

Undying: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah 13 August – 7 November 2026

... 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

Malay Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula,
published 1900

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah (born 1977, 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. Here in *Undying*, his intricately carved and painted works tell a story of our complex relationship with life, death and the afterlife,

and of our connection with (and responsibility to) the natural world. Each sculpture is accompanied by a text by Abdullah, in which he reflects on the animal he has depicted.

Commissioned by the Chau Chak Wing Museum, The University of Sydney, *Undying: Abdul-Rahman Abdullah* takes inspiration from collections of natural history and antiquity to present a story of curiosity, inter-relationship, and perpetuity.

Curator: Katrina Liberiou

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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.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah

Big Cat 2024

Stained wood, steel cable

Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by Penrith Regional Gallery, 2024

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.

Squama Manitis 2026

Stained wood and oiled wood

Courtesy of the artist

Many of our interactions with the natural world are transactional, extractive, or violently exploitative, particularly in the context of commercial agriculture and livestock. Of the nine remaining species of Pangolin across Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, all are threatened, with three critically endangered on the brink of extinction. *Squama Manitis* is the terminology used to describe Pangolin scales as an ingredient of traditional medicines. Believed to cure anything from arthritis and skin disease to lactation issues, this assignation, along with the bush meat trade, has designated the Pangolin as the world's most-trafficked animal, our longevity predicated on their demise.

Witness 2025

Painted wood, horn, glass eyes

Courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2025

The Palestine mountain gazelle embodies a sense of resilience, populating poetry with elegance in the face of adversity. Highly endangered and relying on vigilance and speed for survival, they cling to a precarious existence throughout the Levant. 'Witness', or 'Shahid' in Arabic, translates as both 'observer' and 'martyr'.

Endling 2026

Painted wood

Courtesy of the artist

Vilified by the colonial occupation of Lutruwita as a threat to livestock, the Thylacine population was decimated in exchange for cash bounties for almost a century. Protected status was granted in 1936, just two months before the last remaining known individual died in captivity. I want to imagine a different journey.

Sutura 2025

Painted wood

Courtesy of the artist

'Sutura' translates in Latin as 'sewing together', with etymological links to sew, seam, couture, sutra and even souvlaki.

I encountered this beautiful little monkey at the Chau Chak Wing Museum in a drawer full of Simian cousins. She lay flat on her back, fingers and limbs hooked in loose curls, her body the size and sprawl of a sleeping infant. I was waiting for the twitch and rustle of life to raise that little chest. A row of rough stitches brought me back to reality.

Dead Horse 2022

Stained wood

Courtesy of the artist

A horse is many things – a trophy, a companion, a resource. A dead horse is many things – a tragic failure, a half-tonne of pet food, a senseless repetition. This horse is many things – a still life, a landscape, an equestrian statue that repeats the same stories we tell ourselves over and over again.

Among Monsters 2017

Stained wood, glass beads

Courtesy of the artist. Artbank Collection, purchased 2017

The Miracle of the spider is an Islamic story describing a spider's web spun across the Cave of Thawr, preventing the Prophet's pursuers from searching the interior, saving him from capture during the *Hijrah*, 622CE. As a kid, I was told it was my duty to treat all spiders with respect. I held an uneasy truce with the huge Huntsman spiders that occupied the ceilings of home, always aware of their presence, never quite comfortable under that eight-eyed gaze.

Exempli Gratia 2025

Painted Jesmonite

Courtesy of the artist

Exempli Gratia (e.g.) translates in Latin as 'for the sake of example'. The Macleay Collections at the 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.

Pig (preparation) 2026

Dog (preparation) 2026

Cat (preparation) 2026

Rabbit (preparation) 2026

Fox (preparation) 2026

Painted wood

Courtesy of the artist

Animal mummification served different purposes, whether as offerings, companionship or food supply, each prepared for the new beginning of an immortal afterlife. Pig, Dog, Cat, Rabbit, Fox. These interlopers on the Australian continent arrived with invasion, prepared to exploit an environment that still bears the cost of their voracity.

The Sacrifice 2023

Stained wood, horn, glass eyes, glass beads

Courtesy of the artist

I remember dad slaughtering a big billy goat when I was a kid. He hung so low from the gambrel that his beard dragged in the earth, laced through with bright arterial blood. The visage of a bleeding Billy Goat has stayed with me ever since. As a trophy mount *The Sacrifice* becomes a beaten adversary, bloody from battle, it remains as a constant reminder of what is lost against what is gained.

I am your treasure 2023

Stained wood, Mabe Broome pearls, suspended chandelier

Courtesy of the artist

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.