



Thea Anamara Perkins at her studio (above) and one of her prize-winning works, *Bondi Beach* (2023)



THEA ANAMARA PERKINS

Carrying on her famous family’s legacy, this First Nations painter makes powerful statements in art.

Exhibited at:
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra; Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney; Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin

Awards:
La Prairie Art Award 2023; Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship 2021; Archibald Prize finalist 2021, 2020 and 2019

Breakthrough moment:
Her debut solo exhibition at Sydney’s Firstdraft gallery in 2018. “That was my first time pulling a show together and taking my practice seriously, making that leap in confidence.”

What the critics say:
“Perkins has a beautiful and distinct way of reworking and transforming photographs. She understands photography’s capacity to isolate and memorialise particular moments in time. This, paired with her unique approach to line, colour and form, lends her work an emotive resonance. Transient moments are encoded and commemorated in the gentle yet precise gestures of her brushstrokes.” – Isobel Parker Philip, senior curator of Australian contemporary art, Art Gallery of NSW

As the grandchild of Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, niece of filmmaker Rachel and daughter of art curator Hetti, painter Thea Anamara Perkins was destined to advocate for First Nations Australians. She knew, though, that hers would be a different kind of activism, using portraiture to “lead with love” and address uncomfortable truths. “Being true to how I communicate and try to be in the world, a gentle approach came naturally to me,” says the 31-year-old Arrernte and Kalkadoon woman. “Although softer, it’s just as powerful.”

So powerful that Perkins won the La Prairie Art Award earlier this year – an annual \$80,000 Art Gallery of NSW prize that champions the work of Australian female artists and includes a six-month residency in Europe. In her work, Perkins mines her family’s photographic archives, turning snapshots into intimate paintings of warm, loving moments – the family gathered around a birthday cake, for example, or a Bondi Beach scene of her grandfather, uncle and mother from the late 1960s. “They’re a response to the misrepresentation and misinformation about First Nations families that I saw growing up. [My family photos] presented this clear and direct contradiction to that and it’s something I know about in our wider community.”

Perkins was raised in Sydney but regularly visits her traditional home of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) to paint; the landscape there and the Central Desert movement are a strong influence. Growing up, Perkins was surrounded by creatives – First Nations artists Tony Albert, Jonathan Jones and Christian Thompson among them – and her mother, Hetti, encouraged her to analyse why she was drawn to certain works. “Deep thinking is a big part of my art. I just want to make art that’s useful and a good communicator. On my terms.”

Her paintings have a comforting, universal quality, with a hint of wistfulness. “With what First Nations people have faced in the past and continue to face, we all feel that sense of melancholy.” Perkins looks for photos with “the glimmer”, which she describes as the opposite of a trigger, “something inspiring safety, connection and belonging”. ●