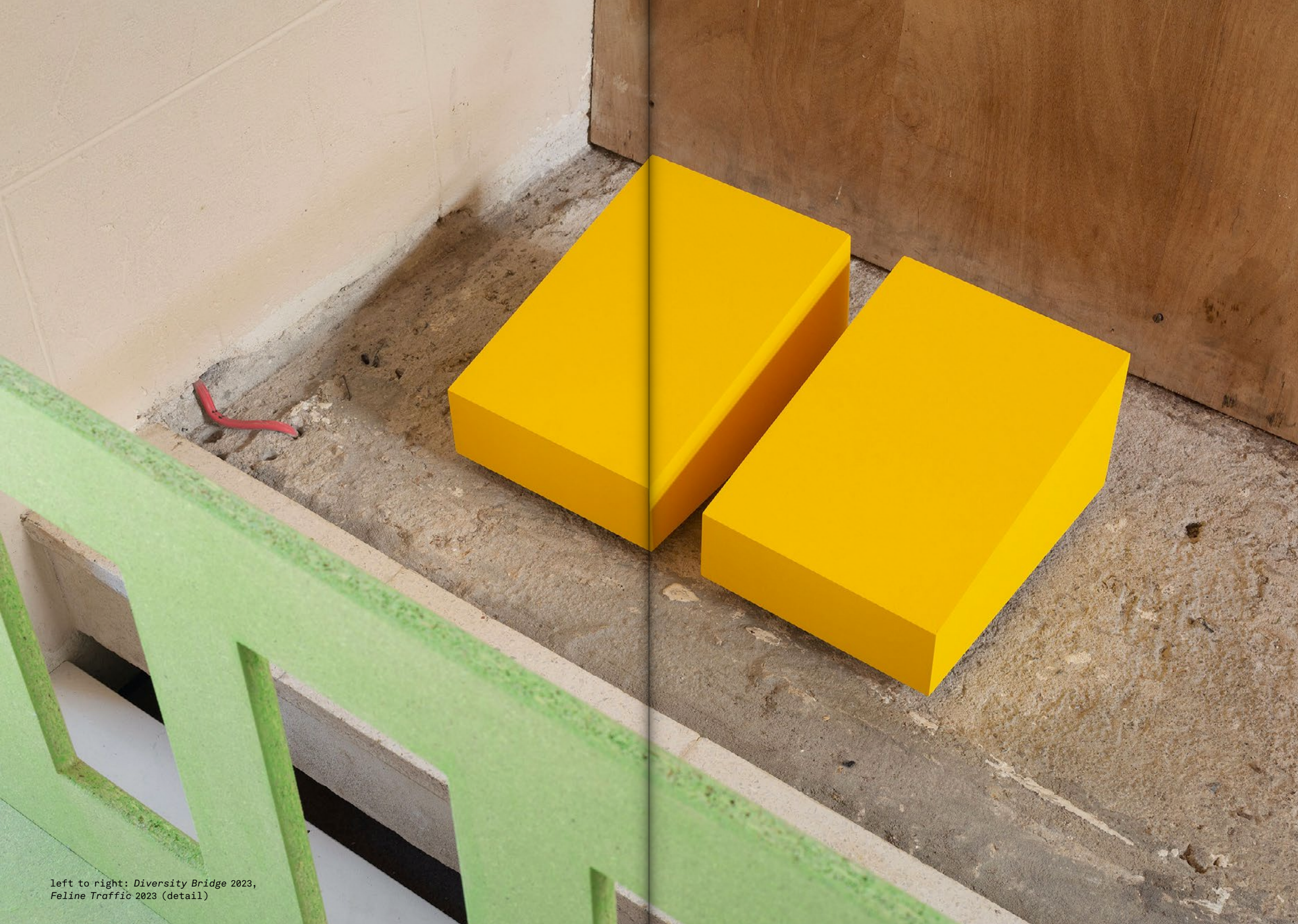
Eye Looking at Large Glass Broken 2023



left to right: Compliance Hall 2023, Benson and Hedges 2023



foreground: *Shannon* 2023;
background, left to right: *Compliance Hall* 2023, *Hindrance Hall* 2023,
Resemblance Hall 2023, *Brilliance Hall* 2023, *Endurance Hall* 2023



left to right: *Diversity Bridge 2023*,
Feline Traffic 2023 (detail)



Raafat Ishak: Eye Looking at Large Glass Broken

Conceived over a number of years, Raafat Ishak's *Eye Looking at Large Glass Broken* is a site-specific exhibition that inhabits the celebrated modernist building known as Heide Modern. Touching on Heide's long-standing role as an incubator of modern and contemporary art and architecture, the project takes the form of an act of cultural inquiry, bringing together an interwoven series of key speculative threads in the artist's practice. Critiquing the museum as a site of public memory and imagination, Ishak draws upon numerous frames of reference including dominant artistic and political contexts, the narratives of the European avant-garde, his engagement with the Australian art community, and his own Egyptian heritage and experience of migration.

The orthogonal design of Heide Modern—composed of intersecting planes, passageways, rooms and alcoves—serves as a viewing apparatus, a spatial-temporal and conceptual labyrinth within which Ishak's works are configured and experienced. Natural light is an integral element in the process. The absence of internal doors and architectural interruptions in Heide Modern enables the light to flood the building and illuminate its spaces. Ishak has commented that the house appears to be 'crying out for the sun to enter it, to be almost bowing down to its rays'.⁰¹ By extension, the idea of sunlight as a source of life and energy that infuses each of us, and exceeds our bounds, sits neatly within the complex stream of associations and narratives that underpin, animate and complicate Ishak's practice.

^{01.}

Raafat Ishak in conversation with the author, 23 February 2023.

Upon entering the building, one encounters an *ABC News* bulletin taking place in real time on a television monitor. Its presence introduces the dynamics of the outside world into the museum, opening the project up to the unpredictable currents of global affairs and the larger social collective. The news stream also provides a domestic acoustic background, drawing our attention to the contrast between the rarefied space of the gallery environment and the grittiness and volatility of daily life. Performing as a continuous readymade, the news media sets up the viewing conditions for Ishak's installation in that it resembles the familiarity, uncertainty and complexity of routines we all inhabit.

Duchampian ideologies and notions around the nature of art and where it might begin – or end – are threaded throughout the exhibition. The title, *Eye Looking at Large Glass Broken*, alludes to Marcel Duchamp's Dadaist masterpiece *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, also known as *The Large Glass* (1915–23). Comprising diagrammatic painted images of mechanical forms situated between double panes of clear glass held together by a metal frame, Duchamp's work was infamously shattered during transit in 1927 and pieced back together by the artist. Ishak's exhibition evokes both the web-like splintered appearance of the partially restored panes and the eye itself, looking at and through the fractures and discontinuities, like fissures in a looking glass.

Ideas of home, migration, identity, modernity, built and social environments, East and West, are some of the many themes at the centre of Ishak's practice. Running concurrently are subtle allusions to personal memories – the continuing cultural influence of his Egyptian childhood in the 1970s and the experience of migrating to Australia as a teen in the 1980s. Intricate graphic compositions converge, blend and collide with fields of painted imageries, alongside sculptural forms of recognisable yet partial and fragmented objects. This is a practice that offers myriad glimpses into an array of entangled interests, ideas and artistic strategies reaching back and forth across distinct geographies, time, cultures, histories, memories and imagination.





left to right: *Short Lives* 2023, *Inclusion with Garlic Sauce* 2023



Though not a practicing Muslim, Ishak is drawn to the traditions, rituals and designs – geometries, patterns and iconographies – of the Islamic faith and to the city of Mecca, the holy site of pilgrimage, as a potent symbol imbued with power and mystery.⁰² A significant recurring motif in his practice is the black cube,⁰³ which suggests and acts as a cultural meeting point for the ancient sacred structure of the Kaaba (the black temple of Mecca).⁰⁴ As a motif, it also alludes to Kazimir Malevich's radical monochromatic canvas *Black Square* (1915). Malevich's painting was presented in the year it was made as part of *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10 (Zero Ten)* in Petrograd, which manifested the new world order of the impending Russian Revolution and the twentieth century avant-garde. By bringing these disparate references into dialogue, Ishak is tapping into the multivalent character and social boundlessness of geometric abstraction. Harnessing its manifold spiritual and utopian associations, he exploits the monochrome's blankness and unknowability, its enigmatic 'nothing more, nothing less' quality.⁰⁵

In the Heide Modern study, Ishak presents a deconstructed black box set against the white limestone walls of the building. Cut-out openings in the form allow the viewer to look through its surfaces. The incompleteness of the cube structure and its condition of fragmentation suggest at once a coming together and falling apart. It registers as both a construction and ruin, a convergence of physical, temporal and intangible states.

The initials 'BS' that round out the title of this work, *Withdrawal Courtesies for BS*, refer to an artist, influential colleague and friend who recently passed away. Similar coded tributes appear subtly throughout the exhibition,

^{02.}

For observant Muslims, Mecca denotes the intersection of the profane and sacred realms and is a place that, as a non-believer, Ishak cannot visit.

^{03.}

Raafat Ishak first incorporated the black square into his work in 1987, while a student at Prahran College (TAFE) in Melbourne, Victoria.

^{04.}

Located in the Great Mosque Masjid al-Haram in Saudi Arabia, sometimes referred to as al-Ka'ba al-Musharrafah, the most sacred site in Islam.

^{05.}

Dr Charles Cramer and Dr Kim Grant, *Suprematism, Part I: Kasimir Malevich*, Khan Academy, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/cubism-early-abstract/russian-avant-garde/a/suprematism-part-i-kasimir-malevich>, accessed 14 March 2023.

referencing a number of artists and thinkers who have been of vital importance to Ishak creatively and personally, and who are sadly no longer with us. These references run in parallel with a series of site-specific collaborative commissions that Ishak has developed with artists Grace Culley, Matthew Davis, Julie Davies, Sean Loughrey and Tom Nicholson as a way of recognising community, creative exchange, communal action, present and past. While deeply engaged with the history of art, Ishak's heroes aren't necessarily the celebrated global luminaries of the artworld, but his local network of creative peers.

Within the adjacent bedroom space, a pink three-dimensional monochrome in the shape of a bed constructed from MDF stands on its end. Unusually positioned, the structure appears to suggest three pillows, a playful nod to the intimacies, both real and imagined, of the museum's founders John and Sunday Reed and their unconventional marriage – as well as to the inescapable public/private nature of a gallery that was once a home. The bed may also be seen as a metaphor for the close-knit Heide circle of artists who collectively gave 'birth' to the Australian modernist canon, and by extension, as a reference to the ongoing act of creation itself—endlessly productive, never finished, a continual cycle of conception, growth and renewal.

The tiny former powder room is crowded by a large, gilded staircase with a decorative underside that leads to nowhere. Impossible to climb, the absurd stair is missing a number of treads and risers, rendering its appearance incomplete and flawed. Gilding is a sign of great affluence in Islamic cultures, and gold continues to hold deep social, cultural and economic resonance throughout northern Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Its discovery in Australia in the 1850s triggered the first mass influx of migrants. Characterised as a nation 'born by the Gold Rush', the influx of gold seekers has historically been presented as some sort of redeeming counterbalance to Australia's violent colonial origins and penal past.⁰⁶

⁰⁶.

'Convicts and the Colonisation of Australia, 1788-1868' in *Digital Panopticon*, https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Convicts_and_the_Colonisation_of_Australia,_1788-1868, accessed 28 March 2023.





Titled *Government Gold* and sequestered in the smallest room in Heide Modern, the staircase alludes to corrupt or compromised leadership, avarice and failed systems of power. Mostly hidden, the sides and underbelly of the construction are meticulously patterned with gingham, a humble fabric design that arrived in the West via the British colonies in India.⁰⁷ Ishak's golden staircase thus suggests complex intertwined global histories, trans-cultural systems of value and shifting political and social ideologies. It functions as a piece of an incomplete, larger edifice replete with missing parts, gaps and uncertainties. As a sculpture, it embodies the formal implications of Cubism and Futurism and the dynamic movement explored by Duchamp in his iconic painting *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* (1912).

Above the fireplace and the conversation pit, the hearth of the home, a small canvas depicts two female faces layered on top of one another, like a painted double exposure or montage. Initially intended to be a portrait of Ishak's mother – a radical artist in her own right who died in 1970, prior to Ishak and his brother's migration to Australia – the image appears fugitive, and unstable. Ishak's mother's face is only partially realised and a likeness of his partner's mother stands in as a kind of surrogate, transposed over the top. When observed closely, the eye shifts between the two impressions. The composition shares similarities with the collage *Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum* (1930)⁰⁸ by Hannah Höch – another artist Ishak admires – in which an image of actress Renée Maria Falconetti is layered with fragments of images of tribal art cut from magazines to create a composite of two faces juxtaposing different cultures and moments in time.

Mysteriously titled *Benson and Hedges*, the painting hints obliquely at the Heide Modern fireplace, as well as

⁰⁷. Originally striped, gingham's well-known checked appearance was developed in the mid-eighteenth century, in the British mills of Manchester. This pattern was incorporated by the artist as a reference to the decorative paper that was often historically used to line drawers, or to protect the base of lamps and domestic objects. From a conversation with the artist, 23 February 2023.

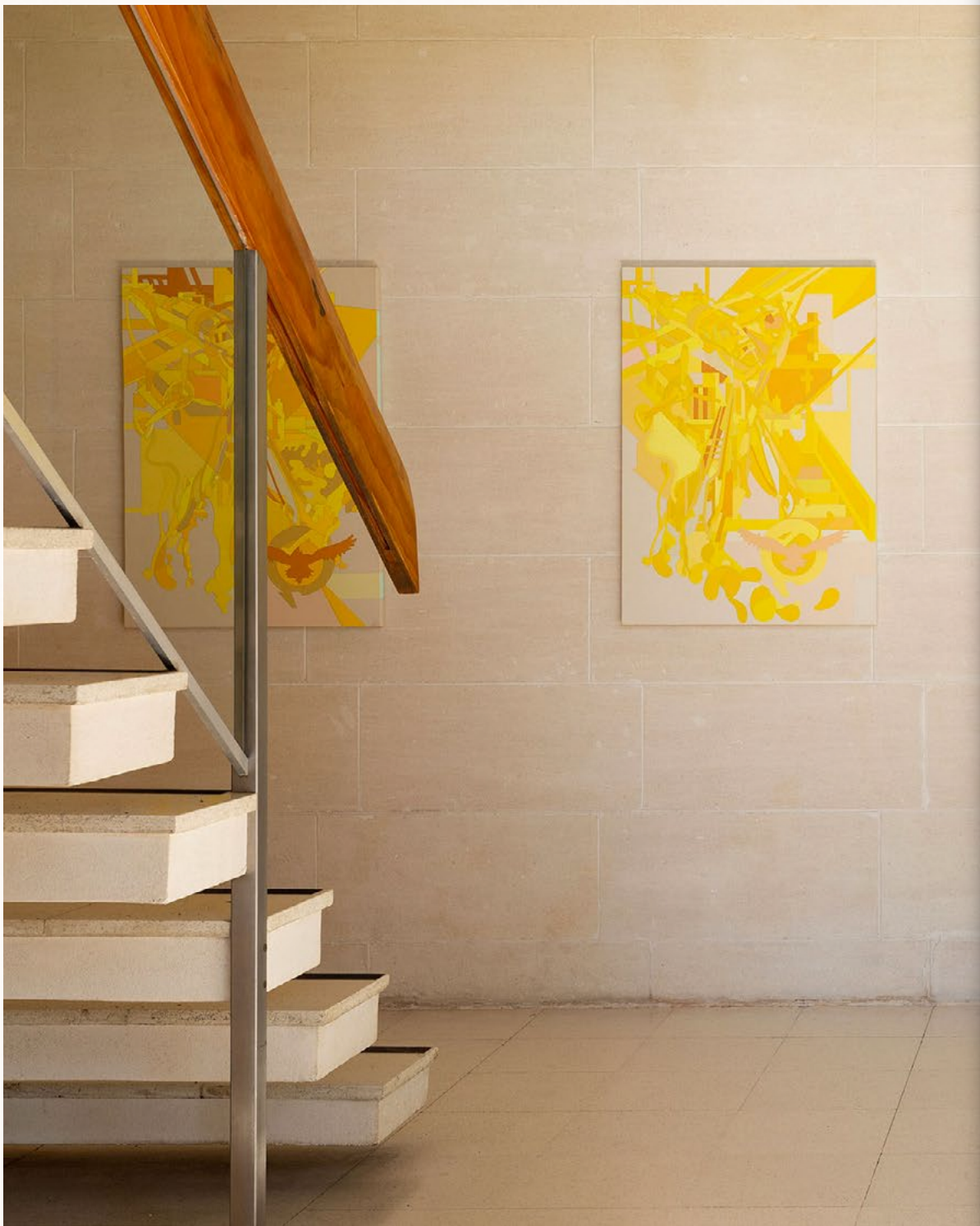
⁰⁸. See Hannah Höch, *Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum* (Indische Tänzerin: Aus einem ethnographischen Museum), 1930, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/296/386>, accessed 12 March 2023.

alluding to the cigarette brand's famous pyramid advertising campaign during the late 1970s and the names of two sibling cats owned by an artist couple in Ishak's social circle. After completing the work, Ishak realised that it was more about himself and his partner than his mother or mother-in-law. The true subject, however, may ultimately be the slippage between these multiple points of reference, evoking the vagaries and instability of sight and the way that images, memories, histories and relationships intermingle, transmutate and coalesce. As a partial impression of a forward-thinking Middle Eastern artist from the modern era, the picture extends beyond the personal to suggest art historical elisions and absences, unrecorded and dismissed histories, and the pervasive hierarchies and tastes of Orientalism.

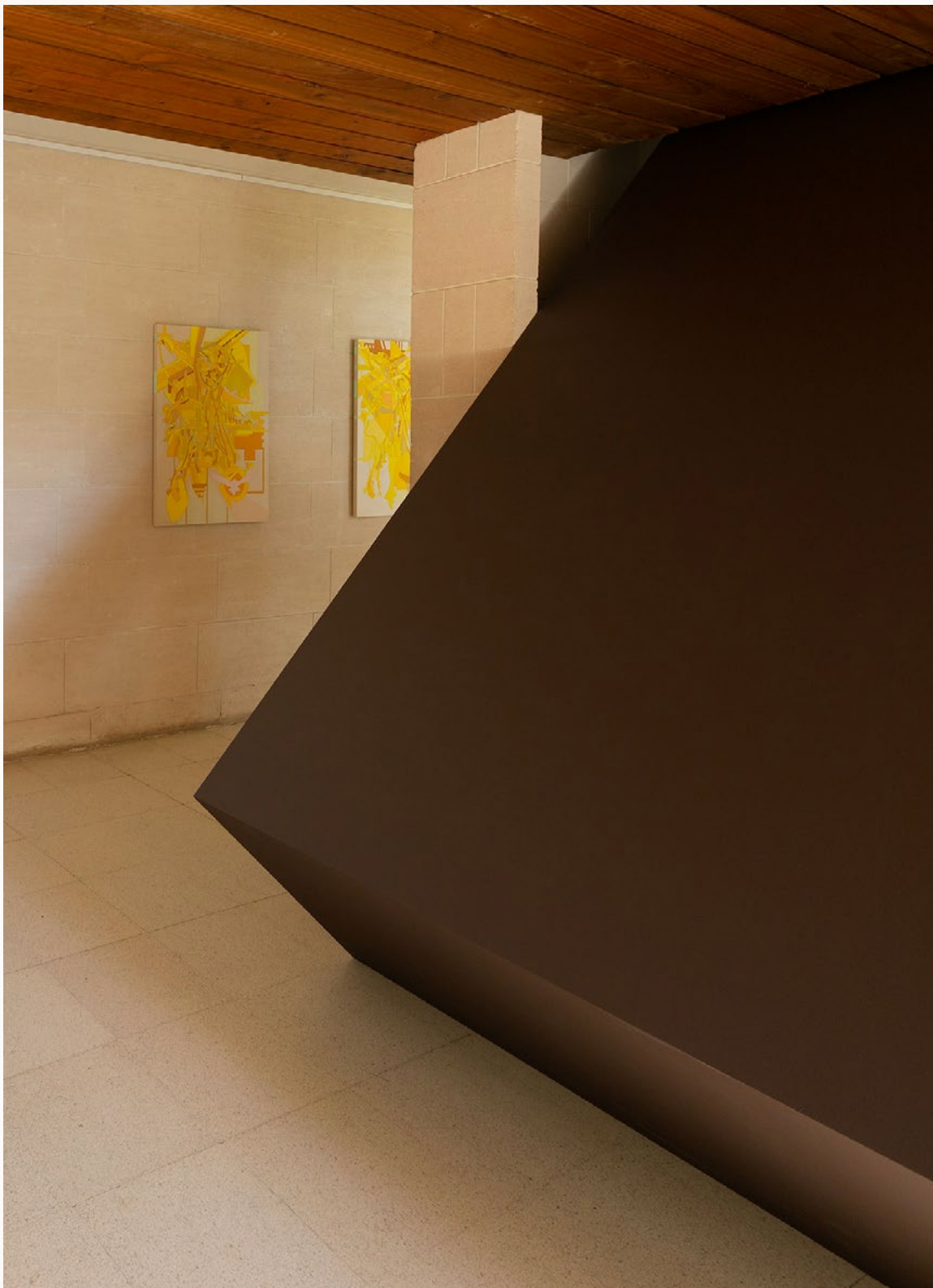
Over the conversation pit Ishak has constructed a small bridge made from green chipboard, a makeshift material that is often used for temporary walkways on building sites. The structure provides accessible short-term passage across what is usually a sunken floor and, for some, an uncrossable divide. Ishak's bridge is both literal and metaphorical, creating a connection point between spaces, cultures, locations and ideas. It raises the viewer up, changes lines of sight and alters points of view – an intervention into the architecture, the institution, and the very fabric of experience.

Displayed across the upper mezzanine and the undercroft below is a suite of ten enigmatic paintings, each vibrantly yellow and visually complex. Reading as a mass of splintered, partially abstract images, objects and architectures, they blend and collide in a non-unified way. Appearing both dynamic and static at the same time, the compositions hover like tiny aircraft, as if outside of gravity and adrift of time. This association is reinforced by the repeated depiction of the Royal Australian Air Force's heraldic emblem, featuring a representation of a wedge-tailed eagle in full flight, across the canvases. The acronym RAAF is an abbreviation of the artist's first name and operates in his work as a kind of signature, while the imagery itself has imperialist overtones. Crashing through structures, it is also suggestive of militarism and 9/11, a trigger point for









anti-Islamic sentiment and a moment that stigmatised Middle Eastern identities.

In the nearby kitchen, a large black box leans against the wall in a state of repose, filling most of the space but leaving just enough room for safe passage. Titled *Apparition of the Miserable Acquaintance No. 3*, it is the third in a suite of interrelated projects that attend to the idea of a black square resting. Ishak has developed similar forms and performative events collaboratively with the artist Tom Nicholson since 2004, under the heading *Proposition for banner march and a black cube hot air balloon*. The use of the square connotes, contradictorily, both the immense grounded-ness of the revered Kaaba in Mecca and the sensation of dynamism conveyed by Malevich's *Airplane Flying: Suprematist Composition* (1915). Ultimately, Ishak's iteration rests somewhere in-between.

Apparition of the Miserable Acquaintance No. 3 is also accompanied by a sound piece. Created in collaboration with audio-visual producer and composer Matthew Davis, it amalgamates a musical score borrowed from the Egyptian film *Nashid al-Amal* (song of hope) from 1937 with a monologue from the 2017 French television comedy drama *Paris ECT*. In the film, the score includes vocals performed by the late Egyptian singer, songwriter and actress Umm Kulthum, which Ishak and Davis replace with the French monologue to create an intercultural, layered sound montage. Ishak's interest in the television monologue lies in its correspondence with the short surrealist text *The Solar Anus* (1927) by French writer and philosopher Georges Bataille. In the monologue, the male protagonist speaks of an experience defecating in the woods and feeling of sunlight on his most intimate parts as an epiphanic moment. Bataille's erotic, metaphysical and transgressive text, considered obscene by some, similarly explores motions of the sun and the body, passages of energy and processes of excretion and fecundity. Deeply poetic and disturbing, it refers to the paradoxical nature of the light of the sun as both life giving and burning, collapsing

distinctions between higher abstract realms and the lower bodily aspects of life, between creation and destruction.

In the living room gallery space, the work *French Folk* comprises a large MDF panel with a cut-out text that reads 'Parla inglese o muori (speak English or die)'. The work attends to a grotesque incident in 2012 on a bus in Melbourne, where three women on vacation from France were verbally assaulted after singing a song in their native tongue. The abuse was filmed by a fellow commuter and broadcast via social media all over the world, including on Italian television. Quoting from the racist rant, Ishak ironically translates it into Italian. *French Folk* highlights the circulation, translation and exchange of information, ideas and knowledge in a global world. It emphasises the ugliness and folly of monocultural desires and points of view, as well as forms of collective resistance. The work also connects with Ishak's interest in modes of transportation, taking place on a moving vehicle – a shifting non-place – that no doubt increased his interest in the incident.

Dispersed across the gallery floor in front of *French Folk* is a series of wedge-like forms shaped like bevel-marked headstones painted in highly visible taxi yellow. Comprising an installation titled *Feline Traffic*, the numbered markers are memorials to cats owned by Sunday Reed and by Ishak and his partner over many years.⁰⁹ Across the duration of exhibition, at the beginning of each day, the museum's Visitor Services staff reposition the objects. Incrementally migrating them across the gallery space, putting new creatures into action while simultaneously bringing the memory of the deceased cats to life.

Taking pride of place in the middle of the living room gallery space is a near life-size hand-built clay camel sculpture that makes a clear connection between the artist's country of birth and the processes of migration and colonisation. Introduced into Australia in the nineteenth century

⁰⁹.

Some of the cats owned by Sunday Reed, with names that can be remembered are: 1. Nudgie, 2. Rose, 3. Micetto, 4. Min, 5. Merrily-hop, 6. Midnight, 7. Euphoria, 8. Dinah, 9. Tatty, 10. Lin. The cats that Ishak and Pip (Raafat Ishak's partner) have owned over the years, together and separately are: 11. Shazza, 12. Tamara, 13. Maggie, 14. Stella, 15. Rufus, 16. Wolf, 7. Seymour, 18. Diablo, 19. Zebadiah and 20. Boris.







as a reliable form of desert transportation, camels have been largely ignored, growing wild, numerous and destructive to the country's vast and dry interior. An increasing ecological and environmental threat, through no fault of their own, efforts to export or cull the camel population have resulted in acts of hunting cruelty and violence. By contrast, Ishak's camel, titled *Shannon*, has been lovingly hand-moulded in clay, the earth pressed over a wooden skeleton. Its sculptural fur fashioned and shaped through repetitive gestures and touch, the camel is covered with subtle impressions that register the fingertips of the artist and his assistants, eliciting feelings of attentiveness, tenderness and care.

As the centrepiece of the exhibition, and a deeply personal yet politicised work, the camel embodies the rich, thoughtful and complex layering of Ishak's multi-disciplinary approach.

Informed by Arabic and Western histories of painting, sculpture and architecture, mixing the intimate and the universal, Raafat Ishak's artistic practice is generated through acts of inquiry, research and experimentation. His projects take place at the intersections of cultures, zones of transference, fields of collapse, exclusion and assimilation, humour and beauty. *Eye Looking at Large Glass Broken* is a remarkable ensemble in which each individual element contributes to a broader body and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Open-ended and in many ways inscrutable, Ishak's art brings his own reference points to bear on the histories and narratives of Heide Modern, intervening and using the building as a platform, with its specific historical setting as part of his dynamically ongoing investigations into the ever shifting, expansive, interrelated and intricate territories of art and architecture, personal and cultural identities, global and local politics, and national and individual histories.

Melissa Keys



left to right: *Feline Traffic* 2023, *Conversations with DB* 2023



front: Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson, *Proposition for a Banner March and a Black Cube Hot Air Balloon (A Frame)* 2012; back: Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson, *Proposition for a Banner March and a Black Cube Hot Air Balloon (A Frame Mirrors)* 2023

Raafat Ishak and Sean Loughrey, *Fan Flag 9* 2023

LIST OF WORKS

All works by Raafat Ishak unless otherwise stated.

Raafat Ishak's work is courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. All other artworks are courtesy of the artists

FOYER:

News 2023
television monitor, 24-hour live news broadcast

STUDY:

Withdrawal Courtesies for BS 2023
synthetic polymer paint on medium-density fibreboard

Eye Looking at Large Glass Broken 2023
oil on canvas

BEDROOM:

Inclusion with Garlic Sauce 2023
synthetic polymer paint on medium-density fibreboard

Short Lives 2023

9 parts, carbon and pencil on paper

BEDROOM WINDOW EXTERIOR:

Raafat Ishak and Grace Culley
Dish 2023
steel

BATHROOM:

Raafat Ishak and Tom Nicholson
Proposition for a Banner March and a Black Cube Hot Air Balloon (A Frame) 2012
C-type photographs mounted on di-bond, MDF, metal hinges

Proposition for a Banner March and a Black Cube Hot Air Balloon (A Frame Mirrors) 2023
printed mirrors, MDF, metal hinges

CONVERSATION PIT:

Benson and Hedges 2023
oil on canvas

Diversity Bridge 2023
tinted urethane on chipboard

CONVERSATION PIT WINDOW EXTERIOR

Raafat Ishak and Sean Loughrey
Fan Flag 9 2023
synthetic polymer paint on plywood

POWDER ROOM:

Government Gold 2023
shellac, 23ct gold leaf, bole, gesso and acrylic on wood.

MEZZANINE:

Recalcitrance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

Temperance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

Abundance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

Observance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

Fla-grance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

UNDER CROFT:
Compliance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

Hindrance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

Resemblance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

Brilliance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

Endurance Hall 2023
oil on canvas

LIVING ROOM:

Shannon 2023
clay, fibreglass, gypsum, chicken wire and plywood

French Folk 2023
synthetic polymer paint on MDF

LIVING ROOM EXTERIOR:

Raafat Ishak and Julie Davies
Citrus Thorn Sculpture from the Collection of Alex Rizkalla 2023
metal print and repurposed ceramic pot

KITCHEN:

Apparition of a Miserable Acquaintance 3 2023
synthetic polymer paint on MDF

Raafat Ishak and Matthew Davis
No Eyes in Eggs 2023
soundscape
2.38 min. duration

LAUNDRY:

501 Conversations with DB 2023
oil on MDF

THROUGHOUT THE GALLERIES:

Feline Traffic 2023
acrylic on MDF (20 parts)

Memorials to some of the cats owned by Sunday Reed, with names that can be remembered:

1. Nudgie, 2. Rose,
3. Micetto, 4. Min,
5. Merrily-hop,
6. Midnight, 7. Euphoria,
8. Dinah, 9. Tatty, 10. Lin

As well as the cats that Ishak and Pip (Raafat Ishak's partner) have owned over the years, together and separately:
11. Shazza, 12. Tamara, 13. Maggie, 14. Stella, 15. Rufus, 16. Wolf, 7. Seymour, 18. Diablo, 19. Zebadiah and 20. Boris

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Raafat Ishak and Julie Davies,
Citrus Thorn Sculpture from the
Collection of Alex Rizkalla 2023



Raafat Ishak and Grace Cullley, *Dish* 2023



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photographer

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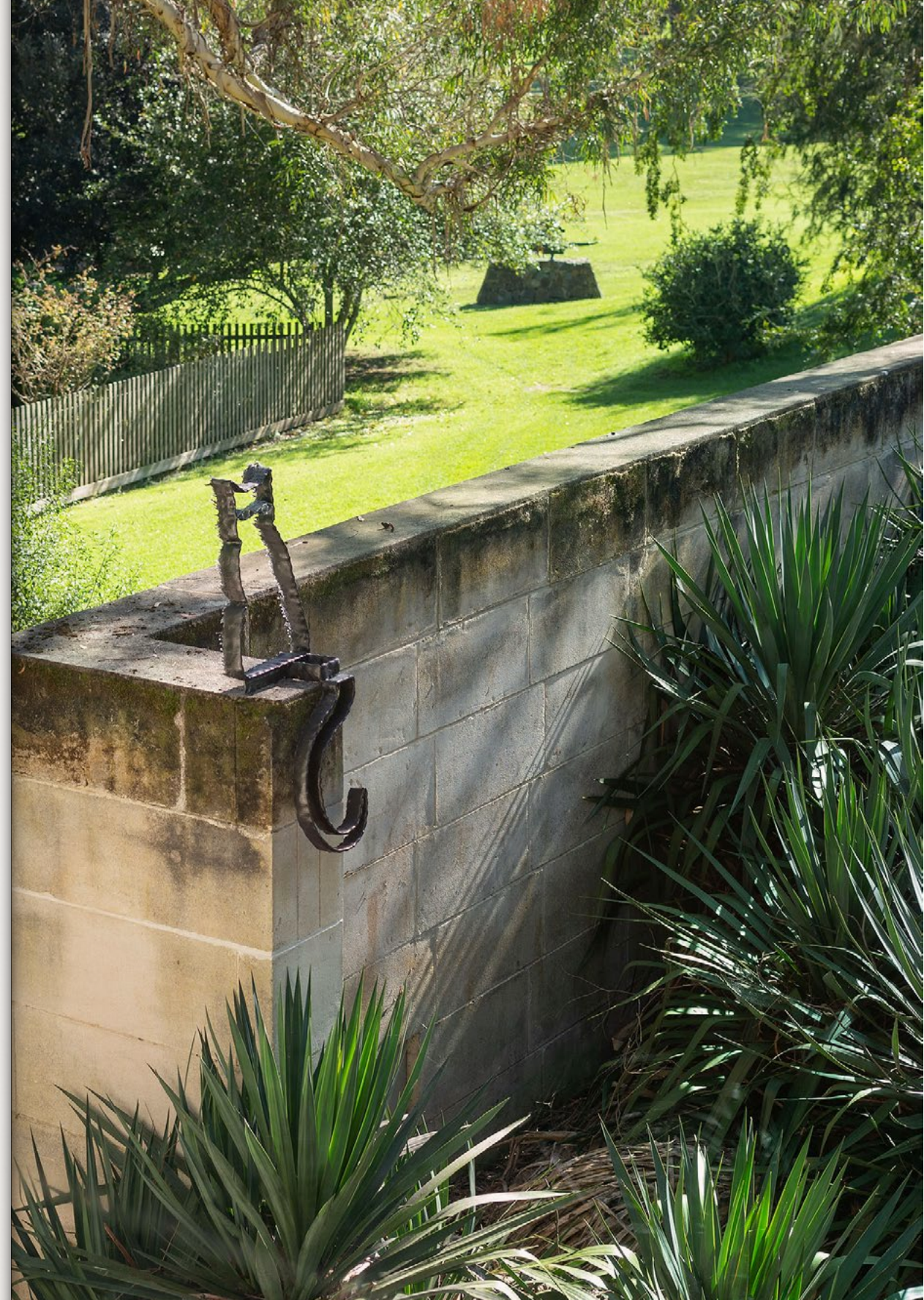
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Heide Museum of Modern Art
acknowledges the Wurundjeri people
of the Kulin Nation on whose land
Heide is located. We pay respect
to their Elders past and present,
and recognise the rich traditions
and continuing creative cultures
of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander peoples of Australia.



Raafat Ishak and Grace Culley, *Dish* 2023

Heide Modern
Heide Museum of Modern Art
25 March – 23 July 2023

**HEIDE
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