

Dr Christian Thompson AO

HOUSE OF GOLD

黄金屋

MEDIATION HANDBOOK

# CONTENTS

About	3
Glossary	15
Key exhibition themes	25
The works	35
4A commissioned essays	45
Other tour resources	52
Prompts for mediation	54
Mediation reflections worksheet	56



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold Chapter 10 (Chinese Museum)*, 2023, c-type print on Moab Slickrock Metallic Pearl paper, wet mounted on archival backing, courtesy Studio Dr Christian Thompson AO.

## ABOUT THIS MEDIATION HANDBOOK

This handbook is designed to assist tour venues, front-of-house staff, educators and volunteers to navigate the themes, ideas and issues in the exhibition Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, curated by Thea-Mai Baumann and Con Gerakaris, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (4A).

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) has been researching and providing training on the practices of Mediation (sometimes referred to as Cultural Mediation) with the aim to equip gallery and museum staff with the tools to implement this engagement strategy across the sector.

Mediation is about deepening the engagement of audiences at a peer-to-peer level through personal opinions being shared, knowledge being discussed, and visitors being given the freedom to arrive at their own interpretations. You can read more about Mediation practice [here](#).

Volunteer and front-of-house staff are often the first people confronted with a wide range of questions from audiences. Outreach staff and educators engage their communities through public programming, enabling safe spaces for discussion, creativity and enquiry for all visitors. Through this handbook, M&G NSW aims to help gallery staff and volunteers develop an inclusive and culturally sensitive vocabulary to talk about the themes and ideas in *House of Gold* with the local community. This handbook is designed to be used as a reference point throughout the exhibition presentation at your venue as well as provide some deeper background and reflections for conversation and engagement.

This handbook was developed by M&G NSW with glossary contributions by Cindy Yuen-Zhe Chen, an artist, academic and educator. Additional glossary contributions have been made by Merindah Funnell, Emma Hicks and Nicole Barakat for FLENK Collective and Dr Megan R. Fizell.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

**4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art** undertook a research and development initiative in collaboration with Aboriginal Chinese-Australian artist Dr. Christian Thompson AO. Building upon the foundation of his prior artistic works, notably *New Gold Mountain* (2021), the *House of Gold* research and development project aimed to unravel the enduring legacy of the Chinese diaspora in Australia, tracing its origins from the era of the 1850s Gold Rush to its present-day manifestations.

Central to this research initiative is Dr. Thompson's investigation into the experiences of the first generation of Chinese miners hailing from the Guangdong region who ventured to Australia during the Gold Rush period. Beyond merely documenting historical events, Dr. Thompson examined the intricate interplay between the Chinese migrants' aspirations and the pervasive impact of the discriminatory White Australia Policy (1901 – 1973) on their lives. This exploration sheds light on the challenges, resilience, and cultural tenacity that characterised this community throughout a period marred by systemic racism.

The outcomes of *House of Gold* were then showcased at 4A (20 April – 2 June 2024), situated in a heritage-listed building in Chinatown amid rapid urban developments. This presentation connected strongly with preserving Chinatown's heritage and the history of early Chinese migration. The work not only honours the struggles and contributions of the Chinese diaspora but also intersects with the crucial task of protecting Aboriginal identity from erasure. Chinatown and Indigenous cultures are interwoven into Australia's national identity, sharing histories marred by injustices and suppression. Just as Aboriginal communities faced historical injustices, Chinese immigrants encountered discrimination and marginalisation. These efforts rejuvenate a cultural hub, highlighting the significance of embracing diversity for a united, harmonious future.

# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

**Dr Christian Thompson AO** traverses and dissolves binary boundaries through an artistic practice that spans photography, performance, sculpture, moving image and sound. The artist critically engages with concepts of race, sexuality, gender and memory by inhabiting imagined personas, captured in fantastical environments frequently centred on native flora. In *House of Gold*, Thompson shifts focus to explore his Chinese heritage, dating back to the 1850s Gold Rush migration boom.

Drawing inspiration from a line of poetry from the Song Dynasty 书中自有黄金屋 [shū zhōng zì yǒu huáng jīn wū], or, 'a book in the hand holds a house of gold', this exhibition was first presented at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in 2024 and celebrated the official debut of Thompson's complete series 'House of Gold'. Photographed on location, these works see the artist populating colonial historical buildings, including the Parliament of Victoria, the State Library of Victoria, the National Wool Museum (the former Dennys Lascelles Ltd. woolstore, built 1872), the Chinese Museum (former Cohen Bros furniture warehouse, built 1890), and Golden Dragon Museum (located on the historic site of Bridge St Chinatown, Bendigo). Utilising the body as a symbol of resistance, Thompson mines sites of colonial history as an act of quiet rebellion to the structural exclusion of authority within this country and subverts the power dynamics such institutions hold.

Supporting this emerging body of work are selected inclusions from 'New Gold Mountain', a series honouring the contributions of Thompson's Chinese-Australian lineage, in particular his grandmother Harriet and great uncles Frederick and Charles. Speaking to the importance of cultural connection, this series is a proud celebration dedicated to the resilience and perseverance his family experienced, from the Chinese Immigration Act 1855 to the negative social discrimination experienced daily.

Curated by Thea-Mai Baumann and Con Gerakaris with curatorial support from Reina Takeuchi, the national tour of *House of Gold*, developed with M&G NSW, brings this exhibition to regional and public galleries across Australia from 2025 to 2028.

## Learn more

[Dr Christian Thompson AO House of Gold \(2024\), 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art](#)  
[Jeremy Eccles \(2024\), Aboriginal Art Directory, 'Christian Thompson Sinologue'](#)

## Listen

[Dr Christian Thompson AO interview, 4A Talks - Produced by journalist and podcaster Silvi Vann-Wall](#)

## Watch

[Unboxing our lucky envelope! - 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art](#)



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2025.  
Photo: Dylan Smyth.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Dr Christian Thompson AO is a Bidjara/Irish/Chinese–Australian contemporary artist whose work explores notions of identity, cultural hybridity and history. Formally trained as a sculptor, Thompson’s multidisciplinary practice engages mediums such as photography, video, sculpture, performance and sound. His work focuses on the exploration of identity, sexuality, gender, race and memory. In his live performances and conceptual portraits, he inhabits a range of personas achieved through handcrafted costumes and carefully orchestrated poses and backdrops. In 2010 Thompson made history when he was among the first cohort of Australian Aboriginal people to be admitted into the University of Oxford in its 900-year history. He is currently a research affiliate at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Thompson holds a Doctorate of Philosophy (Fine Art), Trinity College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom; Master of Theatre, Amsterdam School of Arts, Das Arts, The Netherlands; Masters of Fine Art (Sculpture) RMIT University and Honours (Sculpture) RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia; and a Bachelor of Fine Art from the University of Southern Queensland, Australia.

Thompson has exhibited all over the world during his career that spans across the last two-decades. His work is held in major collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art and Art Gallery of NSW in Sydney; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; National Gallery of Victoria; Queensland Art Gallery and the University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane; and the Aboriginal Art Museum, Utrecht. A major survey exhibition of Thompson’s work, *Christian Thompson: Ritual Intimacy* toured nationally between 2017 and 2019. In 2018 Thompson was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in the Queen’s Birthday Honours for distinguished service to the visual arts as a sculptor, photographer, video and performance artist, and as a role model for young Indigenous artists.

**“I’ve always been really supported, I come from a family of creative people, my grandfather was a painter, my father used to draw, grandad used to carve emu eggs, my mum’s a ceramicist, one of my aunts is a painter, my cousin is a painter [...] that creative thread is present on both sides of my family and I think my parents really recognised that that was my natural inclination and they supported me. We would take my high school artworks home and dad would tip the boot out and we would put the paintings up and everyone would come over and we’d all just stand around and look at the works propped up by the back of the ute.”**

– Dr Christian Thompson AO Quote taken from *4A talks with Christian Thompson AO*.  
Listen to the interview: <https://on.soundcloud.com/XVfsRfyUzFtYNmrlxo>

**“There is a very deep spiritual foundation to my work, because I’m very introspective [...] I have a very rich interior world and life and my work is somehow a vehicle or a channel for that so everything that I experience in the world I kind of absorb that and that percolates on the inside and then it will just come to me like an image. I’ll feel an impulse to create work. I do feel like I am a sponge and I absorb everything around me [...] I have an ability to tap into the zeitgeist and tap into the larger cultural atmosphere in a way that is very intuitive and when it feels like it’s the right time to make that work it will come through with great clarity. I’ve always had this strange ability to absorb a lot of information but to be able to distill what resonates with the culture and ideas and attitudes of that time.”**

– Dr Christian Thompson AO Quote taken from *4A talks with Christian Thompson AO*.  
Listen to the interview: <https://on.soundcloud.com/XVfsRfyUzFtYNmrlxo>



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

## Learn more

[Dr Christian Thompson AO website](#)

[Michael Reid \(2025\), Dr Christian Thompson AO](#)

[RMIT University \(2024\), 'Dr Christian Thompson AO appointed adjunct industry associate professor'](#)

[Kelly Bourke \(2022\), Christian Thompson, the Australian artist taking over London's streets: 'I can be my own worst critic', \*The Guardian\*](#)

[Amez Yavuz \(2022\), Christian Thompson AO \*Yimba Yimbana / Just Listen\*](#)

[Liminal Magazine \(2021\), '5 Questions with Christian Thompson'](#)

[10 Magazine \(2021\), 'Ten talks to Christian Thompson'](#)

[Art Monthly \(2020\), 'The possibilities of strangeness: Christian Thompson's 'strange flower' at the Australian embassy in Berlin', \*Art Monthly Australasia\*, Issue 341 \(Summer 2024/25\)](#)

[Art Gallery of NSW \(2019\), Archibald Past Works and Winners, Thea Anamara Perkins Christian](#)

[UNSW Galleries \(2018\), Christian Thompson: \*Ritual Intimacy\*](#)

[Monash University Museum of Art \(2017\), Christian Thompson \*Untitled \(Banksia\) 2007\*](#)

[Australian Arts Review \(2015\), 'On the Couch with Christian Thompson'](#)

[Kluge-Ruhe - Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia \(2013\), Christian Thompson: \*We bury our own\*](#)

[Pitt Rivers Museum \(2013\), Christian Thompson: \*We Bury Our Own\*](#)

## Watch

[Christian Thompson \(2017\), \*Berceuse\*, Three channel video installation, 5:25 mins, edition of 5 + 2AP, Sarah Scout Presents](#)

[Christian Thompson \(2015\), \*Dead Tongue\*, Single channel video, 3: 32 min, Edition of 5 + 2. A.P., Sarah Scout Presents](#)

## Listen

[Christian Thompson \*Universal Fields\*, ABC Triple J \*Unearthed\*](#)

# ABOUT 4A CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART – TOURING PARTNER

4A champions the practices of Asian artists and elevates cross-cultural dialogues between Australia and Asia and is an independent not-for-profit organisation based in Sydney, Australia. Since 1996, 4A has fostered excellence and innovation in contemporary culture through the commissioning, presentation, documentation and research of contemporary art.

## Learn More

[4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art website](#)

[Creative Australia \(2024\), 'Intersectional diversity in governance at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art'](#)

[Monique Moate \(2023\), '5 Questions on Accessibility in the Arts with 4A', \*LIMINAL Magazine\*](#)



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, exhibition opening, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Anna Hay.

# ABOUT 4A CURATORS

## Thea-Mai Baumann – Artistic Director and CEO

Thea-Mai Baumann joined 4A as Artistic Director and Chief Executive Officer in February 2023. She is a creative executive, artist, creative technologist and producer of Vietnamese-Swiss heritage. Between 2019–2022, she was Manager and Senior Manager of International Engagement at the Australia Council for the Arts where she co-designed and led the launch of the International Engagement Strategy 2021–25, and provided oversight of strategic investments in Europe, North America and the Asia Pacific. Between 2012–2019, Thea was CEO and Founder of world-first hologram brands Metaverse Makeovers® and 超宇美人® based between Melbourne, Shanghai, and Hong Kong where she led the commercialisation of augmented-reality innovation Metaverse Nails.

### Learn More

[Infinite Scroll, curated by Thea-May Baumann \(2025\), 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art](#)

[Man & Wah: Propagate/Germinate/Bloom, curated by Thea-May Baumann \(2025\), 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art](#)

[Gina Fairley \(2023\), 'Q&A: Introducing Thea Baumann, 4A's new CEO', Arts Hub](#)

### Listen

['Episode 19 Thea Baumann' \(n.d.\) APHIDS LISTENS, Podcast](#)



## Con Gerakaris – Curatorial Program Manager

Con is a curator, arts administrator and writer. His areas of interest frequently revolve around social phenomena, subcultures, contemporary urban experiences and our relationship to the built environment. Recent exhibitions curated for 4A include: *NUWORLD* (2024); Dr Christian Thompson AO: *House of Gold* (2024); *YEAR OF THE DRAGON* [龙年] (2024); Louise Zhang: *No dust left in the lilies* (2023); and Rel Pham: *Cache* (2023). Independently, he curated the exhibitions *D A R K S E A* – Lynn Nguyen and J.S.D. Andrews (2019), goodspace, Chippendale; *CITIZENS OF NO PLACE* (2018), Down/Under Space, Chippendale; and *IT'S PRONOUNCED "GIF" NOT "GIF"* (2017), goodspace, Chippendale. Con programmed the inaugural Club 4A for Sydney's Chinese New Year Festival 2018 and instigated, curated and produced for 4A Digital since 2020. He has published articles for 4A Papers, un. extended, Runway Conversations and Art Collector. Con completed a Bachelor of Arts (HONS) in 2013 and a Master of Art Curating in 2016 at the University of Sydney.

### Learn More

[Con Gerakaris \(2022\), 'This Is My Coup d'Etat: K-Pop and Creative Control', 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art](#)

[Con Gerakaris \(2022\), 'One step after another: a conversation with Lee Kun-Yong', 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art](#)

[Cindy Yuen-Zhe Chen \(2022\) Spaces to Stir, curatorial essay by Con Gerakaris](#)

[Con Gerakaris \(2024\), Immortal Critical Essay](#)

### Listen

['Curator Con Gerakaris in conversation with artist James Jirat Patradoon' \(2021\), Artist Talk: James Jirat Patradoon, Mixcloud](#)

**Left:** Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, 4A's Con Gerakaris and Thea-Mai Baumann with *Double Happiness*, exhibition opening, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2025. Photo: Campbell Cole.

# ABOUT MUSEUMS & GALLERIES OF NSW

M&G NSW runs the largest regional touring program in NSW and is committed to touring exhibitions of contemporary visual art to communities throughout Australia. Throughout 2022–2024 M&G NSW reached audiences of 377,946 with 15 exhibitions showcasing 118 artists at 84 unique venues nationally. 544 programs were delivered and over 7,033 students were engaged.

Find out more about M&G NSW's national touring program [here](#).

## ABOUT THE TOUR

The national tour, developed in collaboration with Museums & Galleries of NSW, will bring *House of Gold* and its associated public programming and professional development opportunities to 10 regional and public galleries across QLD, NSW, VIC and TAS from 2025 to 2028. Venues and dates can be found on the House of Gold webpage [here](#).

### Learn More

[Art Guide Australia \(2025\), Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, Christian Thompson, House of Gold City of Wagga Wagga \(2025\), 'Wagga Wagga Art Gallery launches it's summer exhibitions, wrapping up its 50th anniversary year.'](#)



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, *Burdi Burdi*, exhibition opening, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2025. Photo: Campbell Cole.

# EXHIBITION GLOSSARY

## **Bidjara:**

The Bidjara people are First Nations Australian people of eastern Queensland. Bidjara language (also spelt Bidyara or Pitjara) is officially classified as severely endangered; in 1980, it was spoken by 20 Elders in Queensland between the towns of Tambo and Augathella, or the Warrego and Langlo Rivers. Bidjara language includes many dialects, with some being taught at local schools in the region to revitalise the language.

## **Cantonese:**

Cantonese people are a Han Chinese subgroup of people originating from Guangzhou and the surrounding areas of Southeastern China. Cantonese language originated in the city of Guangzhou (formerly romanised as Canton) and is spoken across Southeastern China, Hong Kong and Macau as well as in overseas communities. Cantonese was the dominant Chinese language of the Chinese Australian community from the 1850s, when Chinese settlers began migrating to the colony, up until the mid-2000s.

## **First Nations Chinese Australians:**

The connection between First Nations people and Chinese people can be traced back to the 1850s when Chinese people started arriving in Australia, however, there is a growing recognition that even earlier contact pre-colonisation is likely. Trading, intermarriages and cultural collaborations occurred, establishing blended families and communities across Australia, particularly in Western Australia, Northern Territory, and Queensland. Many First Nations Chinese people are aware of their Chinese connections, through ancestries, cultural practices, food and language. This under-acknowledged part of Australian history is gaining greater recognition through the work of First Nations Chinese Australian artists such as Dr Christian Thompson, Jenna Lee and Jason Wing.

## **Autoethnography:**

Dr Christian Thompson describes his artistic process as autoethnographic. Autoethnography is a qualitative and arts-based research method whereby a researcher connects their own lived, personal experiences to broader social, political and cultural meanings and understandings. Autoethnography is used in disciplines such as anthropology, arts education, literature, sociology and gender studies. Autoethnography allows researchers to reflect upon their position and subjectivity while examining cultural experiences.

## **Cultural Identity:**

Cultural identity refers to a person's sense of belonging to a particular group or culture. It is often expressed through food, clothing, customs, language and behaviours, and is shaped by factors such as ancestry, social class and religion. Cultural identity can be complex and multifaceted, especially for migrants or people of mixed ancestry. Recognising and valuing cultural identities strengthens understanding and communication among diverse groups of people in society.

## **Cultural Resilience:**

European colonisation in Australia made a deliberate attempt to erase First Nations cultural practices and languages through violence, massacre, family removal, systemic racism and discriminatory government policies. First Nations cultural resilience involved keeping knowledge and language alive for generations, passing them down despite immense challenges and risk. Resilience and resistance enable First Nations people to maintain their sovereignty and connection to Country, and revitalise their cultures and languages.

## **Anti-Chinese Immigration Legislation:**

Sparked by the discovery of gold in the 1850s, the number of Chinese people arriving to the Australian colonies grew dramatically, reaching a total population of 38,258 in 1861. Chinese people and labourers attracted particular hostility and racial intolerance, leading to the implementation of state and federal laws that restricted the number of Chinese immigrants entering the country. The *Chinese Immigration Act* enacted in 1855 by the Victorian Government limited the number of Chinese passengers on a vessel to one for every 10 tons. In 1901, the newly federated Commonwealth Parliament passed the *Immigration Restriction Act*; this was aimed at restricting non-white entry and became known as the White Australia policy. The 50 word dictation test, administered to migrants in different European languages, ensured that the 'White Australia policy' effectively excluded immigrants from Asian countries for over 50 years.

## **Tableau Vivant:**

Tableau vivant (often shortened to tableau) is a term used to describe a painting or photograph in which one or more figures are carefully posed for dramatic effect and appear absorbed or unaware of the viewer. Props or costumes are often used and the scene can be theatrically illuminated. French philosopher Denis Diderot first used this term in the 18th century to describe paintings. Variations of this compositional style evolved throughout the 20th century and contemporary photographers continue to adopt this approach to convey a narrative.



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, 2024. Photo: Anna Hay.

# EXHIBITION GLOSSARY

## Colonisation:

Colonisation is an exploitive practice driven by the prospect of increased power and wealth whereby an invading foreign state controls a people or territory through often violent political subjugation. Colonisation involves occupying the land with settlers, imposing cultural practices on First Nations populations like language or religion, and commandeering the region's resources to benefit the colonising settler-nation.

## Country:

As defined on the [AIATSIS website](#), "Country is the term often used by Aboriginal peoples to describe the lands, waterways and seas to which they are connected. The term contains complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity." Look at the [AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia](#) for a visual representation of many of the distinct language groups that make up this country. While this map is a wonderful resource and guide, the best way to know whose Country you are on/from and who the Traditional Owners are is to respectfully ask. Speaking with local councils or land councils are a good place to start. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/>

## Colonial Narrative:

Australian's historical narrative is based on the story of European settlers, told from a Colonial viewpoint, with little acknowledgement of the truths and experiences of First Nations people. This narrative has resulted in legacies and contexts that continue to shape who we are and how we identify to the world around us.

## Continuing Cultural Connection:

Closely linked to the concept of cultural identity, continuing cultural connection is the ability to maintain the historical traditions of a culture and carry them forward into the future. Colonisation and assimilation policies in Australia have resulted in the separation of First Nations communities from their traditional cultural values, practices, beliefs, and knowledge transmission, contributing to a loss of identity.

## Iconography:

Iconography is the traditional imagery or visual symbols associated with a subject, often religious, political or cultural. It can be used to represent complex ideas and themes or as a means of identification, storytelling or interpretation. Artists use iconography to convey specific meanings in their work. First Nations artists are renowned for their use of symbolism and iconography.

## Lived experience:

Lived Experience is the personal wisdom and experience that someone has gained from direct, first-hand involvement, as opposed to knowledge that someone may obtain from a second-hand source, which may be based on hearsay, assumptions, research or the media. Lived experience provides a higher level of understanding of everyday events, situations or issues. Lived experience includes the cultural, spiritual, physical and emotional experiences of an individual, family or community.

## Racism:

The Australian Human Rights Commission defines racism as 'the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race. Racism is more than just prejudice in thought or action. It occurs when this prejudice – whether individual or institutional – is accompanied by the power to discriminate against, oppress or limit the rights of others.' See more detailed information on racism from the Australian Human Rights Commission [here](#).



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, exhibition opening, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Anna Hay.

# FLOWER GLOSSARY



## Baby blue gum

A compact eucalypt growing up to 10 metres tall, with firm round silver-blue leaves that grow in pairs along its stems. Also known as the Silver-leaved Mountain Gum, it grows in grassy woodland in parts of the Central and Southern Tablelands of NSW. Eucalyptus is a powerful antiseptic.

[Waraburra Nura, UTS \(2024\), 'Eucalyptus pulverulenta'](#)  
[NITV \(2018\), 'Here are some of Australia's most unique plants growing in Sydney's newest native garden', SBS](#)



## Banksia

There are 172 Banksia species native to Australia. They grow in coastal areas, dry sclerophyll forests and sandstone mountain ranges. Banksias have rough bark and distinctive flower heads ranging from green to yellow and red in colour. Their fruit are hard and woody, protecting seeds from animals and fire. Traditionally, First Nations peoples used the flower as a paint brush for rock art and ceremonies, with the dried flower also useful as a container to carry embers between camp sites for the lighting of fires.

[Australian National Botanic Gardens, Parks Australia. \(n.d.\) 'Banksia - Australian plant information'](#)  
[NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service \(2025\), 'Old Man Banksia'](#)  
[Greening Australia \(2017\), 'Koori Bush Tucker Garden'](#)



## Bottlebrush

Bottlebrush or Callistemon are small hardy Australian native shrubs or trees related to paperbark melaleucas, with cylindrical 'bottlebrush' shaped flowers. Their woody branches were traditionally utilised by First Nations peoples to make weapons, with their nectar used to make a sweet drink. They are found mostly in eastern and south-eastern Australia, with some species also growing in the south-western areas of Western Australia.

[Australian National Botanic Gardens and Centre for Australian National Biodiversity Research \(2024\), 'Information about Australia's flora, Bottlebrush - genus Callistemon'](#)  
[Greening Australia \(2017\), 'Koori Bush Tucker Garden'](#)



## Chrysanthemum

Referencing the artist's Chinese heritage, the Chrysanthemum was first cultivated in China over 3,000 years ago. Its name is derived from the Greek words for 'gold' and 'flower'. The petals and leaves are edible when cooked, and both can be used to make tea. Known as Ju Hua in China, Chrysanthemums have antibacterial, antifungal and anti-inflammatory properties and are used in traditional Chinese Medicine. The Chrysanthemum symbolises virtue and nobility and is considered to be one of 'The Four Gentlemen', a recurring theme in Chinese art and garden design, along with the plum, the orchid and the bamboo.

[Ken Fern \(2014\), 'Chrysanthemum morifolium', Useful Tropical Plants Database](#)  
[China Online Museum, 'Four Gentleman'](#)



## Firewheel tree

These trees can grow up to 30 metres in height and are mainly found in sub-tropical or tropical regions. Their flowers are a vibrant red and radiate from a central round structure resembling a fire wheel. First Nations peoples have traditionally utilised the tree branches for crafting tools and the flowers for ceremonial practices.

[Museums of History NSW \(2025\), 'Firewheel tree'](#)  
[Jeff Howes \(2023\), 'Stenocarpus sinuatus - Firewheel Tree, Fire Tree, White Beefwood, Tulip Flower', Australian Plant Society NSW](#)



## Peony

The Chinese Peony has green glossy leaves and large, round, fragrant flowers with white, pink or crimson petals, that form a cup shape. In Traditional Chinese Medicine it is used to treat hormonal conditions, inflammation and the immune system, with the root of the Peony used to treat rheumatoid arthritis, muscle cramping and fever for more than 1,200 years.

[BioExplorer.net \(2025\), 'Chinese Peony'](#)  
[PMC PubMed Central, 'Anti-inflammatory and Immunomodulatory Effects of Paeonia Lactiflora, a Traditional Chinese Herbal Medicine'](#)



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2025.  
Photo: Campbell Cole.

## FLOWER GLOSSARY



### Protea

Proteas range from small shrubs to trees and are native to South Africa, where First Nations peoples have traditionally utilised their leaves for medicinal purposes. They are a hardy plant with leaves arranged in a spiral formation and cone-like, long lasting flowers typically red, pink, white, cream or yellow in colour.

[San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance \(2025\), 'African protea'](#)

[South African Garden & Home \(2025\), 'Plant of the Month: fascinating facts about the protea'](#)



### Red flowering gum

A small to medium sized eucalyptus tree, preferring sandy soils and temperate locations, the Red Flowering Gum has dark glossy green foliage, rough bark and a spectacular show of bright red, orange and pink flowers from December to May. Endemic to Western Australia, the Red Flowering Gum is known in Noongar language as 'Yorgum' or 'Yorgam' and has been used traditionally to treat ailments including diseases of the eyes.

[Australian Native Plant Society \(2025\), 'Corymbia ficifolia'](#)

[Government House Western Australia \(2025\), 'Red Flowering Gum'](#)



### Wattle

Found throughout Australia, there are more than 1,000 Australian native species of Wattle. Their fluffy, bright yellow flowers form ball or cylindrical shapes. Wattle is Australia's national floral emblem. The first seasonal wattle blooms are identified by First Nations people as a signal of whales on the move and an abundance of mullet. Wattle has been valued traditionally as a timber source, a medicine and a food. Ground wattle seed has become a high demand product used in baking, flavouring desserts and to produce a coffee-like drink. Wattle seeds are nutritious and rich in protein.

[National Museum of Australia, 'Defining Symbols of Australia: Wattle'](#)

[Koori History.com \(2017\), 'Wattle \(Acacia\) and its many uses'](#)

[Australian Bushfoods Magazine, 'Wattles'](#)

# KEY EXHIBITION THEMES

*House of Gold* offers venues the opportunity to connect with the work of a high-calibre artist, and engage with nationally significant content, First Nations and Chinese histories, arts and cultures. The exhibition includes a range of contemporary themes that will appeal to broad audiences including:

## Culture & identity

- Connections between food and culture
- Intergenerational culture
- Complex and intersectional identities
- Relationships between Aboriginal and Chinese communities
- Chinese Gold Rush history
- Preservation of Indigenous languages
- Family histories

## Dr Christian Thompson AO discusses intersectional identity:

“The story of First Nations Chinese Australian people is not something that has necessarily been given a focus or a lot of recognition but there is a very specific relationship and history emerging of cultures and identities [...] I hope that people are able to take that and apply it to their own personal stories and their family’s own stories, and their own sense of what we now consider Australian identity to be, outside of the dominant colonial narrative that we’ve been fed.”

- Dr Christian Thompson AO Quote taken from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).

“I always refer to my own experience to open up a larger conversation about the nuance and intersectionality of contemporary Australian identity and experience. I think this is what art is capable of doing is moving us forward culturally.”

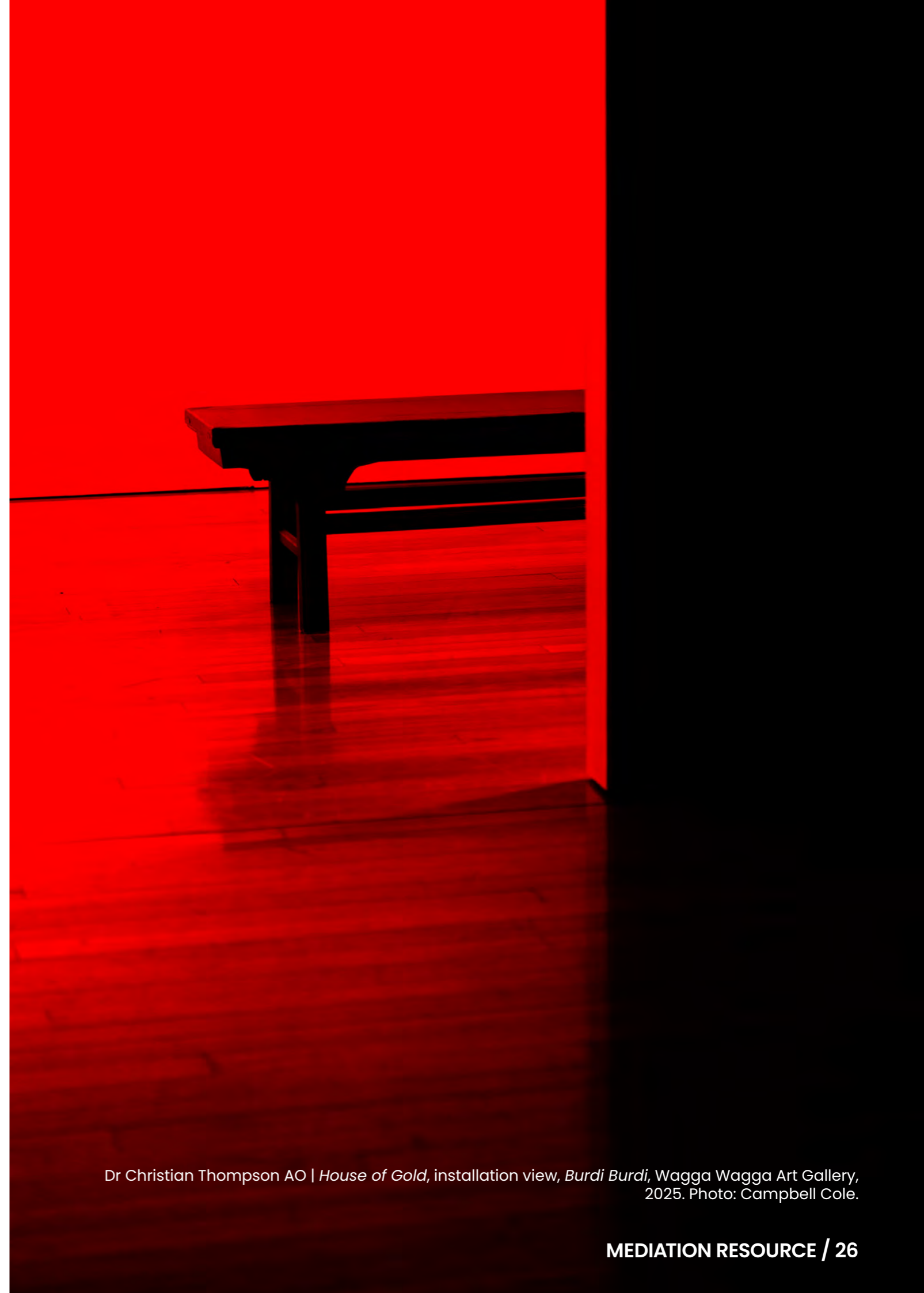
[10 Magazine \(2021\), ‘Ten talks to Christian Thompson’](#)

## Read more

[National Museum of Australia Exhibition \(2025\), Our Story: Aboriginal–Chinese People in Australia](#)

[Yang, E. \(2018\), ‘An untold history: Chinese and Indigenous Australians share a strong cultural bond’, ABC News.](#)

[SBS Language \(2023\), ‘Cultures entwined’: Research uncovers long history of First Nation’s and Chinese blended families.](#)



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, *Burdi Burdi*, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2025. Photo: Campbell Cole.

# KEY EXHIBITION THEMES

## Scholarship & research

- Art as scholarship
- Libraries
- Research
- Archives
- Lifelong learning
- Academia
- Chinese poetry

In 2010, Dr Christian Thompson AO was awarded the Charlie Perkins Scholarship to attend the University of Oxford to undertake his Doctorate of Philosophy (Fine Art); he was among the first cohort of Australian Aboriginal people to attend Oxford University. In the series 'House of Gold', Thompson can be seen wearing the 'Sub fusc' a formal Oxford University academic dress required for examinations and ceremonies. This garment signifies Thompson's identity as an artist and academic with a lifelong practice of learning.

### Dr Christian Thompson AO discusses art and scholarship:

"I was really thinking about this idea of art and scholarship and how the artist contributes to scholarship [...] what is scholarship for artists, and so I've taken this idea of the scholar and turned it into visual language and that's how artists contribute to scholarship [...] this idea of how learning never really stops [...] that is a really integral and important thread of my own story and so *House of Gold* really unifies that identity as an artist, academic, researcher, performer, everything is brought together in this body of work."

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).

### Dr Christian Thompson AO reflects on his time at Oxford:

'I think about the responsibility... I think about the resolve and the fortitude and the determination to exist in those spaces when you've never been in spaces like that before... the weight of not only my community but history, my country, the university... '

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).

### Learn more

[ABC News \(Australia\) \(2010\), 'Oxford Welcomes first Aboriginal students'](#)

[The Guardian \(2024\), 'First Indigenous Australian Students at Oxford look to rewrite history'](#)

## Racism & stereotypes

- Migrant resilience
- Historical injustices
- Art and protest
- Sexuality and gender
- Cultural diversity
- White Australia Policy, Yellow Peril, Queensland's Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act.
- Complex identities, intersectional identity, immigrants
- Whitewashing of Indigenous history/Chinese Gold Rush history, cultural erasure discrimination, systemic racism, marginalisation

### Dr Christian Thompson AO addresses the history of marginalisation in Australia:

"There's the history of marginalisation in Australia because of The White Australia Policy. So people weren't allowed to live in certain areas and were forced out to the margins and so it's not uncommon to meet First Nations people who are also of Chinese Heritage because I think people found community in difference and community in exile and community in each other [...] the ancient wisdom and knowledge and spirituality and connection to place and to me those things really mirror as well."

- Dr Christian Thompson AO quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).

# KEY EXHIBITION THEMES

## Botanicals & symbols

- Native flora as a Connection to Country
- Symbolism
- Floral motifs in traditional Chinese art
- The symbolism of 'gold' – traditionally related to wealth, in the Chinese culture, also power, happiness and longevity

## Dr Christian Thompson AO reflects on his personal connection to wildflowers:

'When we were kids, my grandmother would always say: "Go out to the bush—all the desert flowers have come into bloom." The bush would really change at that time of year. All these beautiful flowers would bloom, and you'd get muted purples and pinks and yellows—amazing colours. ['Australian Graffiti'](#) is really an expression of that. A lot of my work is connected to my memories of growing up in Western Queensland in Barcaldine, so I decided to make these headdresses out of native Australian flowers. There's kangaroo paw, eucalyptus, flannel flower, banksia, another eucalyptus, banksia leaves. I was looking at the idea of our connection to nature, and the flowers as a symbol of that—also the idea of the flowers as a symbol of patriotism or representing Country in this beautiful way'.

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, transcribed from a conversation between Christian Thompson and students from the Melbourne Indigenous Transition School at MUMA on 9 May 2017

'The flower walls are a direct reflection of my upbringing with a strong connection to the natural world, and that is Aboriginal culture. It's interesting because I used to wear the flowers and now it seems like the flowers 'wear' me. I'm inside this floral constellation. I feel like these two flower walls also reflect on the connection I had with my grandmother. I was very close to her, and I've felt her presence around me in a very palpable way. I feel like she has been guiding me through this creative process.'

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, quoted in [Communications Collective \(2021\)](#), '[Christian Thompson on New Gold Mountain](#)'

'There are two flower walls in the exhibition which have become a big part of my artistic identity. In these works, I've used a lot more specific Southern Chinese flowers to reference my Chinese-Australian heritage. One flower wall is called *New Gold Mountain (Xin Jin Shan)*, and the other is called *Double Happiness*.'

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, quoted in [Communications Collective \(2021\)](#), '[Christian Thompson on New Gold Mountain](#)'



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

# THE WORKS

## ***New Gold Mountain (Xin Jin Shan), 2021***

C-type print on Fuji Pearl Metallic paper, four panels, framed

'New Gold Mountain or Xin Jin Shan is what the first wave of Chinese immigrants referred to the Gold Rush in Australia. This was borrowed from the Gold Rush in California USA which was called 'Gold Mountain'. My Grandmother's family were part of this first wave of migration in the 1850's from the River Delta area of Southern China. Hence the strong presence of gold in these new works.'

[10 Magazine \(2021\), 'Ten talks to Christian Thompson'](#)

'The theme of **Gold** has been something that has permeated my practice [...] I've done a series of works that explore specifically our Gold Rush heritage, and my grandmother was very proud of our Gold Rush heritage, she would say 'we're the first generation, we're Gold Rush, don't forget that' and so this motif has emerged in these recent years and I've done different works, a sound work *Burdi Burdi*, *New Gold Mountain*, [...] and then *House of Gold* and I guess there are those connotations there as well, but it's also the idea of the symbolism of gold and the power of those colours and materials and the ideas they evoke.'

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).

'At the heart of this new series of work is an homage to my Grandmother and our Southern Chinese heritage.'

[10 Magazine \(2021\), 'Ten talks to Christian Thompson'](#)

'I have been reflecting on 21 years of my work and have used the time to fortify my own creative voice and fire again. There's a lot of references to fire in *New Gold Mountain*; a metaphor for my personal regeneration experience I've had over the past 12 to 18 months.'

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, quoted in [Communications Collective \(2021\), 'Christian Thompson on New Gold Mountain'](#)



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, *New Gold Mountain (Xin Jin Shan)*, 2021, c-type print on Fuji Pearl Metallic paper, four panels, framed, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2025. Photo: Campbell Cole.

# THE WORKS

## ***Double Happiness, 2021***

C-type print on Fuji Pearl Metallic paper, four panels, framed

'Growing up, my family moved all over Australia, following my father's career in the Royal Australian Air Force. But no matter where we lived, Christmas and Easter were always spent back home in Barcaldine, in the heart of Central Western Queensland. It's a semi-arid hinterland, but in winter, the landscape undergoes an extraordinary transformation—desert flowers bloom, turning the rugged terrain into a vivid floral wonderland. This annual spectacle remains one of my most powerful childhood memories. Native flowers have captivated me ever since, becoming a recurring theme in my work for over 25 years.'

Dr Christian Thompson AO quoted in ['An Interview with Dr. Christian Thompson AO on Botanical Inspiration', Goldfield & Banks Australia Journal \(2025\)](#)

'I was tossing up between two titles one was 'Chinese Fashion' which is a name for a family recipe and basically like an old-school Chow Mein, and 'Double Happiness'. One day, I was walking down the street when I looked down at the ground and there was a packet of cigarettes – a blue packet with the words 'Double Happiness' written across the packet! I was thinking about what title would be best, and at that exact moment, perfectly composed on the ground... I took a photo and posted it on my Instagram ([@ChristianThompsonArtist](#)).'

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, quoted in [Communications Collective \(2021\)](#), 'Christian Thompson on New Gold Mountain'



Dr Christian Thompson AO, *Double Happiness*, 2021, c-type print on Fuji Pearl Metallic paper, four panels, framed. Installation view, *House of Gold*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Courtesy Studio Dr Christian Thompson AO; Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne; and Cassandra Bird, Sydney and Paris. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

# THE WORKS

## **Chinese Fashion, 2024**

Single channel video, 1m 20s.

Thompson's family dish 'Chinese Fashion' is an 'old school chow mien' recipe that was passed down in his family for 180 years through his grandmother who is of Southern Chinese migrant heritage. It is a no-nonsense stir fry of tofu, onion and cabbage, loosely playing off the flavours of hand-shredded cabbage (手撕包菜 [shǒu sī bāo cài]). The recipe substitutes the traditional wombok for western cabbage which is sliced into thin strands to mimic noodles. This recipe speaks to the resilience of migrant peoples who preserve their culture through food by adapting to new environments.

'I was raised by my Chinese Australian grandmother and I look a lot like my grandmother and so that is always reflected back at me. I would say that we always grew up with a strong sense of our Gold Rush Chinese history.'

- Dr Christian Thompson AO quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).

"It's the way that culture and identity is passed down through food and the fact that it survived for such a long period of time as well that is resonant."

- Dr Christian Thompson AO quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Courtesy Studio Dr Christian Thompson AO, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Cassandra Bird, Sydney and Paris. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

# THE WORKS

## ***Burdi Burdi (Fire Fire), 2021***

Four-channel sound installation, presented in an enclosed space, red wall paint, red lighting.

Thompson's artwork *Burdi Burdi (Fire Fire)* features the artists' voice singing in his grandfather's First Nations Bidjara language, now officially classified as severely endangered. By singing in Bidjara language, Thompson ensures that it will live on. The artwork also speaks to Thompson's Southern Chinese Cantonese heritage; his grandmother and great grandfather migrated to the colony in the 1850's. The celebratory colour red pays tribute to his Chinese lineage, embodying auspiciousness, prosperity and vitality.

'There is also a sound work in the show called *Burdi Burdi (Fire Fire)*. This came out of the headspace I was in during lockdown. I went back to my really formative years and I started thinking about my life between the ages of say, 13 to 18. I was reflecting on all the things I used to watch at that age, and I re-watched shows like *Twin Peaks* from that period. The video is also just about my general unease about the state of the world, I think we're all feeling a bit like this, or we have at some point.'

- Dr Christian Thompson AO, quoted in [Communications Collective \(2021\), 'Christian Thompson on New Gold Mountain'](#)

### **Read more**

[Brennan, Dechlan \(2025\), 'Fire on the Bridge: Dr Christian Thompson's Burdi Burdi to Transform Naarm's Heart', \*Style up | Fashion, Beauty & Lifestyle\*](#)



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Courtesy Studio Dr Christian Thompson AO, Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne and Cassandra Bird, Sydney and Paris. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

# THE WORKS

## 'House of Gold' series

C-type print on Moab Slickrock Metallic Pearl paper, wet mounted on archival backing. Series of 12 prints. Edition 1/1.

Taking its name from a line from a Song Dynasty poem, 书中自有黄金屋 or 'a book in the hand holds a house of gold', Christian Thompson's series of self-portraits depict the artist reading various fiction and non-fiction texts in pre-Federation buildings. The books were chosen with biographical intent and each speaks to the artist's personal journey of creative learning, and his First Nations Bidjara, Chinese migrant and Irish cultural heritages. For Thompson, his creative practice has become a way to facilitate a lifelong learning process.



Dr Christian Thompson AO | 'House of Gold' Series installation view, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

## Song Dynasty Poem

### Urge Young Man to Study

By Zhao Heng (Song Dynasty)

No need to purchase land to enrich your home.  
In books you will find a thousand bushels of grain.

No need to build grand mansions to live in happiness.  
In books you will find a house made of gold.

No need to miss your entourage when going out.  
In books you will find carriages in throngs.

No need to worry about matchmaking to wed.  
In books you will find a beauty as fair as jade.

For a man to fulfil his life's ambition,  
Diligently read the Five Classics day after day.



Dr Christian Thompson AO | 'House of Gold' Series installation view, (L-R) *Chapter 2 (Old Parliament Library)*, 2022; *Chapter 3 (Leo Baeck Centre)*, 2023; *Chapter 4 (State Library of Victoria)*, 2023; *Chapter 5 (State Library of Victoria)*, 2023, c-type print on Moab Slickrock Metallic Pearl paper, wet mounted on archival backing, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

# THE WORKS

## 'House of Gold' series

C-type print on Moab Slickrock Metallic Pearl paper, wet mounted on archival backing. Series of 12 prints. Edition 1/1.

'It's all about timing and it was just the coordinates of those things that all intersected at that moment and that was like now it's time to do that body of work and inspired by my work with the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, inspired by conversations that I'd had with my supervisors, inspired by the access that I had to all these incredible spaces. There was actually an image of my examiner Dame Marina Warner and it was in a magazine and she was sitting on a floor [...] and she was surrounded by all of her books and there was an impression of that as well [...] I love the idea of being surrounded by knowledge, that was something that struck me about it.'

- Dr Christian Thompson AO quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).

'In 'House of Gold' the books that I'm reading have all had some personal connection to them in some way so in the first two images [...] I'm reading *Masks of God* by Joseph Campbell which is a really seminal text for me and then I'm reading a book my cousin Brian, called the *Irish O'Kennedys* about my mum's side of the family and then in the State Library works I'm reading *Walk through walls* by Marina Abramović and I did a mentorship with Marina and the works that I show at the War Museum I'm reading a novel called *Fire Stick* which is about the Shearer's Walkout [...] I'm doing two things at once I'm incorporating my own personal journey of learning and then superimposing that into these spaces.'

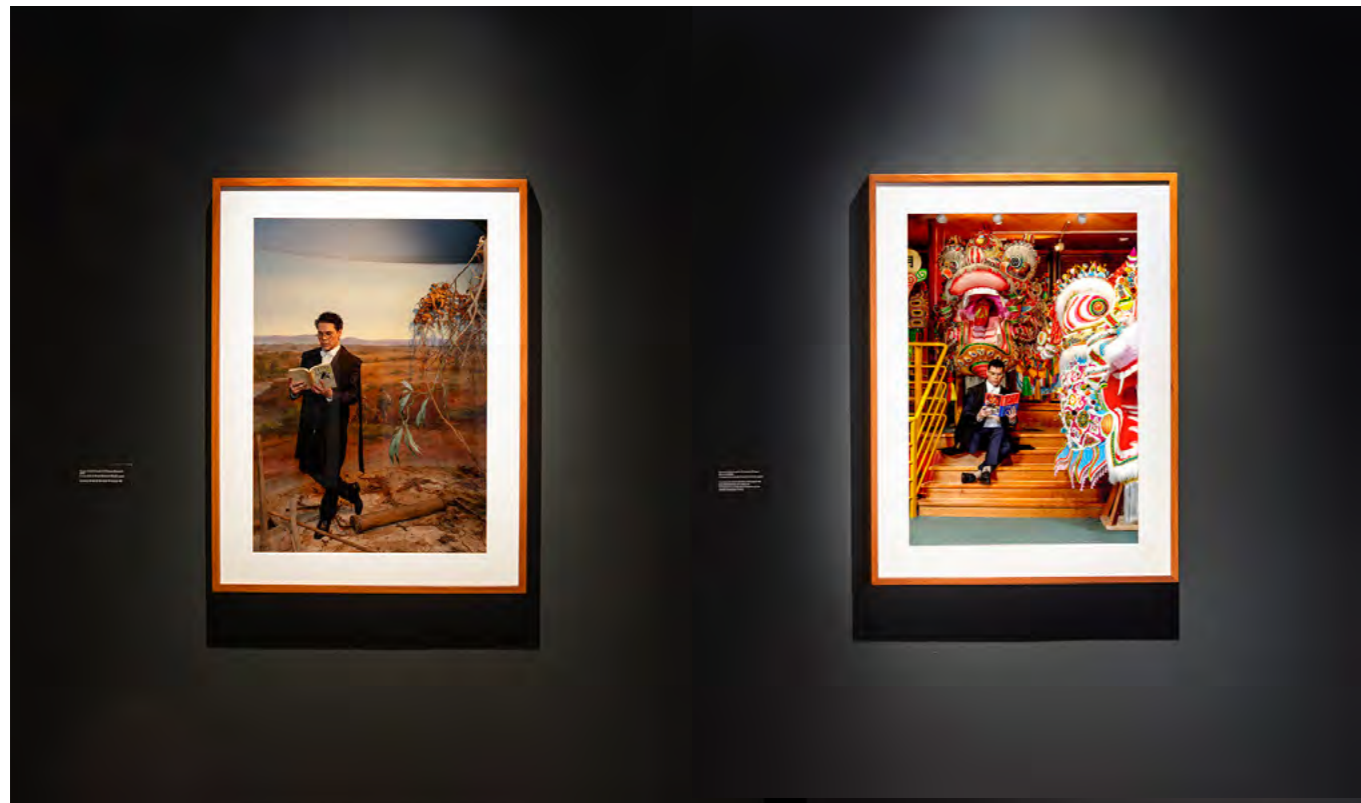
- Dr Christian Thompson AO quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).



Dr Christian Thompson AO | 'House of Gold' Series installation view (L-R) *Chapter 7* (National Wool Museum, Geelong), 2023; *Chapter 8* (National Wool Museum, Geelong), 2023; *Chapter 9* (Chinese Museum), 2023; *Chapter 10* (Chinese Museum), 2023, c-type print on Moab Slickrock Metallic Pearl paper, wet mounted on archival backing, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

“The seeds for this body of work were sewn when I was doing my PHD at Oxford. I created a series ‘We Bury our Own’ that was a response to the Australian Photographic Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum and in that body of work I am wearing the traditional Oxford garb academic dress which is called sub fusc and ‘House of Gold’ was really sewn at that time and I remember actually saying to a friend I’d love to shoot works when I’m actually sitting in these incredible spaces, the Bodleian and the Balliol libraries [...] but I never actually got around to doing it because I was so busy with my PHD and then I was invited by Gertrude Contemporary to do the Gertrude Edition and that’s when I picked up on that idea from that time and I shot two works at Old Parliament Library here at Old Parliament in Melbourne and then that really was the beginning of the series which has really been an online, Instagram series and showing them at 4A will be the first time I will be showing the whole body of work in the flesh.”

– Dr Christian Thompson AO quoted from [4A talks with Christian Thompson AO](#).



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold Chapter 11 (Chinese Museum)*, 2023, c-type print on Moab Slickrock Metallic Pearl Paper, wet mounted on archival backing; Dr Christian Thompson AO, *House of Gold Chapter 12 (Golden Dragon Museum)*, 2024, installation view, c-type print on Moab Slickrock Metallic Pearl paper, wet mounted on archival backing, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

## Books featured in ‘House of Gold’ series

Abramović, M and Kaplan, J. (2017), *Walk through walls: A memoir*. UK: Penguin Books.

Campbell, J. (1974), *The masks of god: Primitive mythology*. London: Souvenir Press.

Kaul, R. and Hu, J. (2022), *Chinese-ish: Home Cooking, not quite authentic, 100% delicious*. Crows Nest, NSW: Murdoch Books.

Kennedy, B.P. (2005), *The Irish Kennedys: The story of the ‘Rebellious O’Kennedys’*. Helensvale, Qld: B P Kennedy.

Malcolm, E. and Hall, D. (2018), *A new history of the Irish in Australia*. Sydney NSW: NewSouth Publishing.

Merii, W. (1950), *The fire stick: Incidents in the shearers’ strike. A tale of Australian bush life*. Cassells Printers.

Riwoe, M (2022), *Stone Sky Gold Mountain*, St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press.

Tobias, P. (2007), *Liberal judaism: A Judaism for the twenty-First Century*. London: Liberal Judaism.



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view exhibition opening, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Anna Hay.

## 4A COMMISSIONED ESSAYS

### **Chinese Fashion by Lee Tran Lam**

“It’s interesting to me how identity is passed down through food. And this is such a simple recipe, but it’s survived generations – right down to me.”

Dr Christian Thompson AO is talking about ‘Chinese Fashion’ and how the instructions for this “very simple chow mein” dish have endured in his family for 180 years or so. Every time an onion is sliced and browned in a pan, and served with stir-fried cabbage shreds and cubed tofu or meat – it reconnects him to his Southern Chinese ancestry.

“Nan was very proud of being Gold Rush heritage,” says Thompson, referring to her father’s arrival in Australia during the 1850s. “She would always say: ‘you’re Aboriginal, but you’re Chinese, too. And don’t forget it.’”

At his *House of Gold* exhibition, viewers can watch *Chinese Fashion* (2024), a step-by-step video on how to cook this aforementioned dish at home. There is no ‘start this recipe the day before’ complexity to this comfort food, but it’s flavoured with a lot of history. From the Gold Rush to the age of Google, this recipe has been a family portrait, a reminder of migrant resilience and an endearing in-joke of sorts.

The tougher, green outer leaves shielding a cabbage – dismissed as inferior by the white population – were once discarded and given to livestock. But it was valued by others. “People would actually pinch the feed to make ‘Chinese Fashion,’” Thompson says. And when noodles were hard to locate, cabbage leaves were sliced into thin strands as a clever knock-off: a classic example of migrant ingenuity.

And if you’re wondering why you haven’t seen ‘Chinese Fashion’ in a cookbook, there’s a good reason.

“My family has these incredible turns of phrase, which I often use a lot in my work. And that’s one of them,” the artist says. When he tried to Google this dish, which had been cooked and served endlessly throughout his life, no recipes appeared.

“It was, literally, just images of Chinese actual fashion,” he says and laughs.

The name refers to his grandmother’s cooking style, which reflect her Guangdong roots: her acts of culinary adaptation didn’t always translate here (Thompson recalls the “snotty” texture of lettuce she stirred into an Irish stew), but this chow mein undoubtedly has.

The recipe isn’t just a culinary heirloom that’s fed many generations. It also speaks to a long-running relationship between Aboriginal and Asian communities.

“There’s a real history of erasure,” the artist says, pointing to the under-celebrated history of Chinese migrants here, and their Indigenous connections. “There’s been trading and intermarriage going on long before the British even arrived in Australia,” he says. “People like myself are a living manifestation of those intersections of Australian history.”

And remember the Makassar sailors from Indonesia, who harvested sea cucumbers around Arnhem Land with Aboriginal tribes from the 1700s onwards (ingredients that, incidentally, ended up in China)? “That was way before white people got here.” The legacy of these relationships can be found in Makassar words in Yolngu and other local languages.

As we talk about this, I think of emu eggs, preserved in the Chinese style (perhaps even in the ‘Chinese fashion’). Or oyster sauce, a Cantonese staple – but prepared in a way that recalls the long Aboriginal history with the shellfish (as archived by the ancient oyster shells found in middens across Australia). These were ideas that Minyungbal woman Arabella Douglas outlined to me, back in 2020, when we collaborated on an essay for the first *New Voices On Food* book I edited: she hoped to one day run an Indigenous-Chinese restaurant pop-up that explored how the “Chinese people were here before the First Fleet – Chinese people and Aboriginal people were together in community”.

She added, “My husband also has Chinese heritage and is a local Aboriginal man; his great grandpa comes from Canton ... We’re hoping to go back to Canton and connect with that community as well, because that’s a very common story in Australia and Chinese history.”

There’s one shared connection between Chinese and First Nations communities that’s especially painful, though: the White Australia Policy. With a Bidjara grandfather and Chinese-Australian grandmother, Thompson’s family was cruelly impacted by such institutional prejudice. “I’m of Chinese descent. I don’t even know what our last name was. And that’s a direct result of the White Australia Policy.”

And although Chinese migrants kept our country fed by establishing market gardens and key industries (banana, sugar, peanut) – suspicion endured. In Australia’s first recorded cookbook (from 1864), Edward Abbott repeats a rumour that Chinese soy sauce comes from pounded-up cockroaches.

When I mention this absurd logic to Thompson, he laughs. (continues on next page)

## 4A COMMISSIONED ESSAYS

### **Chinese Fashion by Lee Tran Lam (continued)**

“You think it’d be a lot more crunchy,” he says. “It’s a liquidy dark sauce with no kind of fibre or anything in it at all.”

Soy sauce has long outlived that dodgy rumour: many varieties line our supermarket shelves. Ditto the tofu that’s a key ingredient in ‘Chinese Fashion’.

When people watch the video, the artist hopes it resonates with them – regardless of their cooking ability. “Food and identity are inextricably linked,” Thompson adds. And he savours the fact that the [original presentation of *House of Gold*] exhibition was located in Sydney’s Chinatown – one of many community centres that emerged as vital refuges for Chinese migrants who worked Australia’s gold fields. “So being of gold-rush heritage, being in that space, and presenting that recipe there, it’s taking it right back to the beginning and bringing it right into the present – which I think will be really powerful.

**Lee Tran Lam** (She/her) has written about food for various publications, including *Eater*, *Gourmet Traveller*, *SBS Food*, *The Guardian* and *Good Food*. She’s the presenter of various podcasts, including *Culinary Archive* for Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum and the award-nominated *Should You Really Eat That?* for SBS. She is the editor of the *New Voices On Food* books and was named a Future Shaper by *Time Out Sydney*. She once had a sandwich named after her at the now-closed Saga cafe (it was named one of Sydney’s best sandwiches when it was still around)! @leetranlam



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2025.  
Photo: Dylan Smyth.

## 4A COMMISSIONED ESSAYS

### *House of Gold* by Cher Tan

Duality is a consistent theme throughout Christian Thompson's multidisciplinary creative practice. His two decade career conjures images of doubles and fragmentation, a multitudinous way of interrogating binaries and dichotomies. This way of seeing has resulted in a large body of work, with notable series such as 'Australian Graffiti' (2007), 'Lost Together' (2009), 'We Bury Our Own' (2012) and 'Polari' (2014), all of which feature the artist himself performing his multiple identities behind the lens. There is a sense of muchness, a "both/and", in Thompson's work—fitting considering his identity is an amalgamation of different threads of Australian history: Bidjara, Chinese, English and Irish.

Trained in sculpture in Toowoomba and Melbourne, Thompson later became the first Aboriginal person to undertake a PhD at Oxford in 2010. While this was a surprising move at the time, as he had already received much recognition for his work by then, it is exactly this lifelong commitment to learning that has persisted as Thompson's practice continues to unfurl. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, he found himself going inward, going on to create a series of Instagram images that would become the first iteration in a deeper exploration into his Southern Chinese heritage. This would become 'New Gold Mountain' (2021), a series that acts as a metaphor for this personal regeneration.



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, '*House of Gold*' series 4A Library, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Anna Day.

Now, Thompson is returning with what can be considered a sequel to 'New Gold Mountain'. Titled *House of Gold*, it features new commissions as well as previously-shown work such as *Double Happiness* (2021), a four-panel print of Thompson's visage hidden behind a morass of native Australian flowers, and *Burdi Burdi* (2021), an immersive sound experience where Thompson is heard singing in Bidjara, his native tongue. It's evident that Thompson's experience at Oxford remains an indelible one, especially as he says that some of the work was inspired in part after seeing a striking image of his examiner, Dame Marina Warner. Thompson also recalls his fascination with observing people immersed in their reading material while riding the London Tube: "They're there, but you can't access them."

This contradiction—of a conscious inscrutability—is picked apart and remade in 'House of Gold'. Flanked by the austere surroundings that make up Melbourne's Old Parliament Library and the National Wool Museum in Geelong, as well as the renowned Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo amongst other locations, Thompson is seen reading books such as *The New History of Irish Australia* and Joseph Campbell's voluminous comparative history *The Masks of God*, as well as his mentor and friend Marina Abramovic's memoir *Walk Through Walls* (2016). Other images see him holding up Chinese-Australian author Mirandi Riwoe's *Stone Sky Gold Mountain* (2020), a lush historical novel that reimagines the lives of Chinese settlers during the Australian Gold Rush.

Approaching photography from a sculptural point of view, Thompson is not only taking photographs but building images. This sensibility remains a throughline across his practice, where seemingly discordant motifs are recast and made anew, set pieces that are carefully arranged yet welcoming deconstruction.

On the surface, one can engage with Thompson's work through what he describes as the "optics of race", but this is just one entry point into his practice. Spiritual, performative and experiential interpretations manifest through deeper observation, reminiscent of Susan Sontag's searing 1964 essay *Notes on Camp*, where she notes, "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre."

Yet despite the continuities, *House of Gold* seems to mark a new chapter for Thompson's career. Challenging his great-grandfather's experience, who in order to avoid discrimination had to conceal his identity from white settlers, the images assert a visceral visibility. Whereas Thompson's older work show him shrouded behind flora or dressed in various costumes, his sense of self is front and centre in *House of Gold*. It was a serendipitous coincidence that the SBS television series *New Gold Mountain*, as well as Riwoe's aforementioned book, appeared around the same time, which the artist attributes to a collective awakening of sorts. "There's a lot of deeply entrenched racism in Australia, and a desire to tell just one kind of story..." (continues on next page)

## 4A COMMISSIONED ESSAYS

### *House of Gold* by Cher Tan (continued)

...about Australian history, which is largely a white, imperialist, colonial history. Our history as Chinese Australians somehow got pushed to the side, [but] that sort of intergenerational shaming has no bearing on contemporary experience or reality.”

This history is particularly conspicuous in the short video *Chinese Fashion* (2024). A one-minute work that sees the artist’s hands cooking a family recipe that has been passed down from the 1800s, the dish is a simple chow mein made up of onions and cabbage, then seasoned with salt and pepper. It is a nod to the impoverished past, where ingredients and spices were not readily accessible. The first Chinese immigrants would improvise, using thinly-sliced cabbage as a replacement for noodles. ‘Chinese Fashion’ is what Thompson’s family calls their recipe, and this is one way he pays respects to his Chinese heritage 180 years later.

In a time of intersectionality, this foregrounding of multiple identities is particularly searing. While Thompson had known of his Chinese heritage all his life, most people deemed it too complex, only showing interest in his Indigeneity. While *House of Gold* is a homage to his Chinese ancestors and undeniably a statement against erasure, it also honours the Chinese poem, that “to hold a book in one’s hand is to hold a house of gold”: the idea that life is an ongoing journey of learning, whether about oneself or the world.

**Cher Tan** is an essayist and critic. Her work has appeared in *Hyperallergic*, *Art Guide Australia*, *The Age*, *Disclaimer Journal*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and *Overland*, amongst many others. She is an editor at *Liminal* and the reviews editor at *Meanjin*. Her debut collection of essays, *Peripathetic: Notes on (Un)belonging*, is out with NewSouth Publishing in May 2024. She lives and works on unceded Wurundjeri land. @CT6000

## OTHER TOUR RESOURCES

### Education Resource

The education resource accompanying *House of Gold* has been produced by Museums & Galleries of NSW in conjunction with 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and has been created by Cindy Yuen-Zhe Chen, an artist, academic and educator practicing on unceded Darramuragal and Gadigal Countries in Sydney. Her expanded drawing, sound and video practice engages embodied listening and sounding to examine Southeast Asian Chinese diasporic identity as a generative and emplaced process.

The resource includes practical and theory-based activities designed for students from Years 5 to 12, however it may be used by audiences of all ages. Some activities can be modified for varying levels of learning and can be undertaken during or after an exhibition visit.

The resource offers:

- Insights into the practice of artist Dr Christian Thompson AO
- Thinking and creative activities for use in the classroom and the gallery focused on First Nations Bidjara language; artwork interpretation; creative writing; discussion and drawing; podcast writing; illustrating traditional recipes; and self-portrait collages.
- Links for further reading and exploration
- Curriculum links



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, exhibition floor talk with 4A curator Con Gerakaris, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 2025. Photo: Campbell Cole.

# PUBLIC PROGRAM IDEAS

A brief document aiming to stimulate public program development at exhibiting venues. It identifies key themes within the exhibition and highlights potential opportunities for the public to learn about and engage with the exhibition – from independent making activities to gallery led artist talks, workshops, discussions and interactions with local artists, Chinese communities and First Nations groups, *House of Gold* artists or the curator.

# EXHIBITION ROOM SHEET

The Exhibition Room Sheet includes an exhibition summary and artist bio as well as two essays commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art as part of the original exhibition, *Chinese Fashion* by Lee Tran Lam and *House of Gold* by Cher Tan.

# 4A BOOKS AND PUBLICATIONS LIST

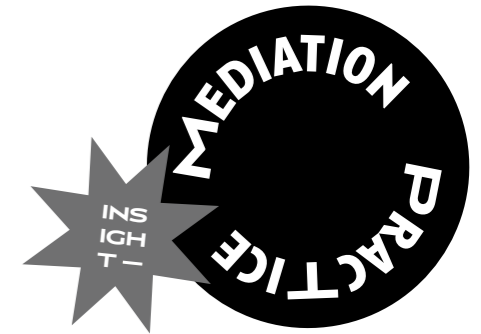
4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art has digitised its entire Library and publication list, allowing them to curate a range of relevant books and publications for individual exhibitions. The details of all books displayed during the House of Gold exhibition at 4A can be found [here](#).



Dr Christian Thompson AO | *House of Gold*, installation view, curated selection of books from 4A Library, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2024. Photo: Kai Wasikowski.

# Prompts for Mediating an Exhibition

This resource helps public-facing teams develop their own understandings of exhibitions and build confidence in talking to visitors about art. Museums & Galleries of NSW and UQ Art Museum have been working closely together to adapt Mediation strategies to the Australian arts and cultural sector.



## First time exploring the exhibition:

- What do you see?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - What artworks resonate with you? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - What doesn't resonate with you? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - Write down five words that come to mind when seeing this exhibition.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - Write down five words that come to mind when reading the introduction panel.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What connections can you make between these two sets of words?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - Choose an artwork:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - What questions come to mind when first seeing the artwork?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Returning to the exhibition:

- What do you see now that you didn't see the first time you explored the exhibition?  
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\_\_\_\_\_
  - How has this exhibition challenged your thinking or knowledge of a subject?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Write about something new you've learnt from/or about the key exhibition concepts:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



Dr Christian Thompson AO

HOUSE OF GOLD

黄金屋

MEDIATION HANDBOOK