HOLDING SPACE 2025

Rituals of Welcome

Introduction

This exhibition is a joyous celebration of ***Rituals of Welcome*** - showcasing the work of 12 project artists and over 200 community participants, engaged in residencies, creative developments and community based workshops in 2025.

Artists were asked to respond to the concept of *Rituals of Welcome*, and to propose creative ideas and transformative processes that encourage connectedness within and across cultures and communities.

We have been guided by First Nation artists who have encouraged us to listen actively and feel the landscapes that welcome us to this land and increase our connection to it. Artists and community members have worked in collaboration to create a beautiful body of artworks exploring stories of lived experiences, ancestral memories and traditional ceremonial practices of welcome. Individual artists have also explored their cultural heritages to re-imagine and create new cultural practices and diversity of expression.

Together this exhibition offers a range of provocations - tactile, sensory and artistically layered, that invite us to look for commonality and connection.

SHORT FILMS in the STUDIO

1.

Welcome to Country, continuing culture for thousands of years

Artist: Jacinta Tobin

Video: 7.47 mins

Reflection time has been sitting deeply with me, as I continue to count the Elders who guided me and encouraged me to stand up and be proud of my Country, Lore and Culture. To show others, we are still here showing good manners and right way intent. A Welcome takes time and prays to our Ancestors, part of the Creator of all that is. Respect is the key for all living things. This is how a “Welcome” has always been.

Jacinta Tobin is a Musical Educator of mixed race from the Boorooberongal and Cannemegal freshwater Darug clans from Greater Sydney with European blood. Jacinta has worked for over 25 years in community, government and non-government organisations and has received many awards for her service. Jacinta believes when we speak or sing in language, we are massaging Country. She believes that there is an old science of knowledge that needs re-awaking for her community and Country’s healing through Songline revitalisation.

Recording credits: Emmanual Doku, Jasper Tobin and Mary Hasting

2.

Tea Time with Your Soft Body
Artist: Wendy Qi Zhang
Video: 4.17 mins

Tea Time with Your Soft Body is a visual meditation rooted in my ancestral heritage of Fujian, drawing from the Chinese tea ceremony as a living practice of attunement and transformation. Guided by the concept of the “Soft Body”, a fluid, ever-shifting self, the work explores how ritual can act as a portal between inner and outer worlds. In the tea ceremony, we witness the flow of transformation. The way things take shape, dissolve, and return in new forms. This rhythm of becoming mirrors the experience of belonging. It is fluid, cyclical, and continually renewed through connection. *Tea Time with Your Soft Body* is an invitation to turn inward and connect with our senses. Rituals here become pathways, not boundaries. They offer gestures through which we might find our own meanings and ways of being. The work opens a space of welcome, a place to share our many selves and layered identities, where belonging is not fixed but gently brewed again and again.

Wendy Qi Zhang is a Chinese Australian artist and technology researcher based on Darug land in Western Sydney. Her practice is rooted in Daoist philosophy, Buddhist meditation, and cyberfeminist thought, exploring healing through emerging technologies. Wendy works across digital media, projection, and interactive installations to explore identity, collective care, and diasporic belonging.

Director and Artist: Wendy Qi Zhang / Senior Creative Producer: Vandana Ram / Director of Photography: Justine Da Jose / Sound Artist: Szem / Production Assistant: Mitchell O’Gorman

3.

Rhythm of Speech
Artist: Shervin Mirzeinali
Video: 3.23 mins

Rhythm of Speech explores the musicality of language and the beauty of accent as a space of belonging. Developed through workshops with young participants from diverse linguistic backgrounds, the work focuses on the word “welcome”, a gesture that holds both cultural and emotional weight.

The piece unfolds as a journey from articulation to abstraction: beginning with close-up studies of the mouth pronouncing the word, it gradually expands into layered voices speaking in English and then in participants’ native languages. As meaning dissolves into sound, words transform into textures, rhythms, and tones, revealing speech itself as music.

This work reimagines accent not as a marker of difference or limitation, but as a rich and expressive form of identity. By detaching language from its meaning, *Rhythm of Speech* invites the audience to listen beyond understanding, to hear in each voice a shared humanity, and in every accent, a rhythm of welcome.

Shervin Mirzeinali is an Iranian-Australian composer, director, and community-focused artist. His work is rooted in his cultural heritage and shaped by a search for new musical forms that reimagine tradition through contemporary context.

Concept, music and video: Shervin Mirzenali / Videographer: Sivani Yaddanapudi / Senior Creative Producer: Vandana Ram / Participants: Aly Mashaly, Ezra Mukendi, Chantal Oredi, Shreya Sharma, Salar Hosseiniamraei, Anastasiia Kachurovska, Sarmad Hosseiniamraei

4.

Sound Walk by the Water –
Listening together as a ritual of welcome
Artist: Oonagh Sherrard
Video: 7.57 mins

In July 2025, Dharug educator Stacy-Jane Etal and sound artist Oonagh Sherrard led a Sound Walk by De Freitas Wetland and Prospect Creek in Fairfield. This audio and video work is based on that event.

Ngarra Ngurragu (Listen to Country). A song by Stacy-Jane Etal © 2025
Ngarra budbud ngurragu (Listen to the heart of Country)
Ngalawa ngarra ngurrawa (Sit and listen to Country)
Ngarra ngurragu bayala (Listen to Country speak)
Mii ngarradyimi (What do you hear?)

Sources:
Alison Cadzow and Heather Goodall “Rivers and Resilience – Aboriginal People on Sydney’s Georges River” (2009) UNSW Press
Stephen Gapps, “Cabrogal to Fairfield City: A History of a Multicultural Community” (2009) Fairfield City Council
Videography and Sound: Sivani Yaddanapudi, Samantha Barahona, Oonagh Sherrard

Composer, sound artist & producer Oonagh Sherrard is inspired by listening to the language and music of the natural world, creating sound based work on waterways including "11 Stories from the River Dyarubbin", “Yarramundi and the People of Dyarubbin” & "South Creek/Wianamatta Turning" involving strong collaborations with Dharug knowledge-holders and community.

5.

Threads of Home

Artist: Damon Amb

Paintings (mixed media) and 12 photographs

Threads of Home is a meditation on belonging, displacement, and the shared human rituals that bind us to one another. Through photography and painting, Damon weaves connections between Persian traditions of hospitality and the welcoming ceremonies of First Nations people in Australia. For him, home has never been a fixed place but a shifting memory — an invisible fabric made of people, gestures, and the small rituals that keep us human. In this body of work, he returns to the symbols that have long defined welcome in his culture: water for purity, salt for loyalty, food for hospitality, and esfand smoke for protection. These same elements echo across continents — in the smoke of ceremony, in the warmth of shared food, and in the sacredness of gathering.

In *Threads of Home*, Damon honours the spirit of those who open their hearts and homes, who keep the fire burning and the water flowing. This work is an invitation — to listen, to breathe, and to feel the subtle power of being welcomed, and of welcoming others in return.

Damon Amb is a multidisciplinary artist, photographer, and cultural storyteller whose work is rooted in personal history, displacement, and the search for identity. Born in Iran and now based in Australia, Damon's journey as a refugee deeply informs their artistic practice, which spans photography, painting, digital art, and curatorial work. He has exhibited across galleries in Iran, Sydney, Melbourne, and a variety of community and professional platforms.

6.

Seeds of Welcoming
Artist: Maryam Hosseini
100 x 100cm, Acrylic on canvas

In this painting, I wanted to show the welcoming part of our culture in Afghanistan. Women have the main role in this tradition. Although they face many barriers and hardships in their lives, they still heal their emotional and physical wounds.

The woman sewing pomegranate seeds — symbols of love — onto the guest's sleeve represents how Afghan women share warmth, kindness, and connection through their hospitality. My work explores the quiet strength and nurturing spirit of women through the interconnectedness of culture, nature, and emotion. I am drawn to stories of resilience, healing, and belonging themes that emerge through gentle colours, layered textures, and symbolic imagery.

Rooted in my cultural heritage and shaped by my experiences across different landscapes, my paintings often reflect moments of peace, reflection, and connection. Whether portraying women sewing seeds of welcome or resting in nature's embrace, I aim to capture the grace and power found in everyday acts of care and renewal.

Maryam Hosseini (b. 1994) is an Afghan artist who has dedicated over 15 years to visual arts. Her work spans various styles, including Realism, Surrealism, Abstract, and Impressionism, employing diverse techniques such as oil paint, watercolor, gouache, colored pencils, and charcoal. Maryam's art primarily focuses on abstract themes, with each piece conveying a profound message to her audience. Her artwork has been featured in numerous exhibitions, such as the Beyond Borders exhibition at 1 Elizabeth and the World Refugee Day exhibition at Parramatta Police Station in 2024. She has also participated in group exhibitions in Tehran in 2023, 2015, 2014, and 2012, and showcased her work at the ECO Cultural Institute in Tehran in 2021.

7.

Healing Ground
Artist: Hosna Saif
Charcoal and colored pencil on paper

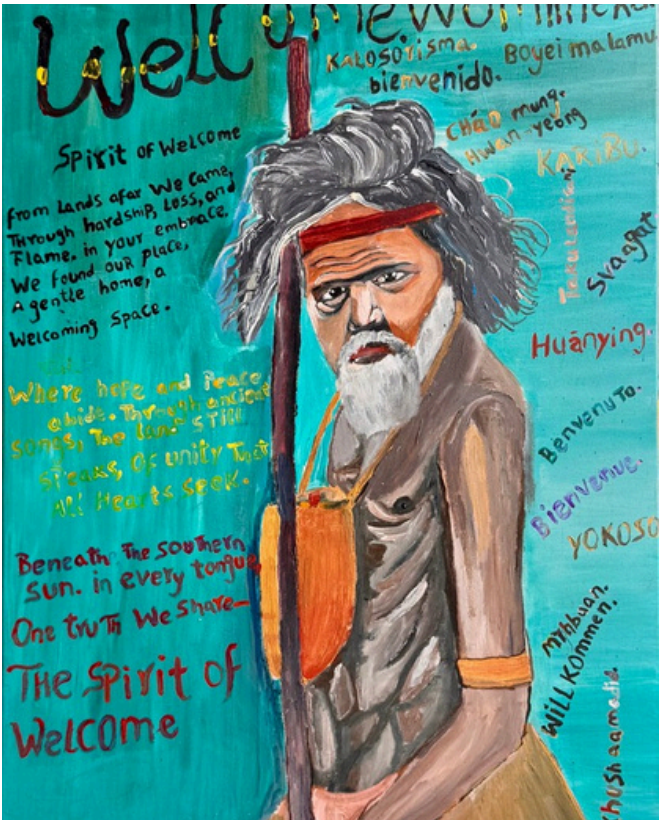
If the land were a human, it would be a mother. Aboriginal people see the land this way too, because only a mother can endure so much, yet remain strong, nurturing, and full of power. For me, the ritual of welcome is the energy I receive from people, the warmth they share, and the connection I feel with nature, the bond between humans and the world around us.

This is how I felt welcomed in this beautiful country, with its green spaces and open skies, a place where I could finally begin to bloom. The dark tones in my work reflect the hardships and struggles I carried, while the flowers and lighter shades represent growth, hope, and renewal. Through this piece, I celebrate resilience, the strength found in care and connection, and the journey from endurance to flourishing.

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, Hosna Saif grew up in a world where being a girl meant her dreams of education and freedom were denied. She turned to art as her voice, using drawing and painting to express strength and advocate for women's rights.

After leaving Afghanistan, she lived in Pakistan, where she won a prize for her artwork "Gender Equality". Now based in Sydney, she continues to practice art while working as a paralegal and studying law, building a future shaped by both creativity and purpose. Her charcoal works have been showcased through Creative Campus in exhibitions including "Beyond Borders" and "Spirit of Welcome". Hosna's story, told through her art, is a reminder that even in the hardest circumstances, it is possible to rise, rebuild.

8.



Spirit of Welcome
Artist: Ezra Mukendi
Acrylic on canvas

Overall my paintings explore the spirit of welcome through culture, nature, and gratitude. They connect with my African roots, the warmth of Aboriginal culture and the harmony of Australia's natural beauty.

1. *Spirit of Welcome* honours the first peoples of Australia and expresses gratitude for the welcome that made this land feel like home.
2. Harmony of home: Two cockatoos symbolise friendship and belonging, reflecting nature's quiet ritual of welcome.
3. Roots of celebration (African traditional dance) celebrate African traditional dance through rhythm, unity, and joy.

My paintings explore the spirit of welcome through culture, nature, and gratitude. They weave together my African roots, the warmth of Aboriginal culture, and the harmony of Australia’s natural beauty. Through colour, pattern, and organic form, I express a sense of belonging and connection to land, to people, and to shared moments of openness and appreciation.

Ezra Mukendi (b. 2006 in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo) is a self-taught artist who developed his skills in Malawi. Working mainly with pen, pencil, oils, and acrylics, Ezra’s art reflects his passion for storytelling and social themes. He has created murals for business owners in Malawi and participated in several exhibitions in Sydney through the Creative Compass program. Ezra uses his art to explore themes like freedom, human rights, equality, and the importance of love and community. His work pays respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original caretakers of the land and honors their long-lasting connection to it. His first exhibition was held at Police HQ, Parramatta.

9.

Blessed Milk Thistle

Artist: Justine Youssef

Digital prints on textured cotton ra*g*

For *Rituals of Welcome*, I present a scented oil distilled from ‘Blessed Milk Thistle’ using a process inherited from my mother and her lineage. This work proposes the act of sharing scent as a transformative process to navigate complex histories and encourage connectedness.

The plant itself embodies paradoxical welcomes. In Lebanon, it is a sacred sustainer, believed to have been blessed by a drop of the Virgin Mary’s milk, which made it a vital food for lactating mothers and a shield against famine. On Dharug Country, however, it was introduced by settlers for medicinal use. It quickly eluded cultivation, developing noxious qualities under the unique climate, and is now considered highly invasive across the region. By engaging with its entire story—its thorns and its medicine—my practice performs a ritual of welcome towards these difficult, entangled truths. I invite audiences to encounter this scent not as a simple comfort, but as a portal to shared narratives of displacement and steadfastness.

This work suggests that true connectedness across cultures begins by welcoming the prickly and the historically charged, transforming exhibition spaces into sites of nuanced, sensory dialogue.

Justine Youssef is an artist and producer whose work is informed by ethnobotany and guided by worldbuilding processes. She guest-edited Runway Journal's recent Issue #49: 'BLOOM', curating contributions on themes of alchemy and renewal. Her exhibition 'Somewhat Eternal' toured across Adelaide Contemporary Experimental (2024), the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (2024), and UTS Gallery, Sydney (2023), following earlier work at the Hawai’i Triennial, O’ahu (2022) which explored impacts of displacement and complicity, and the endurance of rituals and beliefs. Justine lives and works on Dharug Country in western Sydney, where First Nations sovereignty was never ceded.

10.

Clay Rituals
Artist: Kumari Abeydeera

The clay rituals workshops facilitated by Kumari Abeydeera gathered participants from diverse backgrounds to connect to culturally imbued knowledges through the portals of clay and community ritual. Participants were guided to hand-build and embellish clay vessels to re-story their experiences of migration, embodied herstories, ancestral practices and more. Together we used clay storytelling methods to explore themes including Grandmother's stories, Moon rituals and Radical re-membering.

Participants described how working with the clay was grounding, stretched time and held healing and liberatory possibilities. The tenderness of the clay and the collective care that was woven by participants provided a safe space for storytelling, co-weaving a community space for belonging and kinship through culturally imbued creative practice.

Kumari Abeydeera is a Sri Lankan-Brit/ish multidisciplinary artist, activist, Phd scholar, psychotherapist and M/Other, envisioning embodied decolonising feminist futurities through clay, dance, grassroots film-works and participative research, on unceded Dharug and Gundungurra land in the Blue Mountains of so-called Australia. Kumari has exhibited in the Blue Mountains, Sydney and Tokyo as part of group shows and with her intersectional feminist artist collective.

11.

Rituals of Mending: Lineage, Plants and Gifts
Artist: Paula do Prado

Rituals of Mending: Lineage, Plants and Gifts were a series of three creative textile and fibre workshops facilitated by artist Paula do Prado. Ritual Mending was intended as an invitation to co-create a creative and generative space to both directly and indirectly acknowledge that many different groups of people experience disconnection from ancestral, familial and cultural ritual practices as a result of displacement, migration and diaspora. The resultant material outcomes from the workshops affirm the inherent value in making time and space for collective creative expression as a way to reconnect with self, whilst also surfacing in-common narratives and strengthening community bonds.

Workshop participants were guided as they worked towards open ended outcomes in response to reference materials including collected keepsakes, botanical materials and artwork samples. With thread as our shared language, for some this was their first experience of making in a workshop setting without following a set of steps or template to achieve a particular outcome. The works produced demonstrate participants drawing from and trusting their own inner creative knowing.

Paula do Prado is a visual artist, researcher and creative workshop facilitator working with various forms of tejido (weaving) based on the sovereign lands of the Gadigal and Bidjigal people. Born in Uruguay on the lands of the Charrúa Nation, she migrated to Australia in the mid 80s. Her art practice surfaces the intersections of her West African Bantu-Kongo, Iberian and Charrúa ancestral lineages. Her art practice is anchored in the Abya-Yala concept of cuerpo-territorio-espiritu (body-land-spirit) and sentipensante (feel-thinking) pathways that are indivisible from her cultural and spiritual practices, her family, community and beyond-human kin relationships.

12.

Time to Weave
Artist: Jessica Tobin

As part of the *Rituals of Welcome* program, First Nation artist Jessica Tobin led hands-on weaving workshops exploring the art of making bracelets. Participants learnt simple weaving techniques while reflecting on the significance of welcome, belonging, and cultural exchange. These gentle, creative sessions offered space for connection, conversation, and care through the shared act of making.

Jessica Tobin is a Dharug multidisciplinary artist and educator whose community-led practice centres on healing, cultural connection, and creative expression. With a background in socially engaged art and Aboriginal cultural practices, she facilitates workshops that honour traditional knowledge while inviting personal storytelling and connection.

Community Participants:

We wish to thank the following community members who participated in our various creative workshops that ran through 2025 and have contributed to this exhibition:

Nour, Shafiqa, Robada, Nezara, Atifa, Zahra, Delkha, Kamila, Meena, Basira, Rahmatullah, Seema, Beheshteh, Mozhan, Tamana, Roma, Fahima H, Farida, Esraa, Saba, Samah, Noon, Amal, Khawater Gumma, Ayveen, Aneeta, Ghalyeh, Ruqaia, Fahima M, Meryem, Mina, Sadaf, Nazifa, Fatima, Madina, Halima, Madiha, Maliheh, Vaad, Nur, Rim, Sedef, Samira, Chantal, Therese, Bertha, Aly, Ali Reza, Shokoufeh, Salar, Sarmad, Onil, Sajjad, Kamal, Zahra, Marzia, Mariam, Lucy, Lizi, Anastasia, Hanadi, Ahlam, Manija, Vida, Meryem, Enita, Shreya, Bibi Sabargu Masidi, Fatima Alimi, Gulsum Yaqubi, Bibi Maezia, Hakima Hassani, Zahra Hussaini, Zeinab Moradi, Laila Amiri, Yingqing He, Yusheng Deng Felicia Mshila, Clare Guthrie, Wendy Zhang, Ellie Francis, Jason Nicholas, Kirsten Spry , Eve Parry, Jenny Trinh, Kirsten Magalang, Krithika Ramkumar, Louise McKenzie, Alice Ly, Eva Rodriguez Riestra, Maryam Hosseini, Carol Yang, Michaela Ramas, Ottilia Lopez, May Tran, Paz Roman, Natalia Figueroa, Yin Yeung, Ravin Jain, Rebecca Nguyen, Carielyn Tunion, Pratha Nagpal, Prab Juneja, Larissa Dulat, Kylie Swain, Ushma Joseph.

Other Acknowledgments:
This project would not have come to fruition without the amazing support of Moones Mansoubi, Women, Youth & Communities Manager, Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), Ghasan Saaid, Manager, Orientation & Creative Arts, Humanitarian Settlement Program, and their teams from SSI, who assisted in every way to coordinate participation of a huge range of community members, as well as with interpreting, transport , and the very special Community Refugee Welcome Centre.

We also acknowledge the support of Inner West Council staff who assisted with transport and promotion of the project, as well as Aunty Deb Lennis and Aunty Tarunna Sebastian who grounded this project with a beautiful Welcome and Smoking Ceremony.

Curiousworks Team:
Kiriaki Zakinthinos - CEO
Vandana Ram - Senior Creative Producer
Samantha Barahona - Creative Producer
Miranda Aguilar - Creative Producer
Andrea Nealy - Finance and Administration Officer (maternity leave)
Kirsten Maglalang - Administration Assistant (maternity leave cover)
Jenny Trinh - Communications Officer

HOLDING SPACE is funded by the NSW Government through the Multicultural NSW COMPACT Program. Our project collaborators are SSI's Community Refugee Welcome Centre located at Callan Park, Lilyfield, and Community Partners Sydney Opera House.