

Art

Butt Naked Salon: art, music and nudity collide in deeply moving performance

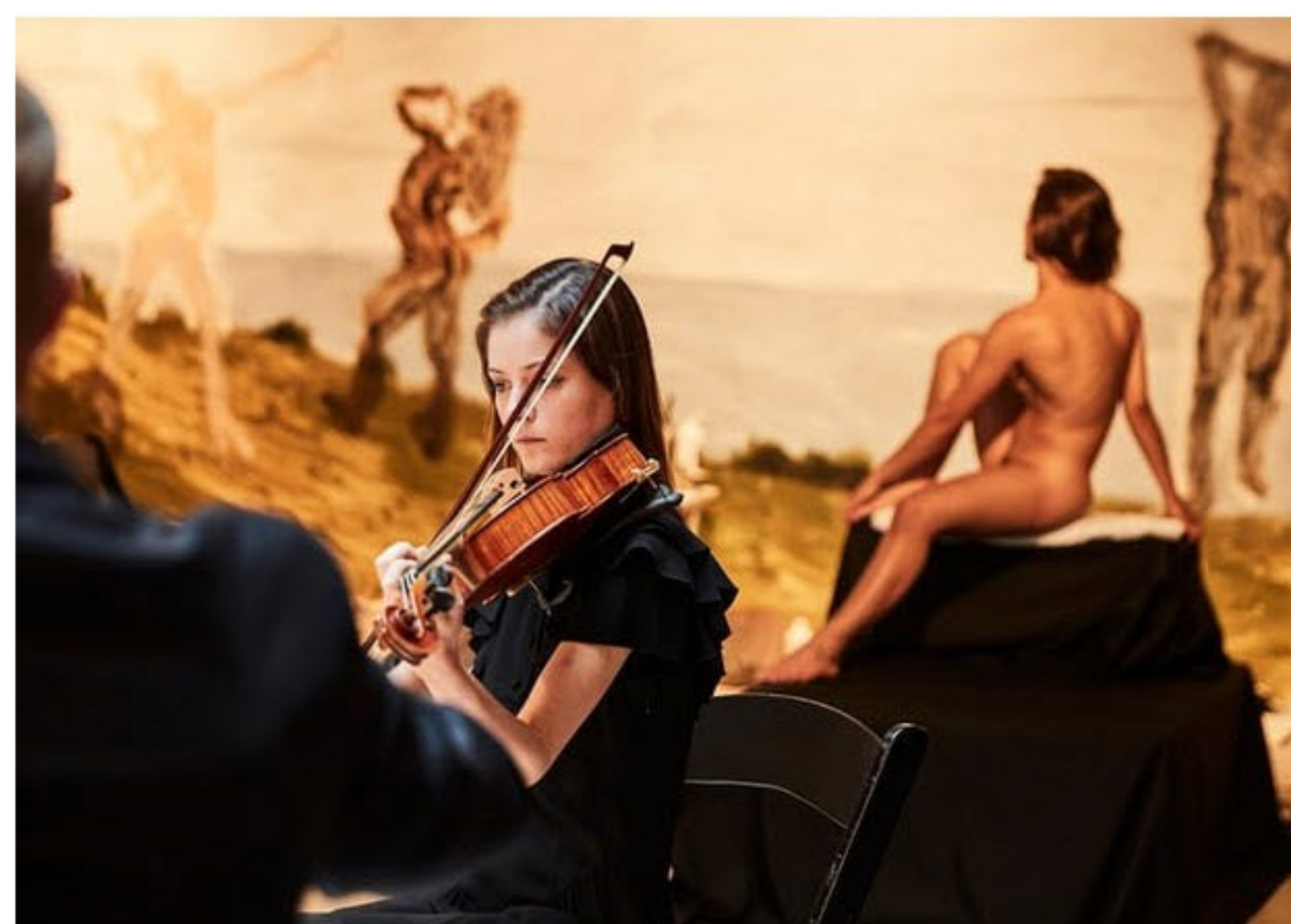
A string quartet plays and a nude model poses as an artist paints the walls, in an ephemeral happening in Sydney inspired by the Parisian Belle Époque

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▲ 'The night is a blank canvas – anything can go,' says artist Alan Jones. Photograph: Barnaby Wilshier

Alan Jones - the artist, not the shock jock - squeezes paint out of a tube, mixes it with water, and lifts a fat, unwieldy brush to the wall. We are in Potts Point, Sydney, and Jones is making a mural inside the hallowed [Yellow House](#).

He is not alone. Generating music that feeds his rhythm is a live quartet; watching him is a small audience; and, arched over a black plinth, long dark hair cascading down her bare back, is a naked muse.

I am at the opening night of the Sydney Art Quartet's Butt Naked Salon II, a re-working of the same concept first launched last year, inspired by the salons in the Belle Époque period in Paris.

While 2016's performance explored avant-garde bohemia, this time was all about native roots: an attempt, in the words of artistic director James Beck, to "get closer to the soul of Australian art, music and landscape".

As the musicians - Beck on cello, Alina Zamfir on viola, Anna Albert on violin and Emma Jardine on guest violin - first strike a chord, Greek-Australian Yolanda Frost walks into the room. She slips her silk dressing gown to the floor, revealing olive skin, a silver nipple ring and unshaved armpits. Although she is nude, she wears moon-like silver earrings and maroon lipstick. Jones takes a moment. He looks at her carefully, assessing her form, narrows his eyes, and begins to paint.

Nakedness here is not used as a novelty or for shock value. Instead, the female body is rendered earthy, beautiful and strong, reflecting back on Australia itself. Frost - [a performance artist, composer, drummer, and queer rights activist](#) - simmers with presence, unashamed and unembarrassed, reminiscent of a young Frida Kahlo.



▲ 'The female body is rendered earthy, beautiful and strong, reflecting back on Australia itself': Yolanda Frost poses as Alan Jones paints. Photograph: Barnaby Wilshier



Important for Jones was the ability to be creative within a familiar setting. His backdrop for the mural is also his home, the Coogee headlands, which he pre-painted earlier this week. "I wanted to start here. I wanted to stand in front of an orchestra and audience and feel comfortable," he tells me.

That matters under pressure. Watching Jones at work feels like witnessing a physical act of exertion. Under the gaze of dozens of eyes, and to quick, stirring music, Jones must try and render Frost in real time, finishing his sketches before the quartet stops playing. As he does, he sweats profusely, scarring the wall in feverish strokes. Sometimes inspiration comes to Jones easily: at other points he struggles, scrubbing over his own images, smudging lines, starting again and, later in the evening, erasing a figure entirely under a sludge of thick green paint.

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Heightening the drama is the opening music, Peter Sculthorpe's String Quartet No. 11, Jabiru Dreaming (a heartbreaking piece by Gerald Finzi and, in the second half, more upbeat Schubert follow). Created by the Australian composer in 1990, Jabiru Dreaming is a heady, throbbing piece, inspired by the shrieks and pulse of the bush.

The artwork itself is unplanned, an impulsive reaction to the melody, insists Jones. "The excitement and the lights and the music ... you've got to just go with your gut."

The end result is less important than the process; or, in Jones' words: "We want there to be an element of surprise. The night is a blank canvas - anything can go."

Questions over representation - namely, how identity is both created, and warped, through art - are also raised. Frost not only stands in front of us; her figure also comes alive before our very eyes on the wall. In a third twist, reflecting her back like fairground mirrors, are a series of finished nude portraits, also of Frost, which hang around the performance.

While the mural is rough and ready, and often clumsily rendered, the paintings, prepared over the last three months and shown here for the first time, are more intricate and delicate. Thick lines of acrylic, shot out of a corking gun, form the background like thousands of multi-coloured strings: indented in this is the female form rendered in oil paint.

Despite its tongue-in-cheek title, Butt Naked Salon is deeply moving, partly because it is so fleeting. For the next two nights Frost will continue to pose; the quartet will play; and Jones will add to his mural. Erasing and painting, erasing and painting, before the entire thing is washed away and the wall is returned, as if nothing ever happened, to white.

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