

Objects and Imagination

At the heart of the exhibition *Objects and Imagination* is the understanding that the distinction between banality and profundity is not a line but rather a blurry zone. In this context, the most ordinary object can have the most extraordinary resonance and understanding or appreciation of objects can be considered a function of the meanings assigned to them. The exhibition is concerned not with spectacle, but with a subtle and profound shift, namely, the moment that an object is recognised and acknowledged as something other than or beyond itself. This act of acknowledgement is neither neutral nor merely descriptive. It is a transformative act that shapes the ways in which objects are encountered, valued, and most importantly, how they enter a shared space of imagination. *Objects and Imagination* proposes that the 'meaning' of objects is not solely located in objects themselves, but in the relational space between naming, seeing, and imagining. In this light, the works by Anu Kumar, Ohida Khandakar, Moorina Bonini, Tessa Mackay and Julia Ciccarone have been curated to consider the gallery as a threshold, where the ordinary is charged with meaning and where perception is reconfigured.

The exhibition points to the relationship between memory and objects as a foundation for understanding. In *The Physical Past*, Marius Kwint, Reader in Visual Culture in the School of Art and Design at the University of Portsmouth states that '*objects serve memory in three main ways. Firstly, they furnish recollection; they constitute our picture of the past. Secondly, objects stimulate remembering, by the serendipitous encounter, bringing back experiences which otherwise would have remained dormant, repressed or forgotten. Thirdly, objects form records: analogues to living memory, storing information beyond individual experience.*'¹ This consideration of objects and memory is particularly helpful in positioning imagination as an active and affective mediation between objects, memory and meaning. Collectively, the selection and display of works in this exhibition suggests that imagination is the mechanism through which objects become meaningful. More specifically, the exhibition points towards the idea that objects do not contain memory in a literal sense; rather, they invite imaginative engagement.

Moorina Bonini's works *Code-Switching: Creating Space to Align Structural Values*, 2023 comprises three timber palette arrangements of wooden museum boxes from the Melbourne Museum. The boxes were created to accommodate significant Aboriginal cultural material from South-East Australia collected between 1950s –1970s and later donated to, or acquired by, the museum from a range of collectors, including anthropologists, ethnographers, farmers, and members of the public. For Bonini, *these wooden boxes are echoes of the violent acts of colonisation that occurred across our woka (country) and wala (water) to which we as a people are still recovering and healing from today.*² Bonini's burnt markings, spread across the surfaces of the wooden boxes have been informed by embodied cultural knowledge of mark-making. Through the historically and culturally significant practice of burning, the work reclaims and repositions these colonial containers.

By accompanying the palettes with the recorded sound of human breathing, Bonini injects a powerful sense of life and spirit where it appears to be absent. At the same time as mourning the loss of Indigenous knowledge and despairing at its sanitisation through museum practices, the breath and the burnings in Bonini's work suggest an enduring life force beyond the linearities of colonial histories and narratives. By focussing on the storage boxes for cultural material rather than the material itself, Bonini's work interrupts the traditional function of museums. Rather than addressing iconographies associated with colonialism *Code-Switching* interrogates its overarching structures and systems, acknowledging their pernicious impact, giving air to their continuing reverberations and highlighting the impossibility of decolonising museums.

The subject of Julia Ciccarone's painting *The Vault of Silent Messages*, 2025, appears to be the storage area of a museum. Hidden from public view, the room filled with sculpture, architectural adornments and museum plinths seems silent and still. Western classical sculptures are rendered mute by their gauzy shrouds which visually blend gently into the drapery of the figures. Purposefully avoiding the public realm of the museum, Ciccarone presents viewers with the 'back end' – the non-public space where objects await awakening or activation through curatorship. The sculptures and the vacant plinths around them are positioned on timber palettes. Clearly these are weighty objects that have been moved, remaining here until required again in the public galleries.

¹ Marius Kwint, 'Introduction: The Physical Past', in Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley (eds), *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, Berg, Oxford, 1999, pp1-16.

² Bonini, Moorina, <https://www.moorinabonini.com/exhibitions/wanyarra-active-codeswitching-2023> accessed 19 Jan 2026

The vault in Ciccarone's *The Vault of Silent Messages* is a contemplative and speculative space in which the specificities of history, temporality and authorship dissolve to generate a collective timelessness. Through her painterly rendering Ciccarone highlights the rarely disclosed or discussed potential of objects. Even when removed from the public eye of museum display Ciccarone's sculptures and empty plinths have a silent energy – a presence that evokes a sense of anticipation in which the removal of the veils and the occupation of the plinths can be perceived as acts of release and fulfilment. Ciccarone's choice of 'storage' as subject matter for painting positions the 'hidden' as the 'revealed'. Whilst clearly defined, the plinths and sculptures are relatively neutral in colour, their tonal subtlety contrasts with the dark doorways and windows. The painting can be understood as transitioning between the known and the unknown. The known being that which is already illuminated – the light and airy storage space, and the unknown – that which is yet to be illuminated – the dark voids and portals beyond the storage room.

Informed by the idea of photography itself, the photorealist paintings of Tessa Mackay draw from awkward and unrefined amateur digital photos. Mackay's meticulous rendering *France 09.jpg* is a painting of a photo of the sculpture Venus de Milo or Aphrodite of Melos by Alexandros of Antioch in the collection of the Louvre Museum, Paris.³ This exquisite work clearly demonstrates an interest in elevating tourist imagery to the status of art. Only the upper two thirds of the sculpture is visible in the painting. The lower third is blocked by museum visitors taking photos with digital cameras. Mackay's source material for the painting appears to be one of these subsequent photographs. Unable to get a clear eye-level view of the sculpture, the museum visitors raise their cameras above their heads to take a photo, or probably multiple photos in the hope that at least one captures the sculpture. Rejecting the crisp detailed imagery that these visitors likely seek, Mackay has selected a clumsily composed, out of focus photo (possibly caused by movement of the camera) as the source image for *France 09.jpg*. The work can be understood as a highly focussed painting of an out of focus photograph in which the experience of being in a precise place and time is articulated through the hazy afterglow.

Mackay's painting appears far less about the sculpture and more about the idea of photography as evidence - at the Louvre, in front of this sculpture with these people. Beyond the apparent frenzy, the blur injects the painting with a sense of impermanence. Mackay's depiction of the sculpture has an ineffable aura and despite its obvious weight, the sensual marble statue (and everything else in the room) is in a state of flux. The statue itself is thought to represent classical ideas of sexual love and beauty. In its discussion of the *Venus de Milo* the Louvre Museum claims that '*You would need a heart of stone not to be moved by her grace!*'⁴ *France 09.jpg* unsettles the certainty of this claim which assumes that grace is self-evident, stable and universally recognised. The blur which interrupts this assumption, suggests that grace is not located in the object itself – it is sought and felt. The phrase '*heart of stone*' evokes an important irony here: the sculpture is carved from stone, yet the emotional response it provokes depends not on material solidity but on imaginative engagement.

Photographer Anu Kumar describes her work *An Archive of Home* as an '*ongoing photographic project that serves as both personal storytelling and collective archive-building, a visual meditation on displacement, memory, and the reconstruction of home across borders*'.⁵ Drawing on her Indian heritage, Kumar's suite of photographs captures small moments. Intimate objects, gestures and sightlines are transformed through acts of attention. At the core of *An Archive of Home* is the idea that objects are not fixed entities – that they have the capacity to hold memory and generate imagined lives once they are recontextualised as photographs.

Kumar's photographs depict modest objects and spaces. Her imagery is imbued with a quiet, contemplative intensity which while located in India, has wide spreading universal resonance. When Kumar photographs her subjects, they undergo a subtle but critical shift. They are no longer only things in the world: they are sites for projection, memory and imagination. More specifically, their meaning is altered when captured through Kumar's lens. *An Archive of Home* does not attempt to explain each subject's history, rather it invites speculation about what it has witnessed and its relationship to its surroundings. Understandings or interpretations of Kumar's photographs emerge not from the immediacy of information, but rather from the slow act of being with her imagery.

³ The *Venus de Milo* or *Aphrodite of Melos*, Alexandros of Antioch, 2nd Century BCE, marble, approx. 204cm collection Louvre Museum, Paris

⁴ <https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/the-palace/ideal-greek-beauty> accessed 20 Jan 2026

⁵ Kumar, Anu, *An Archive of Home*, catalogue of works Haydens, Melbourne 2025

The role of the imagination in Kumar's work is relational in that it is not intrinsically linked to the artist or the object. Imagination in these photographs is activated through the relationship between object, image and viewer. Resisting closure, readings of *An Archive of Home* hovers in a nebulous space between documentation and reverie. The works foreground the temporal dimension of objects. Suggesting real and imagined lives and histories that are not fully visible but persist materially, many of Kumar's photographed items appear worn, weathered, or marked by time. Through the act of photography, Kumar expands understandings of her selected subjects beyond notions of utility, locating them as central to the contemplative qualities of her images.

The single channel video *Dream Your Museum* 2022 by Khandakar Ohida focusses on the relationship between the artist's uncle Khandakar Selim and a young girl. Because this relationship is so tenderly explored via Selim's process of collecting all kinds of discarded (and often broken) items, it is difficult not to interpret the young girl as a young Ohida. Through the film Ohida delicately navigates a tension between postcolonial thought, institutional narratives of preservation and the micro-universe of rural Muslim life in contemporary India. Curious about how he acquired the objects and what their purpose would be the girl asks Selim questions about the objects and his process of collecting. Selim's responses can be understood as fragments of bigger narratives that point towards (almost) forgotten histories as the real and the imagined attributes of his objects collapse into one another.

Selim talks matter-of-factly about his collection, and his stories unfold as normal occurrences. *Dream Your Museum* blurs fantasy and reality to articulate and discuss a lived experience. The magical realism elements of the film (e.g. floating flowers that are released when Selim opens a discarded perfume bottle and the sound of horses galloping that accompanies a faded reproduction of a Mughal miniature painting) point towards the roles of the psyche and subconscious in processing and understanding history. '*His museum – an invitation to dream around, or with these objects – could be viewed as an act of defiance, even of resistance – an antidote to the singular hierarchical and chronological narratives organised by official bastions of culture.*'⁶

Selim's discussion suggests that experiences of objects in a museum are shaped as much by imagination and authority as by material fact. More specifically, *Dream Your Museum* proposes the idea that the power and value of objects lie not in their inherent extraordinariness, but in the conditions that allow them to be seen differently. The work considers the museum as an institution that is *dreamed into being*: built through aspirations of care, permanence, selective remembering and erasure. Selim's museum can only be brought into full existence through the imagination, without which, objects remain dormant. Dreaming, the experience of creating stories, images, thoughts and feelings during sleep is integral to Selim's museum. Without dreaming, his objects are just objects.

The works of Moorina Bonini, Julia Ciccarone, Tessa Mackay, Anu Kumar and Khandakar Ohida are potent reminders that objects are neither inert nor benign. By foregrounding the imaginative act, objects can be understood as sites of transformation which offer opportunity for reframing inherited stories. Their works unsettle fixed hierarchies between the everyday and the extraordinary and highlight the imaginative and speculative responsibility of the viewer in considering the relationship between objects and the stories assigned to them.

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⁶ Jansen, Charlotte, In West Bengal, a museum in a mud house now has the world's attention' <https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-in-west-bengal-a-museum-in-a-mud-house-now-has-the-world-s-attention> accessed 22 Jan 2026