

# STATION

## NELL

### *I SAW the LIGHT*

Spending time with Nell's work is like embarking on an epic road trip through time and space, art-history and popular culture. Over the last two decades she has built a lexicon rich with symbols and materials that inform her work across painting, sculpture, installation and performance. Nell's practice consistently explores states of opposition: darkness and light, silence and noise, fragility and strength, life and death. Her artistic multiverse seeks to collapse time, uniting objects and adapting materials from a variety of periods and sources, forging new connections while acknowledging old.

In Nell's most recent body of work we journey across countries and continents, from the ancient to the contemporary, Memphis Egypt to Memphis Tennessee. As always in Nell's work, Rock 'n' Roll is the journey's heartbeat and soundtrack.

The influential American musician Hank Williams (1923–1953) wrote his gospel country anthem *I Saw The Light* in 1947. The ultimate backslider, Williams' tragic personal life, addiction struggles and untimely death at age 29 add to the tenderness of this song some 74 years later. Nell's painting of the same name (and title of this exhibition) is a nod to the enduring influence of Williams' music, and marks a continuing theme of her work: the use of light as a metaphor for faith, hope and optimism. *I SAW the LIGHT* also shows Nell's ongoing connection to New Zealand artist Colin McCahon (1919–1987), her restricted palette and dynamic composition are a gesture to McCahon's exuberant text-based works.

Several works in this exhibition reference light – and more specifically the sun – as a powerful and ancient source of warmth, life and growth. Art-deco sunbeams radiate throughout Nell's paintings; some are delicate and tenuous, others strong and defiant. Hand-blown glass, neon and fluorescent tubes become vehicles to transmit light, connecting individual works.

Nell's painting *AUSTRALIA* reminds us that the power of the sun can also contribute to destruction. Painted in the aftermath of the 2019–20 summer bushfires that ravaged vast areas of the country's south-east, *AUSTRALIA* is landscape painting disguised as text. *AUSTRALIA* is a big word – a big idea, a big place and an ancient continent. Nell constructs this work in nine paintings framed in black wood that read as single works yet stand as one. She shows us the skin of this charred country where ghost gums have been blackened, a palette of white and black, gold and rust. Tiny areas of oxidised paint suggest regeneration.

The way the frames of each painting butt against each other reminds me of looking at maps and observing our state borders. It suggests a colonial history of division and demarcation. The 2019–20 bushfires did not care for state borders. Nell's *AUSTRALIA* was completed during a period of global pandemic – where the impact of lockdown and restricted movement has empowered 'the border' with a strange new status. Thousands of Australian citizens seek re-entry to the country from abroad, while others are trapped within.

The most internal and reflective work in the exhibition is *From Memphis to Memphis*. This sculpture, a mummified Gibson Les Paul guitar with a vintage case as sarcophagus, ponders a terrifying question: could Rock 'n' Roll be dead? Memphis was the capital city of Ancient Egypt, and it was protected by Ptah, the patron of craftsmen. In modern times, Memphis Tennessee, a city in the deep South of the United States of America, is acknowledged as the birthplace of Rock 'n' Roll. It is home to the legendary Sun Studios – where the likes of Elvis Presley, B.B. King and Johnny Cash recorded their music – as well as Graceland, the home of Elvis and site of his burial – a modern day Tutankhamun.

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Nell's Gibson guitar has been lovingly wrapped in hand-dyed fabric that includes a bed sheet, vintage tablecloth and an old shirt. Looking into the case, each aspect of the guitar appears tender and fragile. Small and special possessions belonging to the artist have been wrapped and embedded within the work, amulets for a journey to the afterlife. Four guitar pics are visible, each carefully wrapped and placed on the neck of the instrument. *From Memphis to Memphis* is simultaneously enigmatic yet confessional. As in much of *I SAW the LIGHT*, from ambiguity there emerges a more pressing question: when faced with death, how do we hold onto life?

- Beatrice Gralton, 2021.

## About the artist:

Nell (b. 1975, Maitland, New South Wales) lives and works in Sydney.

Across two decades, Nell has been included in over 250 exhibitions in Australia and abroad. Recent exhibitions include: *Hyper-Aware: 21st Century Highlights from Collection*, Home of the Arts, QLD; *Know My Name: Australian Women Artists 1900 to Now*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; *Miffy and Friends*, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, *One foot on the ground, one foot in water*, La Trobe Art Institute, Bendigo; *Present Company*, MAC Lake Macquarie, NSW; *Anywhere but here: MCA Primavera Acquisitions*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney; *Hope Dies Last: Art at the End of Optimism*, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne; *Talismans for uncertain times*, Bendigo Art Gallery, VIC; *Just Not Australian*, Artspace, Sydney (and touring NSW regionally); *Workshop*, University of Queensland Art Museum, Queensland; *NE/LL*, Walkway Art Gallery, Bordertown, SA; *WORDS + CROSSES*, Ramp Gallery, Hamilton, NZ; *The Woken*, STATION, Melbourne; *The National*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; *NE/LL*, Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton, *BLACK 'n' WHITE*, PS Project Space, Amsterdam, NL, *Magic Object*, Adelaide Biennial, The Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.