



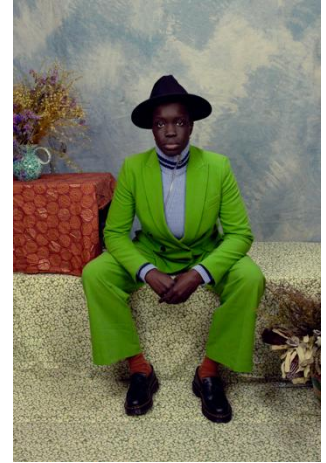
MEDIA RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA

MEDIA CONTACTS: MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, NGV
MARION JOSEPH | 0427 147 999 | MARION.JOSEPH@NGV.VIC.GOV.AU
BRIANA TOMASINO | 0408 333 399 | BRIANA.TOMASINO@NGV.VIC.GOV.AU
BERNICE TOMOV | 0402 784 650 | BERNICE.TOMOV@NGV.VIC.GOV.AU
ANNIE ROSS | 0447 679 440 | ANNIE.ROSS@NGV.VIC.GOV.AU

Rite of passage: NGV celebrates the work of Atong Atem in the artist's first ever major solo exhibition, *Passage: The Art of Atong Atem*

Passage: The Art of Atong Atem | 30 October 2026 – 14 June 2027 | The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia | FREE



6 May 2026: In 2026, the NGV presents the first-ever major solo exhibition of South Sudanese, Melbourne-based contemporary artist **Atong Atem**, who is celebrated for her dynamic and vibrant photographic self-portraits that explore identity, mythmaking and intergenerational storytelling. Opening 30 October 2026 at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, *Passage: The Art of Atong Atem* is a world-premiere exhibition surveying the past decade of the artist's practice. Bringing together more than 65 works, it is the most comprehensive presentation of Atem's work to date.

In her vivid self-portraits, Atem is both subject and storyteller, embodying generations of memory and tradition. Transforming herself through textiles, paint, costume and symbolic objects, Atem uses her own body as a vessel to explore themes of race, gender and colonialism, as well as the beauty and resilience of her Dinka Bor culture and Melbourne's African diaspora. The exhibition demonstrates how Atem uses photography as a medium for celebration and reclamation. Her practice interrogates how identity is performed, both in everyday life and before the camera, creating images in which history, memory and imagination intertwine.

The exhibition conceptually and spatially explores ideas of movement and journeys – global themes brought to life through Atem's personal experience of migration. Born in Ethiopia to South Sudanese parents, Atem and her family made their home in Australia in 1997. Through her work, Atem links continents and generations, honouring the cultural stories and memories that have endured displacement and war.

The exhibition includes world-premiere and Australian-premiere works, alongside series presented in their entirety for the very first time. Highlights include the Australian premiere of *Scars and Constellations*, 2024, a series commissioned by the National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam. These powerful images explore the complex relationship between sea, sky and the histories of colonial trade and navigation. Central to the series is scarification, a Dinka Bor cultural practice carrying deep meaning in identity, ritual and healing that is also layered with the histories of conflict.

Atem will debut a world-premiere commission created exclusively for this exhibition at the NGV. This large-scale wall installation, *As Above*, explores the stories held in the skies and constellations weaving together Dinka dance, traditional beading and Catholic iconography. The work also references the astronomical concept of the false cross, which are groupings of stars that mimic the Southern Cross. The work explores how we position ourselves within vast cosmic, historical, cultural systems that surround and shape us.

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Also on display for the first time in a major Australian cultural institution is *Banksia, 2021*, a photographic series taken at the Melbourne Immigration Museum. Atem turns her lens toward African, African American and Caribbean convicts and free settlers who arrived with the First Fleet. The work prompts audiences to reconsider the foundations of Australian identity, while creating a space for reclamation.

Shown in its entirety for the first time, *Surat, 2022*, examines the mythological aspects of portraiture through family photographs. Atem recreates portraits of relatives known to her only through images, using herself as a bridge for memory and ancestral links. In Dinka Bor culture, names are not owned individually; they are inherited to honour ancestors. Atem's photographs embody this idea, acting as visual relics that unite a family across time and space.

Tony Ellwood AM, Director, NGV, said: 'Atong Atem is one of the most exciting artists of her generation, redefining what it means to be Australian in contemporary life and culture. Her work aligns with the broader traditions of African studio photography, feminist aesthetics and diasporic storytelling. Yet, she has crafted a style and perspective that are uniquely her own, earning her recognition worldwide. The NGV is proud to showcase Atong's first major solo exhibition and share her creativity with our audiences.'

Of the exhibition, **Atong Atem said:** 'If the body is a terrain, who gets to be the geographer and who becomes the cartographer? My practice as an early career artist has sought to make signposts on the body as a politicised landscape; to document, archive and speculate. These tensions between heritage, identity and place are at the crux of my impulse to make art. I am honoured to share these intimate and universal questions at the NGV in 2026.'

A fully illustrated new monograph produced in partnership with Thames & Hudson Australia will be published to coincide with the exhibition. The book includes essays by Osei Bonsu, Jorge M. Pérez, Senior Curator, International Art, Africa and Diaspora, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom; Clothilde Morette, Artistic Director, Maison Européenne de la Photographie (MEP), Paris, France; reflections from Atem Yaak Atem and Anna Abul Malual Aguer; an interview with the artist and Natasha Bullock, Senior Curator, Photography, NGV and Anna Honan, Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art, NGV and an afterword by Tony Ellwood AM, Director, NGV.

Passage: The Art of Atong Atem will be on display from 30 October 2026 – 14 June 2027 at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Fed Square, Melbourne. Entry is free. Further information is available via the NGV website:

[NGV.MELBOURNE](https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibitions/2026-2027/passage-the-art-of-atong-atem)

ABOUT ATONG ATEM

Atong Atem is an Ethiopian-born, South Sudanese artist living in Naarm/Melbourne. Her work has been exhibited widely across Australia, including at the National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Portrait Gallery and the Immigration Museum. Internationally her work has been exhibited at the Tate Modern (London) Wereldmuseum (Rotterdam), Fotografiska Shanghai, Stadtgalerie (Germany), Victoria and Albert Museum (London) and the National Maritime Museum of the Netherlands. In 2025, Atem exhibited at the Rencontres D'Arles in partnership with PHOTO Australia, where she was selected as one of six nominees for the Prix de La Photo Madame Figaro-Arles. She was the recipient of the inaugural La Prairie Art Award from the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2022 and the National Gallery of Victoria and MECCA M-Power scholarship in 2017. Atong has developed numerous collaborations with the fashion world including Romance was Born, Social Studio and Harper's Bazaar. Her work is held in public and private collections across Australia and the world.

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Images:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/ebmmrclx80iyyoc28euIn/ABeD1IRONOu3NRXZ8hxc7Mc?rlkey=1hl17xh7z1sjhqt7u0eyafj3&st=d46pfv5h&dl=0>

Image Captions (L-R): *Atong Atem, Red dust sticks to you 2022*. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased, Victoria Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2022. © Atong Atem. *Atong Atem What we are given 2024*. Commissioned by the National Maritime Museum, Amsterdam. *Atong Atem Men in this town 05 2024* from the *Men In This Town* series 2024. Courtesy of the artist © Atong Atem.

Media Contacts:

Marion Joseph, Associate Director, Media and Public Affairs, NGV
0427 147 999 | marion.joseph@ngv.vic.gov.au

Briana Tomasino, Senior Publicist, NGV

0408 333 399 | briana.tomasino@ngv.vic.gov.au

Bernice Tomov, Media and Public Affairs Coordinator

0402 784 650 | bernice.tomov@ngv.vic.gov.au

Annie Ross, Media and Public Affairs Assistant, NGV

0447 679 440 | annie.ross@ngv.vic.gov.au

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