



NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA UNVEILS SKYWHALEPAPA TO THE NATION

The National Gallery and artist Patricia Piccinini today unveiled *Skywhalepapa*, a new hot air balloon sculpture by the renowned artist and the most ambitious commission by an Australian woman to enter the national collection.

Skywhalepapa is the companion to Piccinini's iconic *Skywhale*, commissioned for the Centenary of Canberra in 2013 and together they fly as Piccinini's *Skywhales: Every heart sings*.

The wind and weather need to be just right to spot these magical creatures – it is up to nature to allow them to soar and that is something beyond control. A flight was not part of mother nature's plans this morning, so the balloons were instead tethered near the National Gallery.

The \$1.3 million performative exhibition project will have the skywhales take to the skies of Australia's national capital three times – if possible – before heading off on a two-year national tour, and then, possibly to international destinations, which are currently in negotiation.

Due to COVID-19 protocols, a strictly limited 2,000 tickets were available for people to witness the inflation of both balloons. Those without tickets were able to witness the event from other vantage points including Lake Burley Griffin and the parliamentary triangle.

National Gallery Director Nick Mitzevich, who commissioned Piccinini to create a second hot air balloon sculpture, said *Skywhalepapa* and *Skywhale*, which became part of the national collection in 2019, were the perfect examples of art in the 21st century.

“This is about taking art to the people – you can literally look up in the sky and see the skywhales flying by,” he said. “Audiences don’t need to go to a gallery to see the skywhales – this is art that is accessible and democratic.”

Mr Mitzevich thanked The Balnaves Foundation, which supported *Skywhalepapa*’s commission and the Canberra season of flights, as well as National Tour Partner the Naomi Milgrom Foundation and Visions of Australia for supporting the national tour, which begins in Albury in mid-April.

Piccinini said *Skywhalepapa* continued the concepts around nurturing, caring, nature and evolution that began with *Skywhale*. “I’m really moved by nature. The idea that all creatures, not just humans, are perfectly evolved for their environment blows my mind,” she said.

Two skywhales allows audiences to bring their own interpretation to this unusual couple. “With one skywhale you have a character, with two skywhales you have a relationship,” she said. “It changes the entire narrative.”

Piccinini says, for example, the nature of the relationship between *Skywhalepapa* and *Skywhale* is deliberately ambiguous. “I don’t know if they are his children, or her children or their children. All that matters is that they are looking after them together.”

Jaklyn Babington, Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, who has worked with Piccinini on the project for the past two years, said it was one of the most ambitious works commissioned by the gallery.

“*Skywhalepapa* is a hybrid machine: a contemporary sculpture, and a certified aircraft. The skywhales represent a wondrous collaboration between art, science and nature,” she said.

An immersive sonic experience accompanied the first skywhales launch, with a special live performance of art pop song “We are the Skywhales” by musician Jess Green (aka Pheno), supported by the Luminescence Children’s Choir.

The inaugural flight is being celebrated with skywhale inspired food and memorabilia, including an *Every Heart Sings* children’s story book, penned by Piccinini, a Skywhale Croissant Cone, created by Three Mills Bakery, a new ale by brewer BentSpoke and a knitting pattern to inspire creativity. The book and other skywhale souvenirs, including bags, hats and magnets, are available at the gallery.

A party atmosphere accompanied the first launch, a COVID-safe event, as families rose early – and some even dressed as the iconic creatures – to meet the new addition to the skywhale family.

Another two flights are due to occur on 8 March 2021 and 3 April 2021. Further details will be available at www.nga.gov.au closer to the date.

Skywhales: Every heart sings is the third instalment of The Balnaves Contemporary Series and is a Know My Name project.

Media images are available [here](#) and video footage [here](#).

Skywhalepapa: the facts

How many cubic metres of air in *Skywhalepapa*?

3540 m³ (cubic metres), 4.5 tonnes of air

How big is *Skywhalepapa*?

Skywhalepapa is as tall as a 7-story building.

How many metres of fabric was used?

Skywhalepapa used 3.6km of fabric in the construction of the envelope. The fabric which is 1.5m wide was cut into 2342 panels.

How many stitches approximately?

Making some assumptions regarding the edge length of each panel and knowing there are 2 rows of thread for each seam, at a rate of 250 stitches per meter, Nick Purvis' of Cameron Balloons calculates that there would be approximately 7110m of sewn seams so roughly 3.6m stitches!

How much did *Skywhalepapa* cost?

The total cost of the Skywhales: Every heart sings project and national tour was \$1.3million How long *Skywhalepapa* takes to inflate? Approximately 30-40 minutes in two parts: cold inflation, and then hot inflation. This can sometimes take longer.

How many babies does *Skywhalepapa* have?

Nine babies, ranging in ages from toddler to newborn.

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