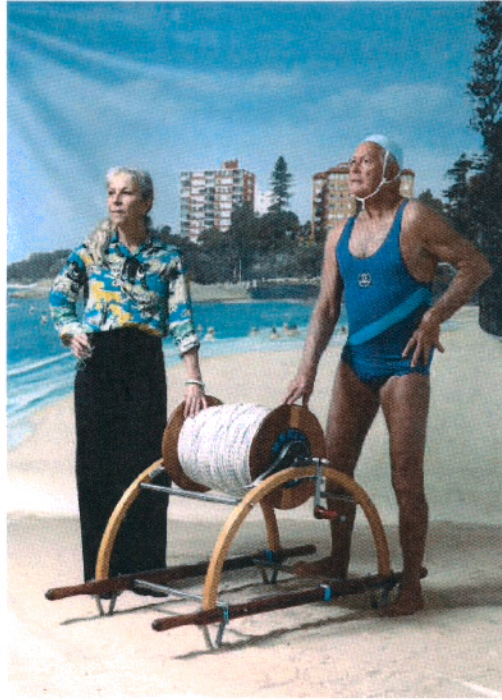




ANNE  
ZAHALKA

PLAYGROUND  
OF THE PACIFIC



## MANLY ART GALLERY & MUSEUM

4 SEPTEMBER - 25 OCTOBER 2015

EXHIBITION CURATOR  
ROSS HEATHCOTE

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Image (above): *Anne Zahalka with Ray Moran in  
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# ANNE ZAHALKA

## PLAYGROUND OF THE PACIFIC

### ANNE ZAHALKA IN CONVERSATION WITH CURATOR ROSS HEATHCOTE

AUGUST, 2015

**RH:** Across your various series over the years you have never strayed for too long from the theme of 'the beach'. Whether it be real or imagined. What draws you to the idea and the image of the beach in the Australian cultural landscape?

**AZ:** The beach is such a 'loaded' place in the Australian psyche and so defining of modern Australian society. It is a site that has endlessly been represented throughout our history and been imbued with symbolic meaning. To me the beach is at once nostalgic but also a fraught and a 'contested' site for those who gather on its shores. It was the setting for race riots and cultural conflict ten years ago while also being a place where cultural diversity and difference can now be expressed in an egalitarian way.

My interest in the beach as a mythologized site stems from an early residency at Bondi Pavilion in 1989, the suburb in which I lived. Through my research for this project I came across early images of seaside studio photographs where painted backdrops were utilized featuring beach scenes; an imagined version of what was just outside - a replica of the real world made for the convenience of the photographer. I found examples in the local and state library photographic archives, the surf lifesaving clubs and was reacquainted with these kinds of images through a recent exhibition at MAG&M featuring keepsake photographs made with a studio backdrop featuring scenes of sandy beaches, palm trees and umbrellas.

The backdrop became a device that references this form of photography and provides a kind of set-like space that the subjects can present themselves and perform on. I never really attempt to conceal that they are in fact backdrops and in some sense point to the artifice that is involved in these staged studio photographs, suggesting that portraiture is a constructed process.

The works of notable painters, from Vermeer and the various 'Dutch Masters' to mid-20th century Australian painters such as Charles Meere and Freda Robertshaw have been touchstones for generating some of your best-known images. Here for Playground of the Pacific you've been reflecting on a much more obscure 1940s oil painting (from the MAG&M collection) by Nancy Kilgour. What are the qualities of this painting that have engaged you and inspired you toward new work?

After being invited to participate at MAG&M, and shown through the gallery's collection, I was keen to involve myself with something specific to this place and to extend my earlier beach-

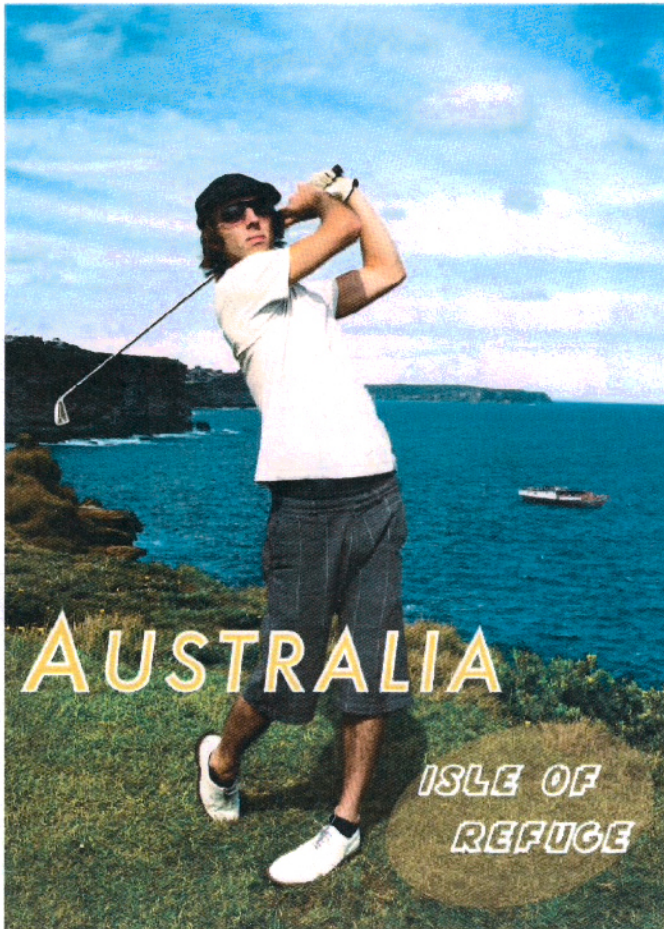
themed photographs for this exhibition. When I saw Nancy Kilgour's Manly Beach painting from the 1940s tucked away in the art store, I felt an immediate response to it. Yes, it is very much the kind of material that has inspired me. But in this painting there was something very curious; the figures arranged in the pattern of the figures in Georges Seurat's famous painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of la Grande Jatte*, but instead set on a recognizable Manly Beach.

This theatrical arrangement of figures is very interesting and I have drawn much from it in the making of this new body of work. The original painting, re-photographed, figures digitally removed with current background scenes added, has become a new backdrop for me.



*The Sunbather, 2015*





Above left: *Australia, Isle of Refuge*, 2009. Above right: *Cronulla, Jewel of the Shire*, 2009, from the series *Homeground*

I have then re-figured contemporary subjects into the composition reflecting on both Kilgour and Seurat, which gives me opportunity to introduce a new narrative set on Manly beach today.

The painting has drawn me back to South Steyne and the Manly Surf Club to work in this context much the way I had worked at the Bondi Pavilion some 25 years earlier.

The Kilgour painting itself is less precise than some works that I have reflected on in the past (such as *Australian Beach Pattern* by Charles Meere), and presents a far less idealized image. When I view the painting, I feel as though Nancy knows some of the subjects she is portraying – that she has a relationship to them just as I have to the people in my work. Unlike Meere who painted in the studio, it feels as though Nancy spent time on the beach acquainting herself with the subjects and with their behaviour. Some of the figures that occupy my response to her work have appeared in earlier images over the duration of my beach series.

I'm intrigued that Kilgour has reflected on Seurat's early painting from 1884 as an almost postmodernist gesture, and was motivated to mirror the subject matter. I enjoyed thinking about the fact that Nancy had chosen

this relatively modern painting (though it was possibly 64 years old by the time she referenced it) and where she may have first seen it. This has been a wonderful new stimulus for me, and I owe a lot to Nancy.

Your portraits from the recent shoots at Manly, like many of your past portrait projects, carry a staged tableau appearance. To keen observers of your body of work, this may give the impression of a familiar controlled aesthetic, but is there also an increasing social/documentary aspect emerging?

I feel my work has always engaged with an aspect of social documentation and commentary even when it is staged. As I return to past subject matter and reflect on this work, I notice that what has been recorded is subtle changes to the way we live, and the society we have become and I'm pleased about this occurrence. Inevitably, this has an impact on the making of new work and I'm aware of its relevance as a social record of individuals and groups within the community.

The tableau-like compositions really stem from my fascination with painting and its

conventions. The stylized figures in the works of Meere and Freda Robertshaw are obvious examples of a neo-classical style but allow for a re-presenting of these to comment on the kinds of images and ideals that these works perpetuated.

In the portraits made in Manly, I see a strong relationship with my earlier Bondi series and my socio-documentary style of the 1990s such as my *Open House* and *Fortresses* and *Frontiers* projects.

The integration of irony and parody into your work is well documented. However, I find your images of people to be non-judgmental, and I have noticed during the shoots a genuine warmth between you and your subjects. How do you view that balance and how do you achieve that trust?

I find that I develop a relationship (even if brief) with the people I photograph. I feel privileged and grateful to anyone who is willing to be a subject in my work. Funnily enough, some people are thrilled to be included while others abhor the idea.

There is an element of parody in some of my





Clockwise from top left: *Cole Classic*, 1998, *The Lifesavers*, 2015, *The Surfers*, 1989

work, but I feel a responsibility to be respectful. Many of the poses will appear staged, and they were staged, but as I've said in the past, I feel there is an unpredictable and interesting tension between the participation of the subject and the scene they are performing in.

Some of these subjects in your portraits re-appear in new works many years after the initial works, and you have done the same with some props, costumes and objects. The effect is compelling and powerful, revealing when the works are viewed together. What is your ambition with this device?

A couple of years ago I undertook to re-make the image of *The Bathers*, 1989 for *The Art of Australia* documentary. I gathered some of the original cast of subjects and added other faces to reflect the changes in ethnicities that had occurred in this time. The original *The Bathers* consisted a very European group of people with Italian, Greek and Anglo's jostling for space. *The New Bathers*, 2013 includes Asian, African

and Indigenous Australian figures along with a Muslim woman wearing the 'burqini'. It seemed important to show the difference between this past work that had become so defining of multicultural Australia of the '80's and '90's, and the one we live in today.

The *Spire* images and in particular the portraits shot on Cronulla Beach are charged with a purposeful socio-political mission. Working here at Manly now, is there a more nostalgic impetus in making these new images that will be part of *Playground of the Pacific*?

The project here at MAG&M begins with exhibiting some existing works shot in Manly for my *Leisureland* series, so it really is a 'return to Manly' experience for me. I've approached the new Manly work with a view to collaborating with the community. I've looked at many portraits and 'beachscape' images shot in and around Manly, thanks to the MAG&M collection once again, and to the local studies collection at Manly library.

Inspiration and ideas from these historical images dovetail with my own projects from the past to inform the new portraits. There is no agenda beyond wishing to discover and document the diversity of the community, and perhaps in subtle ways hint at a changing social landscape, whilst happily playing with the real and artificial location of Manly Beach, and somewhat within the traditions of photographic portraiture.

In my work, I still like to question the dominant images of Australian culture, whether it is a painting by Charles Meere or a photograph by Max Dupain in order to expose the stereotypes and offer other ways of seeing ourselves. Identity is formed through our association with place and through the roles and activities played there. In some ways all this is stripped away at the beach yet we are still defined by the colours, caps, togs and even the thongs we choose to wear there.





Manly Art Gallery & Museum proudly presents Anne Zahalka's *Playground of the Pacific*, as the focus exhibition for the Manly Arts Festival 2015.

Anne Zahalka has become one of Australia's most recognised photomedia artists, having produced a celebrated body of work from more than 30 years of practice.

Zahalka's artworks feature in major public collections across the nation, and prominently in published collections of Australian art photography. Her images have been commissioned for airports, hotels, universities and Parliament House Canberra. Some of Anne's works could be said to have taken on a status almost matching that of the famous paintings that she occasionally references.

From her acclaimed early series *Resemblance* (1987) - photographic portraits strongly reflecting on the stylistic elements of paintings by Dutch Masters, through to celebrated *Leisureland* (1999) series, and more recently a series of images delving into the shifting cultural characteristics of Sydney suburbs titled *Homeground*, Anne Zahalka has remained a leading presence in Australian contemporary art.

Reflecting on the imagery of commercial portrait photography, cinema and advertising, Zahalka has explored the device of the traditional scenic

backdrop, and artificial painted and printed backdrops remain a feature of her work.

Alongside the visual tropes in her images, Zahalka has continually investigated and challenged ideas of national identity, culture and gender. In the range of settings for her portrait figures, she has never strayed for too long from the image of the beach, whether real or imagined.

The *Playground of the Pacific* exhibition gathers together beach-themed images from previous photographic series and individual works by Anne Zahalka, and she has created new images inspired by and generated in part from an obscure 1940s painting of Manly Beach by Nancy Kilgour – a work from MAG&M collection. Anne has reflected upon, re-figured, and paid homage to that image to be both artwork in itself and backdrop for the creation of site-specific portrait works, which have been created in Manly.

Top: *Untitled, Figures on Manly Beach* (after Nancy Kilgour), 2015

Left: *The Artist*, 2015