



**Nicola Mason Cycle**

COVER: *The yellow studio* 2022, oil on canvas, 102 x 122cm

Cycle  
**Nicola Mason**

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery  
9 April - 5 June 2022



*Still life set up 2022*, oil on canvas, 51 x 41cm

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*Banksia cone cooling* 2022, oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

## INTRODUCTION

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery is committed to showcasing the work of artists based in the region through its Local Artist Project initiative which provides professional development opportunities for artists living in the Central West by supporting the creation of new work and raising the profile of regionally based artists.

For Napoleon Reef based artist Nicola Mason, staying home through recent lockdowns has suited her creative lifestyle. In her domestic setting, nostalgic household appliances, beloved kids' toys, and finds from her

daily walks with her four-legged friends all make appearances in the theatre of her still-life works.

Mason references memento mori symbolism, utilising painting as a vehicle for thinking about living with the land. Her thoughts on nature and culture coalesce on the canvas, enacting contemporary storytelling within her works. Here she challenges the still-life genre where subjects are traditionally presented as binary, instead blurring the boundaries between the natural world and the man-made.

Special thanks to writer Tracy Sorensen for her insightful

catalogue essay; artist Nicola Mason for her joyful enthusiasm in realising this exhibition; and Create NSW for awarding Mason with a Small Project Grant for development of work for this exhibition.

BRAG's exhibition program would not be possible without the skill and dedication of the BRAG team, and the ongoing financial and program support provided by Bathurst Regional Council, Create NSW, and the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery Society Inc. (BRAGS).

**March 2022**



*The conference 2022*, oil on canvas, 102 x 122cm

## CYCLE

Tracy Sorensen

On any given day I will glance up and see three sets of eyes gazing back at me. The eyes belong to two bush stone curlews and a white wallaroo, in two large paintings by Nicola Mason hung in the back room of my house. The bush stone curlews are part bird, part human child, their giant eyes lifted for a moment to regard me, the viewer, before returning to their play. The wallaroo is a more realist rendition, fully animal. It, too, momentarily returns my gaze, perhaps before bounding away.

In these paintings, the creatures are outdoors in the Australian bush, where they feel comfortable.

By contrast, Mason's most recent paintings are all set indoors, where humans feel comfortable. These paintings are made in the still life tradition, with objects sitting on a table or flat surface,

throwing interesting shadows on the wall behind them.

A tiny toy koala rides a duck measuring cup like a horse. A cheese grater and a banksia cone stand side by side, strangers but also strangely familial, like guests assembled for a wedding photograph. Three banksia cones pose with a 1970s kitchen mincer. They're not in fear of being minced - it seems to me - but behaving more like children posing on the bonnet of a car, enjoying the exhilarating strangeness and power of it. The cones in the mixmaster's mustard yellow bowl *do* look a little threatened by the electricity that might at any moment pulse through that yellow electric cord.

There are almost-but-not-quite stories here, shades of nursery rhyme and nostalgia, of things endowed with personalities,

of the lively relationships that children have with their toys and familiar household things.

The move indoors is a familiar one. The pandemic has kept us at home and La Niña, coming on the heels of drought and bushfire, has brought a lot of rain. To make these paintings Mason moved out of her wonky miner's cottage studio on her small bush property at Napoleon Reef on Wiradjuri country just outside Bathurst, and into the downstairs living space of the family home. As if to press home Mason's ecological concerns, nature duly made its way indoors, flooding the area.

"The weather came inside!" says Mason as we stand in her workspace looking at the paintings and the things - the kitchenalia, children's toys and plant material - that have been acting as models over this past



*The sifter and the banksia cone* 2021, oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm



*The cheese grater and the banksia cone* 2022, oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

year or so. Nim the tall kelpie cross and Mr Barry Fox the short collie cross are also present and from time to time actively participate in the conversation. Two goldfish swim in a large tank on a shelf. Other human family members are lurking in other rooms of the house. Outside, a very old horse by the name of Tiptoe stands in the long grass. Chickens cackle.

None of these are extraneous presences. They form part of the flow of biological life that both inspires and requires Mason's attention. Before she made the decision to paint full-time, Mason had a career in National Parks and conservation management, handling, observing and managing native animals. She is also the mother of three human children. Large parts of her days are spent co-creating and attuning to her family nest. All of this flows into her work.

Feminist scholar Donna Haraway calls it *situated knowledge*, elevating the particular over the general, the personal relationship over the grand, mythologising, "God's Eye" view. It's a sensibility that can be neatly contrasted with Sidney Nolan's epic drought paintings, on show in this gallery at the same time as Mason's *Cycle* exhibition. In the Nolan paintings, the dead livestock represent Tragedy and Human Hubris; the dead animals themselves have become almost pure symbol. In Mason's work, a wombat skull is certainly symbolic, but it also vibrates with the life and death of one particular animal.

As it was raining a lot as she painted this recent set of paintings, Mason decided she needed to add clouds. She could have just painted them straight on to the canvas; instead, she

played around with creating a small object that could join the others on the table. This is how a painted cloud on a stick came to join the enigmatic relationships of objects/creatures, light, symbol, colour and texture in the series.

The banksia cones were found just outside the studio during her art residency at Bundanon, the property gifted by Arthur Boyd on Wodi Wodi and Yuin land on the NSW south coast. Mason guessed they'd been discarded by the previous artist.

"There was no wombat poo on them!" says Mason, ever alert to scats in the environment (and the fact that Bundanon hosts a large number of wombats). "It was like when you walk into an op shop and see that thing! Gold!"

The banksia cones were attractive and familiar, evoking childhood storylines such as the



*The strainer and the banksia cones* 2022 oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm



*The mincer and the banksia cones 2022, oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm*

exploits of May Gibbs' wicked banksia men. Mason had also seen and remembered the looming life-sized shapes in the soft-sculpture works of Heather B. Swann.

Once she'd painted the double shadow thrown by the banksia cone in the red mincer (her lighting set-up includes a floor lamp and daylight), Mason saw shades of a Heather B. Swann banksia looming in the background. The lively shadows in these paintings - their multiplicity suggesting movement - become extra characters at play in the almost-but-not-quite stories being told in these layered images.

Part of the story is told by the ground over which the images are painted. For this new series, Mason covered each canvas with a thin layer of acrylic ochre. Wide, energetic brushstrokes are

clearly visible, creating abstract shapes, drips and textures. In some of the paintings this ground is almost entirely painted over with layered oil paint, with just small areas of the yellowish ground peeping through. In others, the ground is a bolder presence.

"I did the ground first, then when I was painting, I decided to leave it there, to make it part of the composition," says Mason. "It's important that the ground is fully playing with the rest of the painting. It makes an interesting play between the abstract and the representational."

There is, of course, an ecological point being made here too: the ground (the land) is never just a venue or a base for our activities; it is an active participant in the creation of the world.

The traditional realms of the still life - the symbolic and

the compositional - are here brought into dynamic play with 21st century concerns about ecological relationships and the status of the more-than-human world.

The combination of organic and manufactured elements (the banksia cone and the cheese grater, for example) blurs the line between what is considered "natural" and what is considered "cultural".

"The banksia cone is a cultural object," says Mason. "It has been shaped by firestick activity over thousands of years. And the cheese grater is rusting, a natural process."

The combination of such objects as equal players on a level surface creates a slightly unsettling, uncanny feeling. The familiar binary of western sensibility gives way to a non-hierarchical continuum of



*The measuring duck carousel* 2022, oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm



*Weighing in the wet* 2022, oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

plants, animals, natural things, human beings and human-made things. Donna Haraway calls this *natureculture*.

While compositional and symbolic aspects are important in Mason's paintings, these never overwhelm the vital presence of the nonhuman things themselves. Each object seems creaturely, with a personality of its own. The mixmaster, for example, has a black eye on the side of its head, like a parrot's face seen from the side. The black handle could be the parrot's crest or perhaps a sturdy quiff of hair.

"What's that word for faces in things?" asks Nic, trying to remember. It's pareidolia. Our social brains are hard-wired to anthropomorphise not just

animals but objects. While some warn against the dangers of anthropomorphising animals and things, its blurring of the strict lines between the humans and non-humans, of culture and nature and objects, is part of the point.

New materialist philosopher Jane Bennett would argue that when we're looking at an old mixmaster we're not really looking at an "object" at all, but a kind of *subject*, an "actant" with its own agency in the world.

Or, as Donna Haraway says, *matter* matters. The material world is not a dead thing to be mastered and shifted around at will; it is full of vital, powerful forces that fight back. Like storms and floods, for example.

Mason and I look at the things themselves that have done their time as artist's models and are now taking time off, just sitting around on a shelf in the studio. The mixmaster was once an active working member of the household. The red colander will go back into active service, draining pasta. The small toys lie this way and that, as if resting or dead on a battlefield.

"I feel connected to these things," says Mason. "It's what's around me, what I put around me, what I'm interested in."

*Tracy Sorensen is a Bathurst novelist and craftivist. She is a PhD candidate at Charles Sturt University, researching storytelling in the Anthropocene.*



*The mixer and the banksia cones* 2022, oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm



*The tin and the kangaroo* 2022, oil on canvas, 46 x 46cm



*Cup full* 2021, oil on canvas, 46 x 46cm



*The measuring cup duck and the koala* 2021, oil on canvas, 20.5 x 25.5cm



*The measuring cup duck and the banksia* 2022, oil on canvas, 20.5 x 25.5cm

# LIST OF WORKS

*The conference 2022*  
oil on canvas, 102 x 122cm

*The yellow studio 2022*  
oil on canvas, 102 x 122cm

*La Niña down 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*The measuring duck  
carousel 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*The cheese grater and the  
banksia cone 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*The mixer and the banksia  
cones 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*The mincer and the banksia  
cones 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*The sifter and the banksia  
cone 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*Banksia cone cooling 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*The strainer and the banksia  
cones 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*Weighing in the wet 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*Shuffling cones 2022*  
oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm

*The Still life tripod and the  
bookcase 2022*  
oil on canvas, 51 x 41cm

*Inside weather 2022*  
oil on canvas, 51cm x 41cm

*Still life set up 2022*  
oil on canvas, 51cm x 41cm

*Cup full 2021*  
oil on canvas, 46cm x 46cm

*The tin and the kangaroo 2022*  
oil on canvas, 46cm x 46cm

*The banksia and the clock 2022*  
oil on canvas, 46cm x 46cm

*Deer Family on the Wall 2022*  
oil on canvas, 41cm x 51cm

*Fawn on the Wall 2022*  
oil on canvas, 41cm x 51cm

*Buck on the Wall 2022*  
oil on canvas, 41cm x 51cm

*Rhinoceros beetle down 2022*  
oil on canvas, 31cm x 31cm

*Black wasp down 2022*  
oil on canvas, 31cm x 31cm

*Butterfly down 2022*  
oil on canvas, 31cm x 31cm

*Horn down 2022*  
oil on canvas, 31cm x 31cm

*Measuring duck train 2022*  
oil on canvas, 25cm x 50.5cm

*The measuring cup duck and  
the koala 2021*  
oil on canvas, 20.5cm x 25.5cm

*The measuring cup duck and  
the doll 2022*  
oil on canvas, 20.5cm x 25.5cm

*The measuring cup duck and  
the banksia 2022*  
oil on canvas, 20.5cm x 25.5cm

*Banksia travels 2021*  
oil on canvas, 20cm x 15cm

*Banksia travels II 2022*  
oil on canvas, 20cm x 15cm

*Banksia I 2022*  
oil on canvas, 15cm x 20cm

*Banksia II 2022*  
oil on canvas, 15cm x 20cm

*Banksia III 2022*  
oil on canvas, 15cm x 20cm



*Clockwise from top left: Rhinoceros beetle down 2022, oil on canvas, 31 x 31cm. Black wasp down 2022, oil on canvas, 31 x 31cm. Horn down 2022, oil on canvas, 31 x 31cm. Butterfly down 2022, oil on canvas, 31 x 31cm.*

## ARTIST STATEMENT

New works developed for my exhibition *Cycle* were created on Wiradjuri country and supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW. These new works have been curated with select other works developed from my Bundanon Trust artist in residence program.

*Cycle* extends a conversation with the concurrent exhibitions at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, *Robert Hirschmann: Past Night* and *Sidney Nolan: Drought*. Like their work, my work is a response to being in the world and being influenced by the times. My still life theatre with painted clouds on sticks and a glass table-top of watery like

reflections echoes these La Niña times as floods wreck havoc on the east coast of Australia. I lean on my background in ecological management and mix this with my current domestic realities. Notions of nature and culture coalescing occupy my thoughts. I find the still life genre of art in the Western tradition an apt tool to play with relationships within and between things or actors. *Cycle* also references my processes around making works. Through the act of creating works for exhibitions or projects, new ideas become formed for both the work on the easel and further works. One works leads to two more.

I wish to thank the staff at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery for their support; Create NSW for Small Project Grant funding support; writer Tracy Sorensen for her insightful words for this catalogue; Councillor Margaret Hogan, Bathurst Regional Council for opening this exhibition; and family Mark, Caitlin, Tynan and Bo and pooches Nim and Mr Barry Fox.

*Nicola Mason, March 2022*



*La Niña down* 2022, oil on canvas, 76 x 76cm



Nicola Mason in her studio. Photo supplied.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

In mid-2016 Nicola Mason resigned from a twenty year career in the conservation and land management field to focus on her art practice. She undertook post graduate studies in the painting workshop at the Australian National University, School of Art & Design and a Fine Arts (Honours) year at University of New South Wales, Art & Design, becoming a Dean's List recipient. These studies culminated in an Australian Consortium for In Country Indonesian Studies (ACICIS) Creative Arts and Design program at both Universitas Sanata Dharma and Barbaran Segaragunung Culture House in Yogyakarta, Indonesia with an Australian Government New Colombo Plan Mobility Grant.

Mason's practice has been propelled by several residencies including her 2020 Home Residency supported by an NSW Government Arts Restart Grant

through Orana Arts Inc; 2019 Bundanon Artist in Residence program through Bundanon Trust; 2018-19 Art of Threatened Species residency, grant and exhibition, a collaboration between Orana Arts Inc and the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment; and 2017 residency at the Centre d'Art Marnay Art Centre (Camac), France.

In 2021 Mason's work was selected for the *S. H. Ervin Salon des Refusés*, the *Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Art*, and was runner up in the painting section of *Remagine 2021 Art Prize*. In 2020 her work was Highly Commended in the *Adelaide Perry Prize for Drawing*. Her works have additionally been selected as a finalist in numerous other national awards including the *Calleen Art Award* (2020, 2019, 2018, 2017 and 2016); *Macquarie Group Emerging Artist Prize* (2018); the *Waterhouse*

*Natural Science Art Award (Emerging)* (2018); and the *Fleurieu Biennale* (2018).

Winning the 2015 *Calleen Art Prize* Central West Regional Art Award led to Mason's first solo exhibition, *WILD* at Cowra Regional Art Gallery in 2016. She has since held four solo exhibitions, and participated in numerous group exhibitions and community art events including *Invincible* (Tremain's Mill, 2020), *Listening in the Anthropocene* (Creative Practice Circle, Charles Sturt University 2020), and *Movers and Shapers* (Hazelhurst Arts Centre, Gympie, 2018).

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