YOUR NATIONAL CULTURE GUIDE

NEW RELEASES

Alien: Covenant (MA15+)
Ridley Scott had decided to start the *Alien* franchise again five years ago with *Prometheus*, a prequel to the original *Alien*, set some 20 years before Sigourney Weaver's Ripley confronted the creature. In *Alien: Covenant* Scott hasn't stinted on the blood and gore. He wants to make two more films that bridge the storyline gap between this and the first film, so he has to have a commercial success. Make no mistake: *Alien: Covenant* is for the most part a terrifically exciting ride. But it never chills the marrow quite in the way the first film did. Starring Michael Fassbender and Katherine Waterston (pictured, right).
DAVID STRATTON ★★★½☆

Don't Tell (M)
Given the appalling stories emanating from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the release of the Australian film *Don't Tell* is particularly timely. For her first feature, Tori Garrett has assembled a fine cast to tell the story of what happened to Lyndal, who was 12 years old when she was sexually abused by her housemaster at the prestigious Anglican Toowoomba Prep School, and the court case that followed a decade later when Lyndal, after going off the rails and being arrested in NSW, returned to Queensland to seek justice. *Don't Tell* is a sad reminder that the abuse of children can be exacerbated by the way in which an adversarial legal system works when a deeply troubled survivor is placed in the witness box. It's a thoughtful, quietly shocking film, beautifully made.
DS ★★★★☆

NSW

CLASSICAL

Tchaikovsky's Pathetique
Baiba Skride, the Latvian violinist who dazzled audiences with her debut guest appearance with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 2010, is back to play Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto, paired with Tchaikovsky's passionate *Pathetique* symphony. The pains of life, with fleeting joys and delicate triumphs, are beautifully explored with intense and thrilling emotion.
Sydney Opera House. *Concert Hall, Bennelong Point. Final performance tonight, 7pm. Duration: 1hr 55min, with interval. Tickets: $39-$137. Bookings: (02) 9250 7777 or online.*

ACT

CLASSICAL

Blown Away
The Canberra Wind Symphony presents *Blown Away*, a display of contemporary works by both local and international composers. Forty of the region's finest wind players will be dazzling the audience in an evening of beautiful woodwind music from the likes of Vincent Persichetti, Percy Grainger, Ralph Hultgren and Philip Sparke. Conducted by multi award-winning artistic director and chief conductor Geoff Grey.
The Street Theatre. *15 Childers Street, Canberra. Friday, 7.30pm. Bookings: (02) 6247 1223 or online.*

VICTORIA

EXHIBITION

Witching Hour
The works of 38 artists, including Patrick Pound, Anne Zahalka and Christian Thompson (pictured is Thompson's *This Brutal World*), have been generously donated to the *Witching Hour* fundraising exhibition, where all photographic works on display are for sale. From vintage prints to digital and alternative technologies, the fundraiser encompasses all aspects of contemporary photography. Along with a Drome Studios tour with Patricia Piccinini, the fundraiser will also auction a one-on-one architectural photography excursion with John Gollings. Other packages including a tour of Patrick Pound's *The Great Exhibition* at the NGV will be available.
Centre for Contemporary Photography. *404 George Street, Fitzroy, Melbourne. Opens Thursday, 6pm. Inquiries: (03) 9417 1549 or online. Until May 28.*

TASMANIA

EXHIBITION

Passages
Passages is the sum of six artists whose work engages with the subjective and sensory encounters between humans and locations. Curated by Emily Bullock.
Contemporary Art Tasmania. *27 Tasma Street, North Hobart. Free admission. Inquiries: (03) 6231 0445 or online. Until May 28.*

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

THEATRE

A Doll's House
The State Theatre Company Ensemble presents Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in a new adaptation by Elena Carapetis. Nora Helmer (Rachel Burke) has become increasingly aware that the components making up her life seem to be stacking up in the most unjust ways: a secret debt, children, a mortgage and a terminally ill best friend. The sudden, unexpected arrival of an old high school acquaintance may finally push Nora to breaking point. Directed by Geordie Brookman.
Dunstan Playhouse. *Adelaide Festival Centre, Festival Drive. Tickets: $33-$61. Bookings: (08) 8216 8600 or online. Opens June 30.*

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

THEATRE

Oklahoma!
Oklahoma! is the musical by Rodgers and Hammerstein, based on the 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Set in 1900s Native American territory, it's the story of the romance between Curley McLain and Laurey Williams. Directed by Paul Treasure and Bree Hartley.
Roleystone Theatre. *587 Brookton Highway, Roleystone. Wednesday, 8pm. Tickets: $20-$25. Bookings: (08) 9490 9306 or online. Until May 20.*

NORTHERN TERRITORY

MUSIC

Queen: Conocophillips Symphony
The Darwin Symphony Orchestra will be joined by eight of Australia's finest musicians to perform an "orchestral journey" through the music of one of the most internationally successful bands, Queen.
Darwin Botanic Gardens Amphitheatre. *Gardens Road and Gilruth Avenue, Darwin. Gold coin donation on entry. Inquiries: (08) 8999 4418 or online.*

Edited by Sofia Gronbech Wright
Full reviews of new films will appear in *The Weekend Australian* on Saturday

Send event information to **listings@theaustralian.com.au**

The painter is in tune with her artistic forebears

TERENCE MALOON

MICHAEL BRADFIELD

Elisabeth Cummings at work in 2015, main; *Rain Clouds Over the Tweed*, 1999, top right; *Day into Night*, 2011, below

Cummings is picking up good vibrations

Elisabeth Cummings' art is attuned to vibration — to thronging energies that course through a landscape, ricochet between the surfaces of a confined space and riddle a painted surface to bursting point. To meet and to match her impressions of this all-encompassing energy, Cummings has developed her resources in drawing and colour and her approaches to composition accordingly.

Typically her images will strike a viewer first and foremost as concentrations of sheer visual excitement — before we are able to identify whether it is a landscape or an interior, before we can ascertain whether it is figurative or abstract, before we have had time to read the work's title.

As a consequence, the poet Francis Ponge's allusion to Brownian motion touches on one of her work's essential features — its irrepressible vivacity — and helps us identify her links with the works of her artist forerunners and contemporaries.

Brownian motion is a phenomenon first recorded in 1827 by the Scottish botanist Robert Brown. He noticed that the grains of pollen in the water drop he was examining under a microscope were in a state of constant agitation. What was giving them the jitters? The inference that the pollen grains were being buffeted by invisible atoms or molecules began to gain credence.

Proof that atoms and molecules actually existed was little by little extrapolated from Brown's discovery — culminating in Einstein's publication of his "breakthrough" paper on Brownian motion in 1905.

More or less simultaneously an analogous phenomenon began to be observed in Western painting, with repercussions that grew increasingly tumultuous and anarchic. Pierre Schneider has given the classic description of this phenomenon: "Even in canvases where colour did not blaze openly, the stroke quivered, simmered, darted in all directions, spilled over the outlines of forms, seethed, scattered itself, whirled, melted and abruptly broke off."

In other words, this strange parallel to Brownian motion had taken hold of paintings by Turner, the Impressionists, the Neo-Impressionists, the Nabis and Fauves — with the eventual result that "the realistic image was torn to tatters", as Schneider put it.

Yet it was not only the realistic image but naturalism in its broadest application and ultimately representation itself that fell afoul of what Schneider called "the maenads of colour".

Whether consciously or inadvertently, Cummings' paintings return us to the crack-up of naturalism, refocusing our awareness on its historical perpetrators, Bonnard and Vuillard first and foremost. She became aware of Bonnard and Vuillard when she was a student at the National Art School in the 1950s at the urging of one of her teachers, Wallace Thornton — and they are "still the ones I respond to a lot".

There is an extraordinary letter that Vuillard wrote to Maurice Denis in 1898, where he described the crisis of confidence that was affecting his ability to work at the time. It had forced him to dispense with many traditionally sanctioned aspects of painting and drawing, which he had come to consider inessential, inartistic and unsustainable. As a consequence his work had become "more elementary".

In reassessing Vuillard's achievement of the 1890s, it is his astounding economy of means and the untrammelled, hands-on immediacy of his technique that strike us today as virtually ageless. Much of his work is astonishingly "ahead of its time", some of it well-nigh abstract. The art historian Andre Chastel has said: "Abstract art could have been invented around 1895 had the Nabis (Vuillard, Bonnard and their associates) wanted to make such a bold decision."

Despite his agonies of doubt and restriction to unprecedentedly "minimal" pictorial means, there were consolations and compensations associated with his dilemma, as Vuillard admitted: "I have friends — and with their support I have kept my faith in simple accords of colour and shape. Leaving this aside, the important thing is that there is enough there to go on working with."

Consequently Vuillard didn't experience his "crisis of modernity" entirely negatively, nor was it so for his closest kindred spirit, Pierre Bonnard, nor for the legions of other artists who followed in their wake and were able to profit from their lessons.

The "realistic image torn to tatters" gave rise to a more specialised focus on "simple accords of colour and shape", and the upshot of this was much less a shutting down than an opening up of possibilities. The latent energies of media — the dynamic association of lines, colours, shapes, textures, patterns, etc — could be seen and enjoyed independently of their representational function, and painting could then become truly painting, autonomous and free.

Cummings described the liberation she inferred from looking at Cezanne's work: "I didn't really understand it until then — that inner life. Cezanne's paintings were rocking with that tension and life, they were energy and life. It moved, it moved. To have that life in the painting ..."

Bonnard articulated the modern painter's credo: "It's not a matter of painting life, but of bringing painting to life." Yet despite his acute awareness of an abstract substrate underlying his compositions, he was never tempted to cross the frontier into total non-objectivity. "It's always necessary to have a subject, no matter how minimal, to keep one's feet on the ground," he declared.

In her words and deeds, Cummings expresses a similar wariness of the borderline of abstraction, although it is apparent how she crosses it time and again in the formulation of her images.

She also shares with Bonnard his propensity for the oblique — her work implies a similar categorical distinction between "the model before one's eyes and the model one has in one's head", as Bonnard put it. The model before one's eyes might serve as the stimulus or pretext for one of Cummings' paintings, yet the painting is understood to be a wholly independent entity whose ultimate reference is "the inner life" and "the model in one's head".

Direct (too direct) observation of the model was a taboo for Bonnard, as it is for Cummings. The mere idea of transliterating a motif part by part and detail by detail was abhorrent to Bonnard, the epitome of everything commonplace, unintelligent and inartistic. ("People always speak of submission in front of nature, but there's also submission in front of the picture," he protested.)

It is commonly supposed that plein-air painters (the Impressionists in particular) bare their souls to nature and transcribe the sensations they receive with dogged literalness, yet Bonnard had a very different understanding of how painters engage with their motifs. He thought that they developed methods and devices to ward off the authority of the motif, to prevent themselves from merely copying what they saw.

There was a portfolio of Vuillard's lithographs published in 1899 with the title of *Paysages et interieurs (Landscapes and interiors)*. Vuillard's abstracting tendency was very much in evidence here, but something strange had occurred in the juxtaposition of landscapes and interiors. The interiors had acquired diffuse, sprawling, massy, jungly qualities and the outdoor scenes were enclosed, patterned and intimate. In effect, the genres had become blurred — presumably because they were converging in a common denominator of abstraction. These were not quite landscapes, not quite interiors, but more aptly interior landscapes.

That was the term that Picasso adopted in 1956 for the series of paintings celebrating his villa, La Californie, and the term could apply to Braque's magnificent series of *Ateliers* too. Interior landscapes is a term that pertains extremely well to Cummings' paintings from the 1990s onwards and it serves to link her endeavours with those revered antecedents.

Terence Maloon is director of the Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University. This is an edited extract from a new monograph on the work of Elisabeth Cummings published to coincide with a retrospective at SH Ervin Gallery in Sydney, May 27-July 23

Dancers relish rom-com fantasy

DANCE

Don Quixote, West Australian Ballet. His Majesty's Theatre, Perth, May 11 and 12

DEBORAH JONES

Don Quixote is all fluff and high spirits. Based glancingly on the Cervantes novel, the ballet foregrounds the romance between Kitri, an innkeeper's daughter, and the impecunious barber Basilio. Kitri's father would prefer her to marry money, which turns up in the form of Gamache, a fool.

Questing knight Don Quixote bumbles upon the scene and complications ensue before everything is sorted. A fancy wedding out of keeping with Kitri and Basilio's meagre fortunes follows but what the heck. This is a rom-com, a fantasy and a chance for dancers to show off their classical chops while having fun.

West Australian Ballet's production is a judiciously slimmed-down staging created in 2010 by Lucette Aldous, a celebrated Kitri in her day.

It's mostly effective although the company looks uneven and there's one big, regrettable loss. Don Quixote's dream, in which he sees Kitri as his beloved Dulcinea, is ruthlessly pulled back to feature only the leading characters. The scene lacks meaning and magic.

At Thursday's opening newly minted principal dancers Chihiro Nomura and Gakuro Matsui were sweet, charming lovers. Both are finely tuned classicists.

SERGEY PEVNEV

Gakuro Matsui and Chihiro Nomura in *Don Quixote*

On Friday, soloists Florence Leroux-Coleno and newcomer Oscar Valdes turned up the wattage with a more knowing account of Kitri and Basilio. True, they overindulged with the famously tricky one-arm lift in Act I — Valdes held Leroux-Coleno aloft, twice, for longer than I've seen anywhere and it was frankly just showing off without enhancing the dance, although one had to admire the chutzpah.

Valdes at times showed more dash than finesse but his ebullience and daring are exciting. He was well matched with Leroux-Coleno, whose good humour and spark made her a memorable Kitri. It is beyond understanding why she is not a principal artist in this company.

Andre Santos was the highly enjoyable Gamache on Thursday and a high-octane Lead Gypsy on Friday. Santos is leaving at the end of this season after eight years with WAB to return to Brazil and will be much missed, particularly in light of some disappointing performances from higher ranked dancers on Thursday and Friday.

Corps de ballet member Carina Roberts continues to make her mark on the company and was an enchanting Cupid in the vision scene on Thursday. Also on Thursday Valdes made a killing as the Lead Gypsy while on Friday Adam Alzaim's Gamache was goofily appealing.

Minkus's score may not be a masterpiece but it's cheerful earworm material and the West Australian Symphony Orchestra under the baton of guest conductor Judith Yan gave a rollicking account of it.

Tickets: $22-$120. Bookings: (08) 9265 0900. Duration: 1hr 50min including interval. Until May 27.

Class warfare gets blackly funny

THEATRE

Black is the New White, by Nakkiah Lui. Sydney Theatre Company, Wharf 1, May 10

JOHN McCALLUM

Nakkiah Lui has described her play as "the world's first middle-class Aboriginal Christmas rom-com", and that is indeed what it is, but the irony in the joke hints at the tone of this deliciously funny production. It is full of taboo-breaking humour, farcical family conflicts and appalling characters who nevertheless manage, in the spirit of the genre that it is respectfully mocking, to sort everything out.

Two rich families, one black and one white, come together for Christmas because the black daughter (Shari Sebbens) and the white son (James Bell) have fallen in lurv. The patriarchs (Tony Briggs and Geoff Morrell) turn out to be old political enemies. Their long-suffering wives (Melodie Reynolds-Diarra and Vanessa Downing) have an unlikely rapport. There is another daughter in the black family, a successful fashion-designer (Kylie Bracknell) with a black husband who was once a famous Aboriginal footballer and is now a successful worker in finance (Anthony Taufa). The whole thing is presided over by a mischievously cheerful narrator (Luke Carroll).

Naturally enough the gathering descends into chaos. There's not much I can say about that without giving the whole delightful game away. But Lui has a lot to say, in all this mayhem, about identity, race, class, gender and sexuality. It is done with a light touch but the issues niggle underneath the comedy. What does it mean for wealthy middle-class Aboriginal people to support the struggles of the indigenous poor? For women of either colour to expend their lives in support of their ego-driven men? For people who have secret desires to try to take control of their lives?

PRUDENCE UPTON

Geoff Morrell and Tony Briggs in *Black is the New White*

Paige Rattray's splendid production finds the right style, navigating between the sometimes outrageous comedy (OMG! did they really just say that?) and the sudden moments of seriousness. Whenever you are beginning to think that preachiness might be about to take over, it switches over to farce.

On Renee Mulder's set, full of entrances and exits, and furniture that might be retro-chic or might just be old-fashioned, the characters come and go, walking out on each other and then abruptly returning to join battle again, or to fall into each other's arms.

Music is a part of the story, and Steve Toulmin's composition and sound design is very good.

There is something of the style of David Williamson in this play, in its forgiveness of the enemy and in the moral platitudes with which the characters finally resolve their differences.

I guess that's what happens when you do middle-class comedy of manners, black or white. But in the irony that Lui uses in her appropriation of this happy form there are also hints of her earlier anger.

Tickets: $45-$99. Bookings: (02) 9250 1777 or online. Duration: 2 hours 40 minutes, including interval. Until June 17.