



Sylvia Ditchburn
(Photo by
Amanda Galea).
Right: Elysha Rei.
Below: artworks
Yohaku no bi and
Moss Garden
Carnarvon Gorge.



CULTURE AND COUNTRY

by GINA MOSCH

For lovers of art, nature and cultural storytelling, Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts is the place to be. The gallery will host two powerful solo exhibitions by acclaimed artists Sylvia Ditchburn and Elysha Rei, alongside a showcase of emerging First Nations talent from local high schools.

Together, these exhibitions bring a rich, layered experience to audiences, inviting reflection on both place and heritage.

Local art lovers will be familiar with Dr Ditchburn, one of the city's most beloved painters and environmental advocates.

Her latest solo exhibition, *In Plain Sight*, continues her lifelong pursuit of capturing the fragile beauty of the Australian landscape, this time with an even stronger sense of urgency.

"I started working towards this exhibition three years ago," Sylvia says.

"This body of work extends my concerns for environmental issues such as mining, tree culling, loss of habitat and more."

Rendered in vivid acrylics, her works traverse the country, from the dramatic escarpments of Carnarvon Gorge to coastal mangroves and red deserts, many of which were painted en plein air, or completed in her studio from field sketches, photographs and deeply etched memories.

Sylvia is not only a painter but a witness to environmental change.

A recent piece reflects the devastating transformation of the lagoon at Horseshoe Bay, Magnetic Island.

"About three years ago I went to Magnetic Island to draw the Lagoon at Horseshoe Bay. The beautiful paperbarks, mangroves and birdlife were abundant," she says.

"Last year a photo appeared in the Townsville Bulletin of the lagoon showing most of the trees fallen over and reported the wildlife had disappeared because of the salt water that had been allowed to flood the lagoon. I have created a painting of the Lagoon from sketches and photos that is an example of how beautiful environments can change rapidly."

Although her work is deeply personal, Sylvia is mindful of her audience.

"I want them to relate to my work without the need for a thesis to explain or understand," she says.

"My aim is to draw attention to the magic as it can so easily be lost forever."

In vibrant colour and sweeping forms that blur realism and abstraction, Sylvia's work balances awe with advocacy.

For many, her paintings resonate not only with the familiarity of the land but with a call to protect it.

Running in parallel is *Shirozat to Shinju (White Sugar and Pearls)* by Elysha Rei, a Nikkei Australian artist known for her intricate hand-cut washi paper works.

Elysha's exhibition illuminates the lesser-known history of Japanese migration to North Queensland, a history interwoven with Townsville's own past.

Drawing from archival documents, Elysha's delicately carved paper installations depict sugar cane, pearl shells and turtles, symbols of the industries that once drew thousands of Japanese workers to the region.

But beneath their beauty lies a complex legacy, with the installation a reminder of Australia's former White Australia Policy, which eventually closed the Japanese Consulate in Townsville.



CREATIVE TYPES

“*This body of work extends my concerns for environmental issues such as mining, tree culling, loss of habitat and more***”**

"Her work not only honours the past but also bridges our shared histories, fostering deeper understanding and appreciation between our cultures," the Japanese Consul-General Ishikawa Katsutoshi said.

"It is through such artistic endeavours that we continue to celebrate and preserve the rich tapestry of our intertwined histories. I extend my best wishes for the success of this exhibition and commend Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts for their commitment to promoting cultural exchange and understanding through the arts."

The delicate nature of Elysha's work is both visually arresting and symbolically rich.

The intricate white paper forms mirror the physical fragility of memory and challenge the harsh realities of discrimination, resilience and cultural survival.

For Elysha, this project is personal.

As a Nikkei Australian, a person of Japanese descent living in Australia, she feels compelled to create space for and to share these stories with new audiences and generations.

In doing so, she gives voice to a history that is often overlooked, particularly in the North.

Completing the trio is the *Young Indigenous Printmakers* exhibition, showcasing the talent of students from Northern Beaches and Kirwan State High Schools.

With guidance from artists Ricky Emmerton and Margaret Robertson, these students have carved lino prints that explore identity, culture and connection to Country.

For many, it is their first exhibition in a professional gallery.

This program not only nurtures emerging talent but also gives young artists the tools to express their stories through the visual arts, building bridges between generations and communities.

These three exhibitions, though distinct in theme and medium, share a common thread, revealing what is often hidden or overlooked.

Whether you're drawn to the poetic stillness of Sylvia's landscapes or the intricate storytelling of Elysha's cut-paper forms, Umbrella's winter program offers an experience that is both beautiful and thought-provoking.

And for those keen to hear directly from the artists, Umbrella is hosting free public talks.

Elysha Rei will speak about her artist journey and exhibition at 10am on Saturday, June 14.

Dr Sylvia Ditchburn will appear in conversation from 10.30am on Sunday, June 22.

A Contemporary Paper Cutting Workshop with Elysha Rei will also be held on Saturday, June 28 for those inspired to try the technique themselves.

>> The exhibition opens 6pm Friday, June 13.