

# IN-Formalism



Wendy Paramor  
*Triad* 1967

Exhibition May 18 – June 30, 2019

Symposium 23 June, 2019

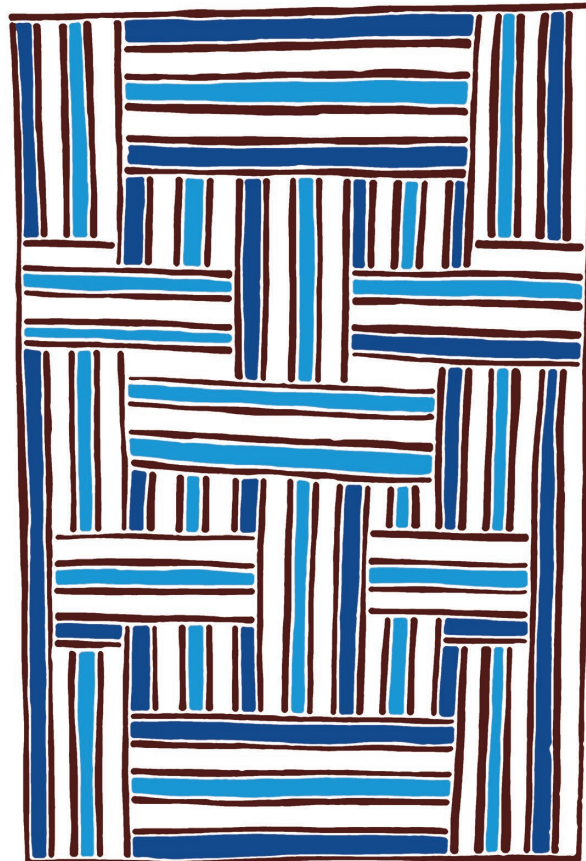
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Banduk Marika  
*Minitjinbarra 2007*

# IN-Formalism

James Paull & Ruark Lewis

"Here: a map that suggests a place to rest. In the desert of language – where can I find you?

Where can I find this new warmth? What is it that is not being said?"

*poetschko-12, Brian Fuata*



*IN-Formalism* could be described as an ambitious effort to survey an intergenerational story of Australian non-objective art. A collection of Formalist paintings, sculptures and installations, these disparate works document the exploration of painting's own formal properties. Beginning with the watershed *Field* exhibition of 1968, the output of three generations of artists emerging from the 1960s onwards tells of an expanding and increasingly hybrid interdisciplinary field of practices, including the turn associated with new digital technologies.

While useful, the above narrative turns play and experiment into orthodoxy. Academicist genres of 'survey', 'history' and 'tradition' overdetermine cultural identity, while relegating to shadow the otherness that contaminates it. What can be discovered in the shadow is the present moment inherent within each work, its contemporaneity. To respond to this more unstable, yet proximate, history we must be prepared to see and think differently.

To take one example: Mel Ramsden's *No Title* (1966). One of three black horizontal monochrome paintings he made in this period, it displays an almost-reflective picture surface. Included in *The Field*, the minimalist form is reflective of ambient light that intervenes in the observer's experience. By drawing attention to the surface in this way, Ramsden helps shift from the artwork itself towards the act of perception. Perception is inherently slippery. Hierarchical ideas such as the autonomy of the painting can be subverted by other perceptible elements: mirror-like reflections, surface imperfections and the ambience of the environment.

Whatever their differences, each generation displayed in this exhibition shares something of the interdisciplinary character of modernism present in Australia over the past century. International movements emerge gradually and disparately. Collectively, they describe the development of an increasingly urban, cosmopolitan and industrialised nation. Although *IN-Formalism* displays threads of this story, its primary focus is a world of parallel ideas, materials and processes that have incubated at Sydney Non-Objective (SNO), an artist-initiated, artist-run gallery which opened in Marrickville in 2005. With a growing collective, it quickly affirmed the platform for a heterogeneous program practice generated by artists engaged in art-making. From its inception, SNO has taken the Central Street group among its prototypes to investigate iterations of nonobjective practice. Central Street Gallery opened in the Sydney CBD in 1967. Programs were prepared by artists with an explicit commitment to the reductive abstraction soon showcased in *The Field*.

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SNO posits the artist's processes at the centre of research. To translate something of its history means not simply focusing on visual objects designed for the gallerist's aesthetic pleasure but to consider the secret chatter that helps drive the engine-room of the artist-run space. Here is a place

for the curious to rest, an in-between world produced in the give-and-take of conversation. Ideas, half-formed and dogmatic, speculative, ludic and pedagogic, drift among volunteers, drop-outs, professionals, amateurs, auto-didacts and artists. The drift meanders, at other times flows. By finding ways to steer it, the artist performs an incubatory role essential to the broader transformative history whereby materiality becomes artwork.

How might this local evolutionary working language be understood if it is always in the making, if we are always directed to see its objects from a different angle? The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein pondered two types of language game. Each game concerns colour, but one reports whether a certain body is darker or lighter than another, the other on the lightness between certain shades of colour. He concludes: "The form of the proposition in both language-games is the same: 'X is lighter than Y'. But in the first it is an external relation and the proposition is temporal, in the second it is an internal relation and the proposition is timeless."

This characteristically enigmatic aphorism can help us to steer through the exhibition's abstract system of creative relations, its playful restaging and interventionist conjectures. Here is gathered in complex modular forms a spectrum of correspondences that communicate visual and aural traces of social and institutional histories, as well internal relations that can be likened to an underlying grammar. When interpreted allegorically, they tell of ways artists approach questions that are as much generational as intergenerational in nature, professional and non-professional, regional and international, painterly and non-painterly.



Aesthetic objects, or 'artworks', are ambivalent because they're doubled as original and reproduction. Today this statement is uncontroversial, subsumed within a new distinction introduced by digital technology. Terms like 'digital natives' are now commonly used to describe a generation for whom information is and always has been 'data'. Things are grasped in terms of speed, instantaneity, virtual networks. Earlier generations – 'digital immigrants' – live in the same world into which natives have grown but differ in their humanist-inflected memory of a time when there was likely to be debate between art and readymade. Today everyone must confront the exchange between human and non-human. Technology mediates all domains of social and imaginative life.

It is then the younger group of artists that brings to the program its generative focus. Urban-based, their language is fluid, digital natives in the landscape of sampling and quotation. Their materials can be anything, accessed anywhere across time and space. Jonny Niesche employs digital printing to produce his visually kinetic graphics, while Brian Fuata's performances derive from text messages and emails. Sardar Sinjawi's work explores relations between the visible and invisible by using found-objects. Eric Bridgeman's patterns have been painted on cheaply purchased materials. Consuelo Cavaniglia's use of coloured perspex and glass documents the ephemeral contingencies of time and place in the production of meaning. They are inheritors of the postmodern suspicion towards metanarratives, travellers in search of multiple yet fleeting experiences and alert to the Western, or Euro-American, bias of modern art canons.

Yet what becomes apparent is less the hyper-referential character that distinguishes today's generation than the awareness their modes of abstraction have with earlier practitioners. Jonathan Jones assembles fluorescent light tubes illuminating what might be an archetypal Formalist pattern.

Biljana Jancic's investigation of light plays with the sensory experiencing of porosity by employing grid systems that filter hard-edge lines. Bonita Bub's remaking of everyday industrial objects draws attention to the replica and its original, thereby alluding to modernism's uncanny presence in postmodern processes. In their exploration of certain shades, such elaborations bring into play a timeless relationship.

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Form, line and colour appear then disappear; an idea, concept, tradition become tangible before receding into shadow. It might be claimed that to a generation at home in an ecology of the digital rather than analogue, modernist prototypes exist merely to be quoted – simulacra of the living and dead. When seen from another angle, the residues of ancient patterns encoded within hybrid material processes speak not just of irony but of a mode of becoming conversant with earlier generational prototypes.

Today's regional vernacular, site-specificity and industrial materiality contribute to demystifying the gallery. In this continuum lies a contrapuntal thinking to the purely 'retinal' ideology Marcel Duchamp identified as intended to please the eye. One evolutionary line of practice is evident in a generation of artists who began their practice a decade or so after *The Field*. Andrew Leslie's fusion of architectural scope and minimalist optical codes develops with wall-based installation. Ruark Lewis' multiplatform transcription practice originates not in the language of painterly abstractionism but in drawing. Jacky Redgate explores principles of transformation and translation across systems, particularly of the three-dimensional world into two-dimensional images. Kerrie Poliness documents explorations of transmission and industrial-scale transformation: instruction texts guide teams of random collaborators, sometimes unknown to the artist, to create geometric public configurations.

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Whatever way intergenerational exchange is discursively fashioned, it is doubtful it represents a project serving narrow ideological agendas. Artists today who delight in running their hands along lines made by another, discovering their 'thoughtlines', are characterised by an evasion of nostalgia and an absence of teleology. Their process records an interrogation of typologies that result in work they conceptualise as a kind of microcosm interconnected within a living (and dying) system.



Helen Smith

*Alighiero e Boetti from Wikipedia, Non Aligned Movement 2015*



Nigel Lendon's most recent works use the generic term 'model' to describe a series of three- and four-dimensional geometric objects made using industrial materials. The small scale of the models invokes a microcosm's relational nature, but in Lendon's hands they speak of multiple histories, personal and institutional – consistently invoking his early encounter with Russian Constructivism.

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It is possible to conjecture that SNO documents two cultural traditions across its one hundred and fifty plus exhibitions. These at times run parallel, often converge, and at times conflict. A founding principle was no doubt a collective interest in developmental approaches that deepened local and global traditions of non-objective art. Although heterogeneous in nature, the ambit of artists presented a shared visual language that references a handful of earlier watershed exhibitions including *The Field*. What distinguished this exhibition is how it showcased contemporary works in colour-field and hard-edge painting by a generation of mostly young, little known artists including Normana Wight and Wendy Paramor. The success of the exhibition helped give the avant-garde institutional legitimacy.

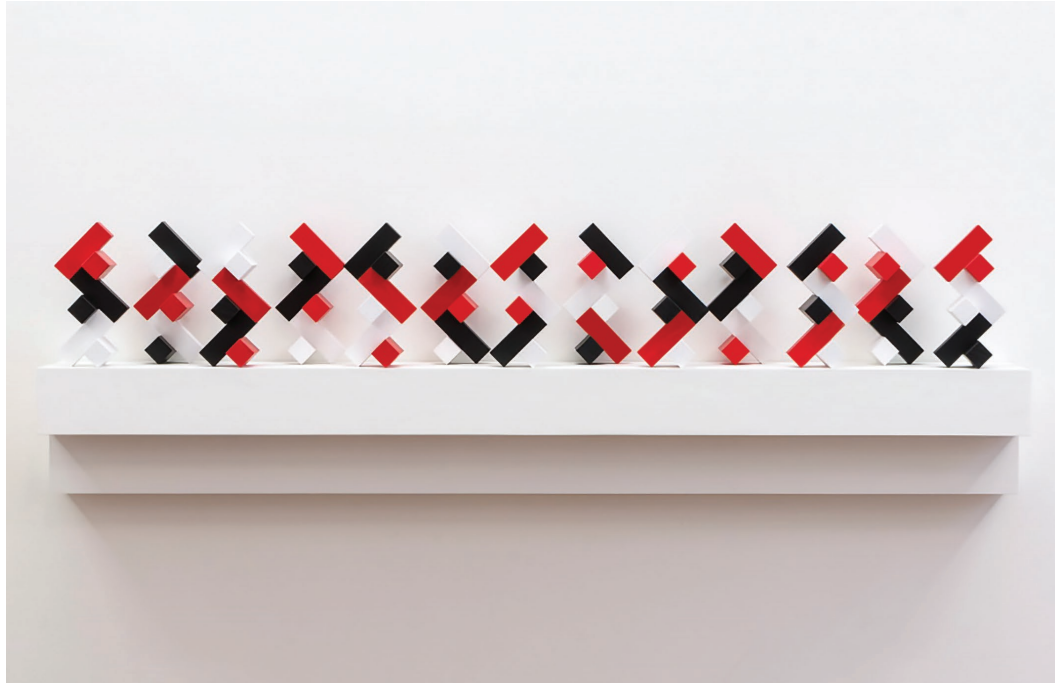
Dominant stylistic and aesthetic trends in 1968 meant awareness of Greenbergian or American modernism, which advocates that narrative in painting be replaced by the purely formal elements of painting. Two artists in *The Field* that seem most decisively to point a way outside this thinking are Mel Ramsden (who, since 1976, has practiced as a member of Art & Language, rather than under his own name) and Ian Burn. Ramsden's *Black Painting (or No Title) 1966*, made by Nigel Lendon in 2018 is a remaking of the original following Ramsden's present-day instructions. Burn's 1966 *Mirror Piece* was created with accompanying books of diagrams and notes he wanted to be duplicated and placed in the exhibition venue.

Their combined intervention occurred at the very moment of Australia's belated entry into the international avant-garde. Each artist marks the break away from the autonomous standing of the painterly object towards an identifiably relational aesthetic. The lessons would be transmitted over the next decade to a new generation, whose artistic exploration by means of post-conceptual processes and new media identifies a second non-objective tradition sometimes referred to as an 'expanded field'. The reflective, interrogative nature of the output belongs to a period of cultural revisionism helping shift focus to the nation's migrant and postcolonial identity.

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First line, first colour, first material. Today's processes of mash-up, quotation and irony allude to a scepticism towards our past. There is good reason for this. The past is treacherous, signposting the highway of history's repressions. Greenberg writes of American painterly abstraction's lineage by refuting European, or any other, traditions. Australian modernists like Margaret Preston champion Aboriginal motifs and forms, while overlooking their context and meaning. But this past is inseparable from another past, ancient and anonymous. In such a time emerged elementary patterns experienced by each community, each being, human and non-human.

As traditional painterly forms withdraw, the patterns they translate return in the periphery of our gaze. The artist communicates the contemporary but her retinal shift is aware of amorphous shapes to her side, shapes that become structures as they advance into focus. The sensation of movement in Leslie's painted modular units records this dynamic. Karin Lettau's *GELB* expands one's sense of space while enfolding intimacy – its enigmatic dialectic inseparable from the structure's yellow optic. Gordon Bennett's stripe paintings document through brushstroke layering an artist's immersion in painting's non-referential materiality.



The movement towards and away from history signals the language-game of *IN-Formalism* – steering, sometimes content to simply drift across passages at once temporal and timeless. The outcome is a puzzling reductionism invoking strange yet familiar patterns – witness Richard Dunn’s clan paintings or Banduk Marika’s screenprint clan design entitled ‘Miyntjinharra’, which means ‘no meaning’.

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As you enter and leave the main gallery spaces, you will need to adjust your way of hearing. The sounds following you communicate an argument about how you see. Walking around, lingering, or perhaps moving in a direct forceful manner to escape the noise. Different states of engagement. You are the listener.

In addition to the audio collages made by composer Rik Rue are numerous other pieces that have been prepared under the curatorship of Ian Andrews and John Gillies. These include a selection of sound and video works by Gillies as well as a video piece of a performance including Rue, Amanda Stewart and Chris Mann. The figures represented at Casula have all emerged since the 1960s. They share a commitment to ludic experimentation. They work as soloists and collaboratively, across theatre, video, dance, art and electronic-digital media. Some design hardware and software, others use high-tech or low-tech recording systems to incorporate urban and non-urban environments.

Listening is too often consigned to the periphery in what is commonly labelled cultural value. Sound is even considered a contaminant of vision, particularly in the pseudo-aristocratic aesthetic of the white cube. However, by 1919 – the year that witnessed the founding of the Bauhaus – no creative practice existed independently of sound. John Cage's mid-century works signal the international 'extra-musical' turn – that is, when divisions separating sound and music, between hearing and seeing, become porous.

By the late 1960s, Cage's formative presence had reached David Ahern. A commission from the Australian Broadcasting Commission for a radiophonic composition resulted in *Journal* (1969), an early experiment in stereo broadcasting in Australia. The following year Ahern established the new music organisation AZ Music and the free improvisation group Teletopa. Teletopa's unpremeditated performances left an imprint on a young generation of musicians, artists, designers and students.

The group also worked collaboratively with Philippa Cullen, whose quest for a dancer-generated environment became inseparable from electronically-mediated performance.

Chris Mann, some of whose texts were set to music by Cage, developed from the premise of sound as the primary determiner of meaning, but it is voice and text that determines how we experience sound. Mann's work stretches five decades, and his most recent creative essays can be explored on his website at [theuse.info](http://theuse.info).



To restage something implies commemoration, but it can also suggest that this something's value has yet to be determined. The art of Wendy Paramor is testimony to this line of thought. The restaging of Paramor is an opportunity to investigate local and international non-objective traditions from another angle. The regional setting of her work in Western Sydney where she lived, worked and died focuses considerations that attend Australian artists encountering modernism – provincial beginnings, the rite of passage overseas, and the return to the most ambiguous of countries: home.



In contrast to some of her Central Street contemporaries, Paramor was obscured in the post-*Field* decades. A major retrospective of her work was not held until in 2000 at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre. In part her obscurity can be attributed to her death in 1975. It would soon prove difficult finding information about Paramor or locate paintings, drawings and sculptures. Her work was barely visible in state or regional galleries. Works given to friends were lost or had deteriorated. This melancholy provenance influenced the curatorial focus of the Paramor retrospective.

By 'finding' Paramor in the form of the archive and restoration of works, a local artist almost lost comes back to life. And yet the fullness of her presence should not occlude the shadows that attend her: an intimate but faded photographic family album of snapshots, anecdotal accounts from those who were once friends and colleagues but now are aged or deceased, commissioned drawings of design outfits never fabricated, paintings that remain lost. Even originals that survive intact, like *Diabolo*, convey a muted character in the use of colour and pattern – a quality separating Paramor from hard-edge and colour field contemporaries.

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The history secreted within an artwork's surface records concentration of focus. Individual biography gives way to an infinitely expansive material abstraction that arose with the decline of naturalist painting. Pattern and colour translate neo-platonic sensations on one side, new technologies and materials on the other, referencing a world both noisier and more democratic.

The generation of artists that emerge in the 1960s exude confidence because their experimentalism carried forward iterations of an international provenance. The ideas and processes underpinning Formalism and Conceptualism trace a genealogy beginning a half-century earlier in Europe: Constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, Dada and Surrealism. These circulate globally (notably to North America) and in Australia through publications, exhibitions, public sculptures, the decorative arts and crafts, commercial furnishings and business districts. Another important conduit is education and the imprint of individual teachers. The nation is inoculated by the White Australia Policy, but interconnected by transnational and interdisciplinary migration of ideas, images, words and peoples.

Around 1966, the Central Street group set about challenging art orthodoxies in the role of a gallery, all the while running an advertising business upstairs. Like most of her colleagues, Paramor lived and exhibited overseas before joining the group. Her sculptural works are displayed in *The Field* and considered among the highlights. Paramor is one of three women among 40 artists shown. Men dominate the avant-garde, but she stands as an equal, enriched by the nuclei's contributions while seeking through collaboration distinct productions of form. Her response to Julie Simpson's commission to produce set designs for outfits is one example. Another is with tapestry-weaver Margaret Grafton, who wove Paramor's non-figurative forms into tapestries before gifting them to Paramor.

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The geo-engineering of the world, today inseparable from the digital, results in the flattening of experience. The constitutive physicality forging basic distinctions of land and sea, urban and nonurban, is threatened. Perhaps this awareness finds its way into fabrications made by the younger generation of artists. Their attention to material heterogeneity reveals the residual strangeness of everyday language by means of what Martin Heidegger valued as 'techne': craftsmanship inseparable from the making of poetic thought.

Grafton's public-commissioned artworks are symptomatic of a time when artists and parallel practitioners expressed the confidence and skill to influence the political and economic system shaping our cities. *The Field* is first exhibited in the newly completed National Gallery of Victoria designed by Roy Grounds. Ideas and forms are fashioned by visitors, travellers and migrants whose affiliations are international. Harry Williamson's minimalist commercial logos typify an intuitively

playful logic. The dress designs of John Kaldor, then John Kaldor of Universal Textiles (Australia) Ltd, are sensual and fragile fabrics displaying a Bauhaus design-education.

Modernist practices convey faith in the beneficial outcomes of science and technology-led growth models. With this is belief in infinite resources, endless abundance. Alongside this attitude, and at times against it, architects and designers explored questions of community in ways that minimised damage to the immediate environment. Bill Lucas designed environmental 'prototypes' for affordable residential housing sensitive to local topography. Glenn Murcutt's vision for designing buildings that minimise complexity, while having the lightest of environmental impacts, carry forward Lucas's thinking.

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Like Lucas and Murcutt, Philip Cox is identified with Sydney School architecture, a style developed around the craftsman's love of simple, honest materials and placed in natural bush settings. Cox, who worked with Grafton, designed Paramor's house in Western Sydney, but Paramor mostly built it herself, rendering its white brick walls and beams by hand. Both home and studio, she lived there as a single mother with her young son Luke. Urban bohemianism remained part of her life, but the rural setting on the city's edge calibrated focus on what it meant to be a formalist artist in a modernising nation. A house built partly into the slope of a land that remained largely untouched by its owner, the dry Hoxton landscape was semi-rural but part of the rapidly growing Liverpool Municipality.

Originally the country of the Dharug and Tharawal peoples, post-war Liverpool saw its population double – a period of residential booms, developments in housing and manufacturing, and the advent of European migration. Regional inequities hindered attempts to catch up on the backlog



of services. The election of the Whitlam government in 1972 introduced policies to help revitalise centres like Liverpool, targeting inequitable resource allocation and linking the west to the Sydney metropolis.

In 1966 there is no Sydney Opera House, or NGV. By 1972, 'Central Street-type painting' is part of the landscape. In this setting, Paramor was well positioned to move forward. Her imaginative lifeworld could withdraw within the intimacy of the house, while finding a way out from the ground up. Friends like Grafton used local materials to weave a modern civic iconography. Paramor also traces the local. Her sculptures are drawn in West Hoxton and fabricated in the north west of Sydney, very close to where the writer Patrick White used 'the rocks and sticks of words' to allegorise Sarsaparilla, the backwater Western suburb home to mid-century Antipodean provincialism.

The artist's provincial beginnings disappear, then return in the making of contemporary mythology. Region and place remain important concepts because they reveal how artists in Australia see in terms of their distance to others. In this postcolonial sense, the quest for purity is ironic because seeing is inherently relational. A conceptual artist like Ian Burn investigated his sense of displacement by a coincident relationship between abstractionism and Australian landscape painting. To what extent was Paramor, whose early important paintings are abstract expressionist landscapes, aware of a comparable tension?

In a changing world, the challenge she and her generation faced was to redefine difference. Their formalist sculptures and colour field paintings are testimony to the remarkable measure of the response, as well as their grasp of the moment. What they left unsaid, or could not say, or what they left to be restated, plays out by means of the expanded field and the endlessly interrogative material trace.



Consuelo Cavaniglia  
*Untitled (screen)* 2018

## ARTISTS

Ian Burn | Richard Dunn | Wendy Paramor | Margaret Grafton | Virginia Coventry | Nigel London  
Mel Ramsden | Normana Wight | Gordon Bennett | Karin Lettau | Jacky Redgate | Ruark Lewis  
Kerrie Poliness | Banduk Marika | Helen Smith | Andrew Leslie | Agatha Gothe-Snape | Eric Bridgeman  
Bonita Bub | Biljana Jancic | Jonathan Jones | Consuelo Cavaniglia | Jonny Niesche | Sardar Sinjawi  
Rik Rue | Michael Graeve | Philip Samartzis | Warren Burt | Camilla Hannan | Jodi Rose | Patrick Gibson  
Jasmine Guffond | Gail Priest | The Loop Orchestra | Alexandra Spence | Glenn Harper | Philip Cox  
Bill Lucas | Glenn Murcutt | Harry Williamson | John Kaldor Fabrics | Alan Loney | Amanda Stewart  
Brian Fuata | Chris Mann | David Ahern | Philippa Cullen | Teletopa | Stephen Jones | Tess de Quincey  
Vsevolod Vlaskine | Central Street Group | Ian Andrews | Garry Bradbury | Kraig Grady | Terumi Narushima

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