

SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Support Structures grows from a question that has driven my practice for over a decade: *How can art be known through the body rather than through the eyes alone?* Throughout my sculptural work, I have created participatory installations that require physical engagement—climbing, touching, moving through space. This comes from a fundamental belief that knowledge is embodied. We understand the world through our whole sensorial being, not through disembodied vision.

Returning to painting felt like a risk. Painting has historically been the ultimate art of the gaze - demanding distance, contemplation, the controlling eye that reduces everything to surface for looking. The Western canon of painting is built on this: the singular viewpoint, the fixed perspective, the body of the viewer rendered irrelevant except as a pair of eyes.

But I wanted to test whether painting itself could become a body—a living, breathing, evolving system that resists being reduced to image. Whether painting could hold and transmit embodied knowledge without requiring physical manipulation. These works are made with bronze particles suspended in a binder that oxidises over time. They are not static images but living processes. The bronze deepens and darkens, carrying its own bodily time forward. This is not decorative choice or poetic metaphor - it is the body of the work aging, changing, breathing. The paintings hold time the way our bodies do: through transformation, through accumulation, through the visible marks of having lived.

The subject matter comes directly from maternal experience. When I became a mother, I experienced a profound bodily transformation—what researchers call *matrescence*. My body was no longer singular, no longer wholly mine. I existed simultaneously as one body and as two, separate and utterly entwined. This is not metaphor. It is the physical, lived reality of another body depending entirely on mine for survival.

The two figures in embrace embody this complexity. They are support structures for one another, but support is never simple. It is both constraint and lifeline, both burden and gift. The figures throughout this exhibition are distinct yet inseparable, their boundaries dissolving into one another. This is what embodied interdependence looks like to me: not the fantasy of autonomous individuals but the messy, necessary reality of bodies that need other bodies.

Formally, I have fragmented the compositions and disrupted spatial coherence. This is about embodied experience. We never see from a single fixed position - our bodies move, shift, hold contradictory viewpoints simultaneously. Maternal experience intensifies this: you exist looking inward at your own transformation while focusing outward on your child, projecting forward to their future while being pulled backward into your

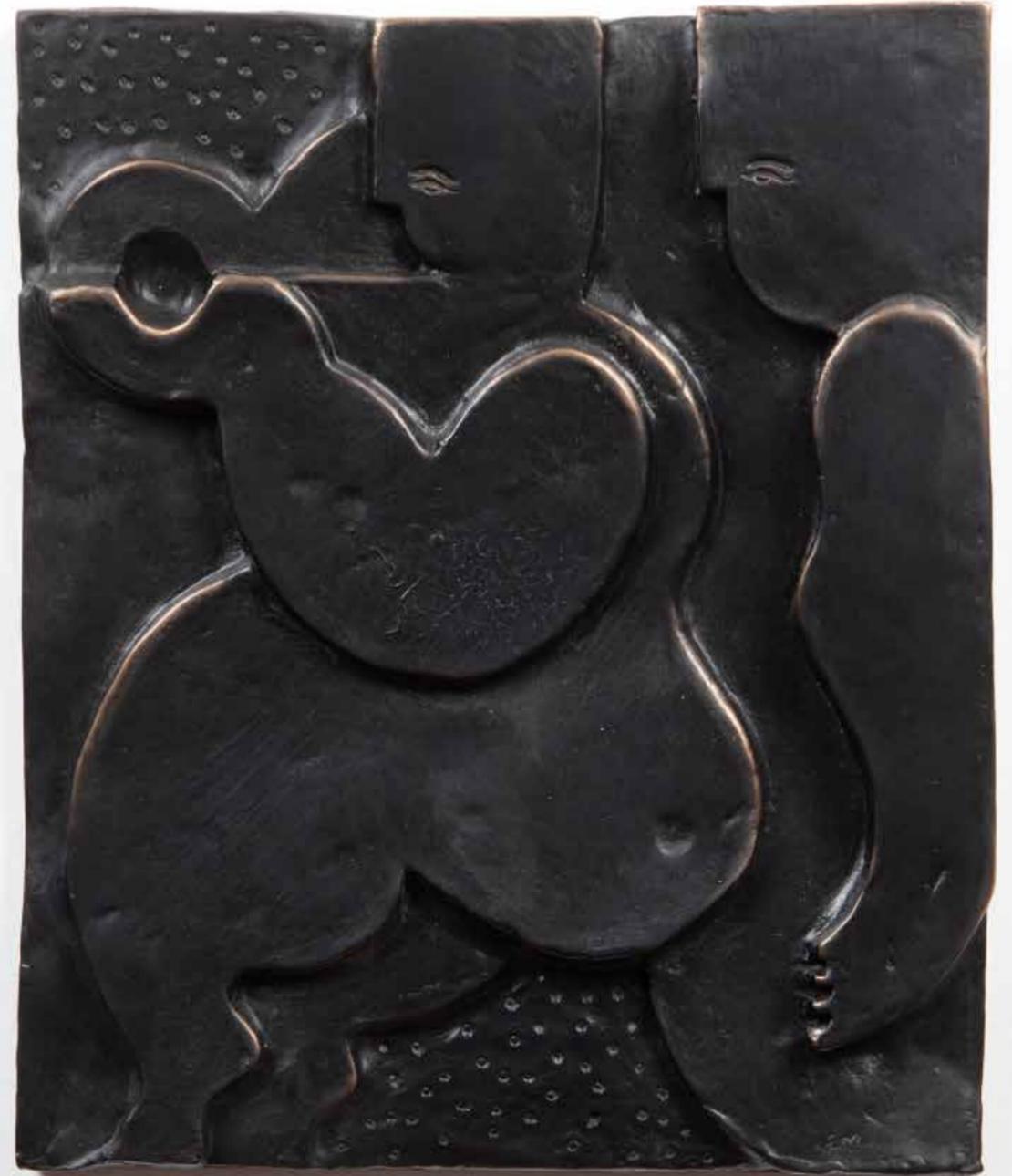
own past. You hold all these perspectives at once in your body.

The bronze reliefs offer another mode of embodied knowing. They ask to be understood through touch, through weight, through the hand meeting surface. This tactile knowledge is distinct from visual knowledge—slower, more intimate, more reciprocal. The hand that touches is also touched. This is embodied knowing: the recognition that knowledge happens between bodies, not through disembodied observation.

Together, the paintings and reliefs create what I think of as a system for exploring how bodies come to know: visually, haptically, spatially, temporally. Each mode offers partial understanding. Wholeness comes only through moving between them - which itself requires a body.

What I am after is art that acknowledges we are bodies encountering other bodies, whole sensing beings meeting works that are themselves alive, aging, carrying their own embodied time forward. Art that knows—and invites us to know—through the fullness of bodily experience.

— Sanné Mestrom, Summer 2026



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SANNÉ MESTROM

Fragmented No More

Geometric curves, angled planes, profiles assembled from minimal cues, eyes rendered as discrete yet confrontational elements. These pared-back forms in Sanné Mestrom's works do not so much depict a body, most often a feminized one, as they evoke it. They highlight how we create meaning from limited visual cues, reminding us that bodies are shaped as much by what we notice as by what we overlook.

In 'Support Structures', Sanné continues her ongoing investigation into the ways bodies are constructed, perceived and experienced. Her works encourage sustained looking, movement around their sculptural forms, and the awareness that meaning emerges through collaboration between object, space, and viewer. These are not passive objects awaiting a single interpretation, but structures that embody what Sanné calls "new ways of seeing that honour multiplicity, embody diversity, and transform our understanding of what it means to truly see." Viewers become integral participants in meaning-making, their role shifting from tactile engagement to sustained visual attention and physical navigation.

Sanné's works are strongly grounded in her investigation of modernism's visual languages and the role of the female body. In response to the exhibition "Cézanne to Giacometti: Masterpieces from Museum Berggruen" at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, she created the interactive installation "The Whole is Greater than the Sum of Her Parts" which directly engaged with these frameworks — particularly Picasso's Cubist fragmentation. Through its viewing devices and interactive tables, the installation invited visitors to experience firsthand how shifting perspectives and composite viewpoints can produce a fuller, more nuanced understanding than any single vantage point alone. At the same time it critiqued the power traditionally afforded to the male gaze when constructing and fragmenting the female body.

For centuries, this gaze has been treated as if it were neutral, natural, and universal. Attached to it are long-standing assumptions: the myth of artistic genius as innately male; the reduction of the female body to a site of possession and examination; the relegation of women to passive protagonists whether as muses, models, spouses or sexual objects. Depictions of the female body are omnipresent in the collection of the Museum Berggruen, which only holds works by male artists — a snapshot of very common twentieth-century collecting practices — and offer a concentrated view of these historical hierarchies.

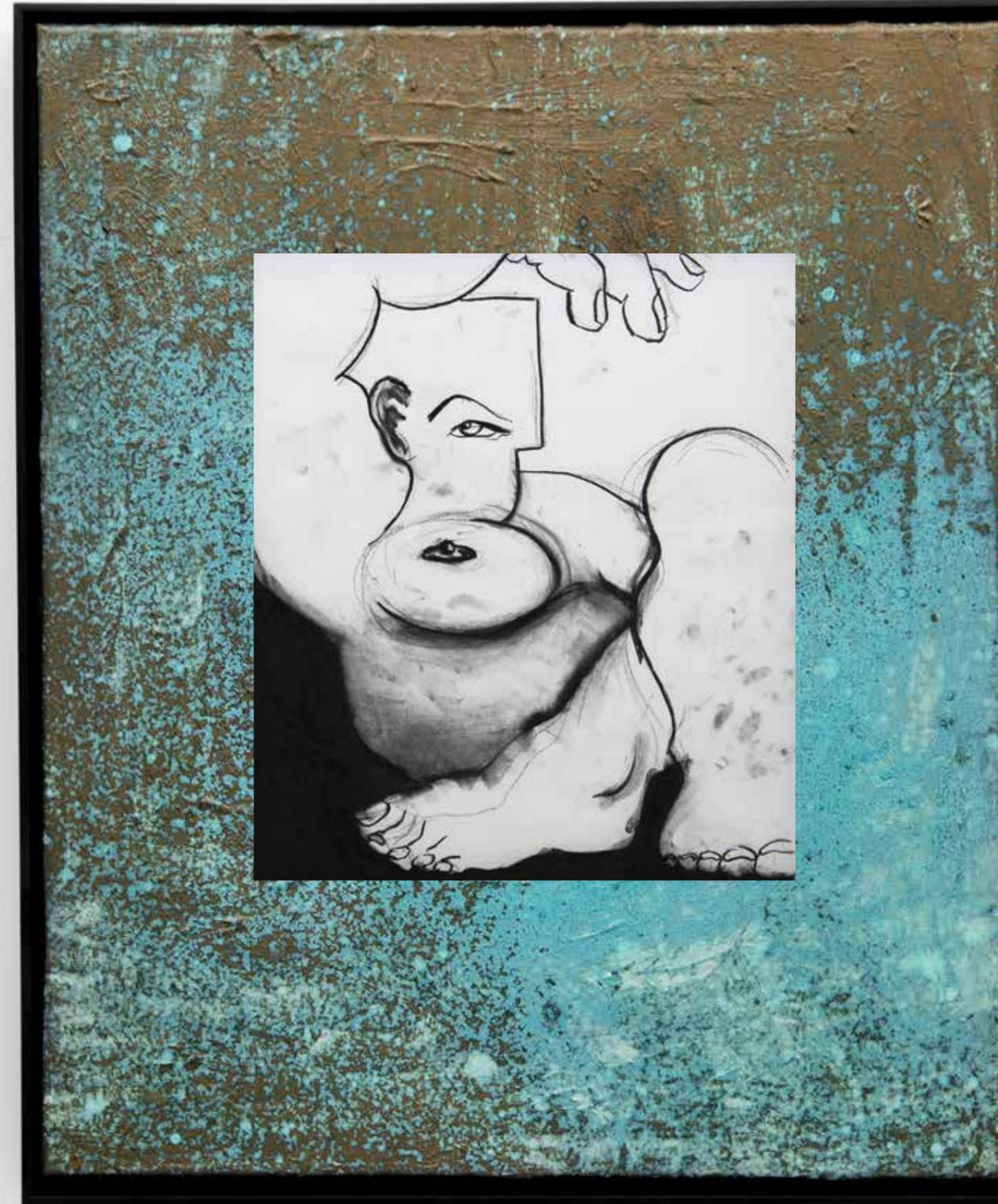
The female figure appears in countless variations across the works of Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Alberto Giacometti, Paul Cézanne, and Henri Matisse. Whether it is an oil portrait of the artist Dora Maar, Cézanne's portrait of his partner Hortense Fiquet, or the model Lorette's twisted naked body captured in a chalk drawing by Matisse. The way women are represented across the museum's collection varies starkly: they are nude, they are clothed, they twist and turn, they look at us self-confidently, they are reduced to geometric shapes, split faces, regally posed, recklessly fragmented. What unites them is that they were captured through the eyes of the male artist.

Sanné's work troubles the canon of these perhaps most famous artists of the twentieth century. By using the works in the Museum Berggruen as a starting point of her participatory, feminist practice she draws attention to ingrained ways of seeing that still shape everyday life. Her practice insists that the act of looking is never neutral: it is conditioned by historical narratives and power asymmetry, but can also be reoriented through awareness and agency, where meaning emerges through collaboration rather than the mastery of one single person. By fracturing viewpoints and inviting the viewer to move, touch, assemble, or reconfigure, her work rejects the idea of a single, authoritative perspective. In this environment, viewers become aware of their own role in constructing visual knowledge. They are no longer passive recipients of a male-authored image but active participants in meaning-making.

In reworking the visual languages of modernism, Sanné does not simply critique the canon — she expands the conditions under which it can be encountered and creates a form of sisterhood with the depicted women. Her sculptures and installations create spaces where perception becomes dialogical rather than unilateral. They ask viewers not only to recognise the structures that have shaped their gaze but to actively unlearn it. Ultimately, Sanné proposes a visual world in which bodies — especially those historically objectified — are approached with multiplicity and openness.

Natalie Zimmer is Curator at Museum Berggruen and co-curator of the exhibition *Cézanne to Giacometti: Highlights from Museum Berggruen/Neue Nationalgalerie* held at the National Gallery of Australia.



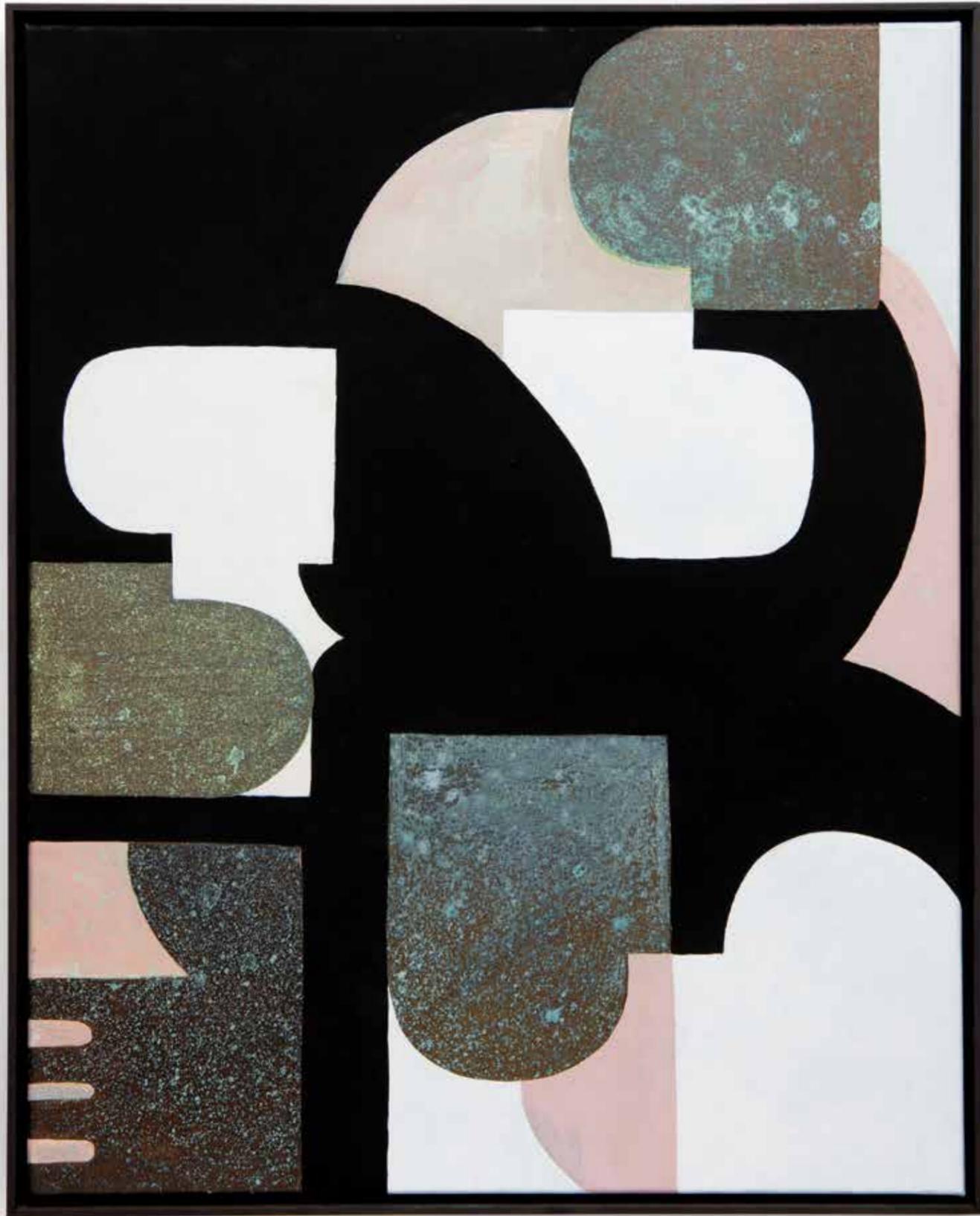


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INTERVIEW

Julie Nicholson and Gary Seller, hosts of the Arts podcast 'Artwank', interview Sanné Mestrom at her studio and home in the Blue Mountains. This is an edited transcript. For the full interview, visit the 'Art Wank' podcast, Episode 242 - Sanné Mestrom - Sculpture, play, and the politics of space.

Over two decades, Sanné Mestrom has built a practice that fundamentally questions how we encounter art. Her large-scale installations and sculptures don't simply ask to be looked at—they demand physical engagement, inviting viewers to move through, touch, and inhabit space in ways that challenge the passive contemplation traditionally expected in gallery settings.

This commitment to embodied experience reached new prominence in 2025 with her commission for the National Gallery of Australia's Cézanne to Giacometti exhibition in 2025. The Whole is Greater than the Sum of Her Parts used viewing devices, tactile reliefs, and playable sculptures to guide visitors through a critique of the male gaze, demonstrating how singular perspective limits understanding.

Support Structures, Sullivan + Strumpf 2026, advances this research in a new direction. Rather than employing participatory apparatus, this exhibition tests whether sculptural and painted forms can themselves embody and transmit the insights gained through physical interaction. The works presented here—newly created paintings alongside bronze, concrete, and steel sculptures—investigate how feminist critique of the gaze can operate through formal construction and material presence alone.

Mestrom's return to painting after fifteen years is central to this inquiry. If painting is "problematic because you can only gaze," as she argues in this interview, can it be reconceived to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously?

In this wide-ranging conversation with Artwank podcast hosts Julie Nicholson and Gary Seller, recorded at Mestrom's studio in the Blue Mountains, the artist reflects on the physical and intellectual demands of her practice, her complex relationship with modernist masters, and why her body's exhaustion has become a catalyst for new ways of making.

Excerpt: From Painting to Sculpture - The Need for Embodiment

Sanné Mestrom: When I was doing my PhD which I finished back in 2008, my project was called The Power of Perspective: Multiple Viewpoints in Painting Practice. But by the end of that, I felt like my body had been stationary for so long in terms of studying and painting and just being sedentary. My body needed to explode, and I felt like I need to create with my whole body. I can't just stand here and let my hands and eyes do the work. I have to actually be physically connected to what it is that I'm making. So it was almost like a reaction to the stillness of writing the PhD and doing this very, very detailed, painterly work. I wanted to pull back and see it from all points. I didn't want to just be re-presenting something. I wanted to make the thing.

Julie Nicholson: But had you done sculpture before that?

SM: No. It was a very intuitive shift. The PhD was very much focused on the embodied gaze, talking about how we see and how we understand what we see. And I think that knowledge carries over directly to any art form. But the transition to sculpture was more about this intuitive rebelling against ways of making and creating and understanding form. I didn't want to look at it. I wanted to inhabit it.

The National Gallery Commission - Critiquing the Gaze

Gary Seller: We've referred to the show at the National Gallery of Australia, which was on earlier this year. You had the final room of that show, which was absolutely amazing—"The Whole is Greater than the Sum of Her Parts." Tell us about that. How did it come about?

SM: I was approached by the NGA to create work in response to the Cézanne to Giacometti collection from the Berggruen Museum in Berlin. With their national Know My Name agenda, which is focused on female inclusion in their collection, they recognised, "We've got Picasso, Klee, Matisse and Cézanne coming. But, opps, there are no women! Women are entirely underrepresented. Shit, we'd got to do something!" So they invited me to respond to – and critique - that epic Modernist collection.

I created three bodies of work. One was these concrete sculptures with viewing devices based on Renaissance perspective graphs, where you look through a viewing device, see a sculpture, and then draw what you see on the page—which was the birth of perspective. I recreated a version of that to invite the viewer to actually understand how perspective operates.

Having just walked through that whole Cézanne to Giacometti collection, which requires the male gaze throughout in the creation of the works and the experience of the works, I wanted the participant to understand: "The gaze is really problematic. It limits you to one point of view." Let me demonstrate how that works in your own body. You sit down, you look through a viewfinder, and you see a sculpture from one point of view. You can transfer it onto the page, but you're never going to capture the whole spirit of the thing that you're seeing.

Then you could move to the next stage—tactile bronzes, where you could rub your hands over these sculptures that you couldn't really see. Two-dimensional flat reliefs. And then you

would look at paintings I'd created on the wall beyond. There's this cognitive dissonance that happens when what you see with your eyes is quite different to what you feel with your hands. I'm trying to guide the participant through this critique of the gaze, moving away from the controlling eye and trying to create an experience of embodied art.

The third major work was this large playable sculpture where you have to physically use your whole body to engage with it. I wanted these different ways of experiencing embodied knowledge or embodiment of art.

Support Structures: The Return to Painting

GS: While we're talking about the show in February, which is at your gallery, Sullivan and Strumpf, 'Support Structures', are you in a position to tell us a little bit about it? What might people expect to see?

SM: Well, there will be a range of works, and it'll include, for the first time ever with Sullivan + Strumpf, paintings!

JN: Oh, nice. That's exciting.

SM: Yeah, I'm really looking forward to this shift. So it's a step forward into the past. So there'll be paintings—some small, some large—and there'll be sculptural works as well, some bronze and concrete sculpture and some steel pieces. But I'm really excited about revisiting painting again. I revisited it for the NGA, and I realised now that I've come almost—well, not full circle, but I'm coming around to my love of painting again. Because when I initially stepped away from painting - there was something about the stillness and the quietness that I loathed 15 years ago - but I'm now welcoming this back into my life. My body's tired. I am worn out. I am so worn out. The sculptural work I do is so physically demanding, so big.

JN: It's like you're a construction worker. The tools that we've seen, full on.

On Scale, Intimacy, and Mark-Making

JN: We were saying, you work at all different scales, like you might have smaller pieces for Sullivan and Strumpf, but the NGA, huge works. How do you feel scaling up and down all the time?

SM: It's natural to me. I really love it. At a small scale, if I'm working with bronze, I make the original in clay, and you'll see my thumbprints and fingerprints in it in a way that's really intimate, and that's ultimately transferred into bronze. You can't have that same intimacy at a large scale. It doesn't translate like that. So you do have to think quite differently when you're working at a large scale, in terms of the finish and the sensibility of the work that you want to achieve.

Which is the same with painting. So if you have these really gestural, chunky gestures on a small scale, you can't just use a fat and wide brush—it's a different thing. You actually have to use a different technique. So in that sense, it's similar to painting. There are challenges in that transition.

Embodied Knowledge: Beyond the Gaze

JN: Was it a bit like a reflection of you going from painting during your PhD to wanting to use your whole body? It's almost like your journey.

SM: Yeah, it is, and I'm only realising that now as we're talking about it. But yes, it does reflect that life arc of my creative career. And I guess that, in Picasso's era (which these works reference) what they didn't allow space for was knowledge held in the body. With all of those works, you can just look at them, but you can't experience them with your body. Whereas if we experience art with our bodies, we actually hold it and understand it and generate knowledge through our encounter with it in a much more fully sensorial way. We understand that we don't just have this intellectual relationship with an artwork. We have something that's much more complex and nuanced once we know a work with our bodies.

JN: So do you think, how do you get that from painting?

SM: Painting is really problematic to me because, typically, you can only gaze, you can only look, and the object and the subject will always be separated. You'll never be able to actually truly understand - or know - the thing that's being looked upon.

On Materials and Mastery

SM: I don't like the idea of mastering any particular skill, because then I'll fear I'm going to get too constrained in trying to perfect the skill. But if I'm a 'guest' in these different skill sets, then I have a much more playful approach to making. I don't expect things of myself that are—it doesn't need to be perfect. It doesn't need to be polished. It's more about exploration and play.

The Poisoned Chalice: Picasso and the Modernists

JN: How do you feel about Cézanne and Giacometti and Picasso and the works you exhibited with and responded to at the NGA?

SM: They're a bit of a poisoned chalice. I think the works are incredible. I love Picasso's work, and I feel like he is one of the absolute most key figures in modern history, and yet he's terribly problematic from a feminist perspective.

I do think the man and the art are intertwined, but I think we're all problematic. We're all full of paradox and complexity. And where does your tolerance level go? I can appreciate the groundbreaking work that he did and the legacy that he left, maybe for me to accept that he's also a deeply flawed man, and that might be in his lifetime never even recognised his flaws. Probably didn't. And that's okay. I mean, that's my job- to critique and to keep these conversations alive, and to keep questioning the gaze, and to keep questioning how we connect with art, and to move beyond the gaze. So I've picked up the chalice that he put down and I'm walking with it on my own path.



'Art Wank' podcast, Episode 242 - Sanné Mestrom - Sculpture, play, and the politics of space.



Mestrom's early paintings 2000-2008



Exhibition *The Whole is Greater than the Sum of Her Parts* National Gallery Australia, 2026



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