

# GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM EDUCATION KIT

## *UNDYING: ABDUL-RAHMAN ABDULLAH*

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### ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource has been created for use by teachers and students to engage with art works and themes in the exhibition.

The resource contains material to utilise with school groups before, during or after visiting the exhibition.

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### VISITOR ADVICE

This exhibition includes realistic sculptures of animals, including a large spider, which some visitors may find confronting.

## CURATOR INTRODUCTION

... the Magic Art, which, as conceived by the Malays, may be said to consist of the methods by which this Soul, whether in gods, men, animals, vegetables, minerals, or what not, may be influenced, captured, subdued, or in some way made subject to the will of the magician.

Walter William Skeat in *Malaya Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula*, published 1900

*Undying: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah* reimagines our complex relationships with life, death and the afterlife, while considering the inherent violence and transactional nature of our engagement with the natural world. Drawing on Abdullah's distinct visual language of animal archetypes, the exhibition presents both new and existing works that form a conversation on the different aspects of the idea of 'undying'.

Commissioned by the Chau Chak Wing Museum (CCWM), the University of Sydney, and supported by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, *Undying: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah* takes inspiration from the collections of natural history and antiquity to present a story of curiosity, inter-relationship, and perpetuity.

Curator: Katrina Liberiou

## ARTIST INTRO

Undying – in search of the perpetual.

I ask you to sit with the idea of perpetuity, to imagine the passage of life, death and whatever comes next, and look for ways to describe forever.

I came here to find stories about animals. We wake, sleep and wake again among the immeasurable sentience of the natural world, yet another species sharing a finite planet. We belong to it.

Walk with me.

The museum is a temple of stillness. A place that secures time in bite-sized bits, to be understood as fractional examples of an infinite whole. This kind of stasis is a beautiful fiction held by continuous calibration, effort and resources. The museum is a place where life may be described by its absence. It is one of our favourite pastimes – to break things and poke through the remains, telling ourselves that it will be different for us. We labour under the promise of meaning, of solid answers, maybe some sort of resolution, and I'm mostly okay with that; I like a sense of purpose. The museum is a place where stories are told, a lexicon of meaning to be continuously crafted, told and retold.

Sit with me.

On a recent trip to the Pilbara, I was staring into the fire with someone wise. She said she was waiting for the old people to come as they always did. I thought about how connected I feel to the place where a single loved one lies and was utterly overwhelmed by this matriarch calmly waiting to greet all of hers. It occurred to me that we weren't far from some of the earliest biosignatures of life on earth, some 4 billion years old. Life is old, and humanity has always been on this ride in one form or another, part of an unbroken cycle of life and death beyond time or taxonomy, beyond language, always.

Stay with me.

This room is full of stories without end.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah (born 1977, Dharawal/Port Kembla NSW) lives on a cattle farm on Bindjareb Nyoongar Country, Western Australia. Shaped by formative experiences as a "Muslim kid with mixed heritage", on his father's side he is a seventh-generation Australian descended from convict arrival in 1815, and on his mother's side, from Bugis and Minangkabau royalty in Malaysia. Abdullah's earliest influences growing up in inner-city Perth included comic books, fantasy novels, skateboarding, hip hop, a haunted family home, Sufism, boxing, and grunge, and "living a very grass-roots existence as a lo-fi creative kid in the 1980s and 1990s".

After working as an illustrator, model maker and zoo designer, Abdullah developed a sculptural practice grounded in storytelling. Abdullah has been included in several solo and group exhibitions in Australia including *Journeys*, Linden New Art, Melbourne (2023); *Tarrawarra Biennial* (2023); *Free State – the Adelaide Biennial* (2022); and *Everything is true*, John Curtin Gallery, Perth (2021).

His work is held in major public collections including the Art Gallery of South Australia; Artbank; the Art Gallery of Western Australia; and Newcastle Art Gallery.

## KEY CONCEPTS

Life  
Death  
Afterlife  
Connection  
Nature/Environment  
Responsibility

Perpetuity  
Finiteness  
Animals  
Belonging  
Cultural stories and traditions  
Mythology

## SELECTED WORKS FOR DISCUSSION



Abdul-Rahman Abdullah  
*Big Cat*  
2024  
Stained wood, steel cable  
42 x 75 x 100 cm  
Courtesy of the artist.  
Commissioned by Penrith  
Regional Gallery, 2024



Abdul-Rahman Abdullah  
*Exempli Gratia*  
2017  
Stained wood, glass beads  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist



Abdul-Rahman Abdullah  
*I am your treasure*  
2023  
Stained wood, Mabe  
Broome pearls, suspended  
chandelier  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist



Artist: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah  
Title: *Big Cat*  
Date: 2024  
Medium: Stained wood, steel cable  
Size: 42 x 75 x 100 cm  
Credit: Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by Penrith Regional Gallery, 2024

**Artist statement:**

Cats are the only animal that domesticated themselves. Yet that relationship remains utterly conditional. Occupying both night and day, light and dark, inside and out, wildness and domestication, they serve their own comfort and so must we. We willingly submit to this equation and so it endures.

**Further contextual information:**

This sculpture references the myth of the 'Penrith Panthers', with the artist stating it is "a beautiful domestic cat curled up, sleeping and calm, but scaled up to apex predator size." The myth stems from recalled sightings of a panther in western Sydney. Government enquiries have investigated videos, photos and giant paw prints held up as evidence and eyewitness accounts have been documented, yet no one seems closer to conclusively proving the existence of these wild animals living in close proximity to humans. The panther is also considered a metaphor for colonisation, adaptation and migration, as an introduced species most probably brought to Australia by boat, that has adapted, spread and now appears to roam the land unchecked. With origins that span from circus escapees, World War II mascots, and the trade of exotic animals from the 19th century, it's a tale that has people sitting in one of two camps – fact or fiction.

**For discussion:**

Why do you think the artist has chosen to make this animal oversized? What does it imply or how does it make you feel?

Mythology and storytelling are central to many cultures. What are some of the reasons for this? Why do specific stories continue to be told through generations, or in today's world gain traction online? Can you think of any other myths surrounding animals in Australia?

**For kids:**

Cats developed about 30 million years ago, and unlike dogs who have physically and socially changed following domestication, cats today are almost identical to their wild ancestors.

Do you think this cat would be friendly? Would it like to be a pet?



Artist: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah  
 Title: *Exempli Gratia*  
 Date: 2025  
 Medium: Painted Jesmonite  
 Size: dimensions variable  
 Credit: Courtesy of the artist

**Artist statement:**

*Exempli Gratia* (e.g.) translates in Latin as 'for the sake of example'. The Macleay Collections at Chau Chak Wing Museum hold more than 9,500 ornithology items, of which around 6,000 are study skins representing birds from West Africa, the Americas, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, India, the Indonesian archipelago and New Guinea. Each stage of life, gender and location are catalogued in Naphthalene-infused wooden drawers; entire families jostled into silent repose. There is a bitter dignity in these little bodies, each a footnote, a step towards their own extinction.

**Further contextual information:**

Here is a photo of the birds in a drawer at the Chau Chak Wing Museum:



**Further discussion:**

Repetition is a major part of this work, what does this technique help do?

When an exhibition or museum collection features an endangered or dead animal, how do you as the viewer interpret it? What do you think the artist is exploring about responsibility – either of the viewer, the museum, or the artist?

**For Kids:**

Birds have evolved from maniraptoran theropod dinosaurs, or in simple terms, they are living fossils!

What's your favourite bird? Do you know any birds native to Australia?



Artist: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah  
Title: *I am your treasure*  
Date: 2023  
Medium: Stained wood, Mabe Broome pearls, suspended chandelier  
Size: dimensions variable  
Credit: Courtesy of the artist

**Artist statement:**

Charity is an obligation for all who can give. It has been said that your hoarded wealth will appear on the day of judgement as a large snake that wraps around your neck and whispers 'I am your treasure'. To ignore the obligation to generosity invites shadow into the light, accruing indifference in monstrous form. This snake embodies guilt as an intractable weight of absence, reminding us to give freely and walk lightly.

**Further contextual information:**

The inspiration of this work comes from a hadith, which is a record of the sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. This specific hadith refers to Zakat, which is one of the five pillars of Islam and instructs a mandatory form of almsgiving.

**Further discussion:**

Many animals hold cultural significance, and they are referenced throughout history, religion, and cultural material. They are often used to symbolise something else or evoke a particular emotion. What are some other examples you can think of?

How else does the artist use symbolism in this work?

**For Kids:**

How does this work make you feel? Why do you think people fear snakes?

## ACTIVITIES

### RESPONDING

- Describe the exhibition in five words.
- Think about why the artist has decided to make these specific animals. Are there connections you can make between all of them?
- Some of the sculptures in the exhibition include other objects, like a rug or chandelier. What does this add to the work's meaning or how the viewer experiences it?

### MAKING

- It's time to make your own sculpture!
- Abdul-Rahman Abdullah uses wood to carve his animal sculptures, and materials including glass beads and pearls to add extra details like eyes. Explore what other materials could be used to make a sculpture of an animal.
- Think about how some materials look more life-like than others, or can be used to create texture, colour, or unique features.
- The animals in the exhibition are dead, alive, watching you, or sleeping. Some are on the wall, and others laid out on a plinth. What position do you want your animal to be in? What does this add to the meaning of your work, or how does it make the viewer engage with it?

## SHARE WITH US

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