



Press Release January 23, 2025, 4:30 pm EST  
By Jerilyn Teahan for the University of Virginia

## Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection to Welcome New Director from Australia

Charlottesville, Virginia - January 23, 2025



Nici Cumpston OAM. Photograph by Josh Vanner.

After an international search, a committee of faculty, staff, and volunteer leaders selected Australian artist and curator Nici Cumpston OAM to be the new director of the [Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection](#) of the University of Virginia (UVA). She will succeed Kluge-Ruhe's founding director, Margo Smith, upon Smith's retirement in May after 27 years of service.

Cumpston is of Barkandji, Afghan, English and Irish heritage. She is a descendant of the Indigenous people from the Barka (Darling River) of western New South Wales. Cumpston has served as the inaugural curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the [Art Gallery of South Australia](#) (AGSA) since 2008 and has also been the artistic director of the internationally renowned [Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art](#) since 2014. Tarnanthi is held annually and features artists from across the country in dozens of exhibitions and events, a major exhibition at the Art Gallery of South

Australia, and the Tarnanthi Art Fair where artists are fully supported to sell works of art directly to the public.

“Nici Cumpston is recognized by her peers as a gifted museum curator, a pioneering art festival director, and a tireless advocate for Indigenous artists and communities across Australia,” search committee and UVA Art History department chair Douglas Fordham said. “We had an extraordinarily talented group of applicants for this position, and we are absolutely delighted that Nici has chosen to lead Kluge-Ruhe at this dynamic moment in its history.”

Cumpston has worked with hundreds of artists and curated 16 major exhibitions since 2008, each with an accompanying exhibition catalogue. She has written numerous catalogue essays for artists’ exhibitions in other state institutions and commercial galleries and has been a regular contributor to the AGSA quarterly magazine and national arts publications.

For two decades, Cumpston has been a specialist advisor on numerous state-based and national arts committees and boards. She also has represented the state government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts on international exchanges to China, Europe, Canada, and the United States. Her contributions have been recognized with the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) for outstanding achievement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts (2020), the South Australian Government’s Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith Memorial Award (2019), and the South Australian Premier’s NAIDOC Award (2013).

Cumpston studied fine arts, specializing in photography, at the University of South Australia and has an ongoing practice where she creates large scale hand-colored photographic portraits of the ancient trees and waterways along the Barka. Her work is held in major institutions and private collections nationally and internationally, and she has been commissioned to create signature works for public buildings in Adelaide.

“Nici Cumpston’s appointment signals the kind of innovation that Kluge-Ruhe leads in the global cultural sector; cross-cultural work on a transnational scale - underpinned by rigor, integrity and driven by the principle of *First Nations First*,” Kluge-Ruhe Advisory Council Co-Chair Jilda Andrews said. “We welcome Nici and look forward to working closely with her as she takes the helm.”

The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, which includes more than 3,600 artworks, is the only museum outside of Australia dedicated to the exhibition and study of Indigenous Australian art.

Edward Ruhe began building the collection in 1965, purchasing artworks directly from artists, community art centers, and early Aboriginal art dealers. John W. Kluge acquired Ruhe's collection in 1993 to supplement his own large and growing collection of Aboriginal Australian artworks. Kluge donated the complete collection to the University of Virginia in 1997, where it could be available for exhibition, scholarly research and study.

"I see this as a once in a lifetime opportunity for me to build on the work I have been doing for the past seventeen years at the Art Gallery of South Australia," Cumpston said. "I am excited about continuing the relationships I have built with artists and their communities of supporters across Australia and to now be in a position where we can showcase their work to international audiences in the U.S. and beyond."

In spring 2014, Cumpston spent a month as an artist-in-residence at the University. Works from her series *having-been-there* were exhibited at Kluge-Ruhe, and she gave numerous lectures to UVA and community groups, including talks about how fine art can raise awareness of environmental destruction and degradation.

"Nici Cumpston's highly respected work as a curator, writer, and educator along with her fierce passion and respect for the Aboriginal people and their art, make her the ideal leader for this next chapter for Kluge-Ruhe," said Vice Provost for the Arts Jody Kielbasa. "I look forward to working with her to build upon Margo's extraordinary accomplishments and legacy."

Kluge-Ruhe is currently located in a historic home on the eastern side of Charlottesville. The University is developing plans to build a new Center for the Arts in the Emmet-Ivy corridor at the heart of the University's Grounds, which will include a new home for Kluge-Ruhe as well as The Fralin Museum of Art, the Tessa and Richard Ader Performing Arts Center, and the departments of Music and Dance.

For further information, please direct inquiries to:

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