

FRIEDMAN BENDA  
515 W 26TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001

VOGUE **LIVING**

## In conversation with two of NGV Triennial's biggest stars

Design luminaries Patricia Urquiola and Faye Toogood  
reveal the inspiration behind their new work for the  
National Gallery of Victoria's Triennial 2020.

By Annemarie Kiely  
February 1, 2021



Photographed by Marco Craig

Annemarie Kiely, "In conversation with two of NGV Triennial's biggest stars," *Vogue*, February 1, 2021.

Snapshotting a moment, a mood, and new modes of making across best global and local art, architecture and design practice, the National Gallery of Victoria launches its Triennial and promises to take museum-goers on a revelatory roller-coaster ride through culture now. The concerns of conservation, representation, collectivism and cataclysm thread through 86 projects, by more than 100 artists from more than 30 countries, all challenged to steer their respective commissions through the realities of Covid-19. The results are telling of human tenacity and historically will be judged to mark the moment when the lights figuratively and physically turned on. We talk to two of the Triennial's star billings, a pair of genre-defying designers who are determined to make the most of a crisis in their startling concepts.



Patricia Urquiola in her Milan studio. Photographed by Stefan Gifthaler.

## Patricia Urquiola

When Patricia Urquiola is pressed to recall the circumstances surrounding her commission to create a floor installation to feature in the Great Hall of the National Gallery of Victoria for its moment-defining Triennale 2020, the Madrid-born, Milan-based designer declares herself “bad at these questions”.

She is hazy on the when, what and how of it all, because it's early morning in Milan and her diary is always over-subscribed with dates — the downside of being a polymath architect, product designer, strategist, creative director (for Italian furniture group Cassina), mother and task-master of endless side projects. But the truth of it, as

Annemarie Kiely, “In conversation with two of NGV Triennial's biggest stars,” *Vogue*, February 1, 2021.

Urquiola admits, is that she finds the “who of it” to be a much more compelling reason for both her dialogue and design.

“Friendly relations, I think this is the story,” she says with smiling command. “My projects come from the lovely side, which means if I like a person, if I like a company, I work with them for a long time; get involved in discussion [about] how they do things, how they produce — if the conversation is good, it goes on.”

That declaration is later put to the NGV’s senior curator of contemporary architecture and design, Ewan McEoin, whose job it was to finesse her upcycling concept through the lockdown constraints of Covid, the logistics of its production, and the pragmatic links to a grand space cast in the jewelled light of Leonard French’s majestic stained-glass ceiling (the world’s largest). He laughs to be told that she must have liked him and his line of conversation.

“We had a beautiful meeting in Melbourne,” McEoin recalls of the pre-pandemic discussion ensuing from conversations with Spanish soft furnishings company GAN and its creative director Mapi Millet with whom Urquiola has long collaborated and recently launched Nuances, a range of rugs radicalising the process of wool felting. “I had met Patricia when working in magazines and she always impressed as a warm and generous person. This commission was all about friendship and the shared commitment to making it happen.”



Patricia Urquiola with prototypes of her NGV Triennial 2020 work, Recycled woollen island (2020)

Annemarie Kiely, “In conversation with two of NGV Triennial’s biggest stars,” *Vogue*, February 1, 2021.

The 'it', as Urquiola volubly explains, was to upcycle the scraps of past GAN projects into felted wools — “like a terrazzo of leftovers” — for the making of floor furniture that facilitated the museum-goer’s full scoping of the Leonard French glass ceiling. “In this fantastic room you’ve got to go and lie on the floor just to get a relation with the space, with the art piece, no?” she questions. “We lie in domesticated landscapes where there is always a sock. I live my life in socks — they are part of our shadows — can we interpret this idea in this immense, fantastic room?”

Eulogising the humble garment as a symbol of connection — always needing another, with a shape largely unchanged since the Stone Age — Urquiola details her proposition for a woollen island of giant socks that label with the sort of motivating missives scrawled on sporting footwear. ‘HOP ON LOOK UP’, one black-and-white tag playfully pleads to Grand Hall visitors to view the ceiling plane. “I don’t want to worry about formality or elegance — I want people to smile,” she says with an Aussie ease. “No worries.”

While her agreement to take the commission was conditional on the manufacture going to GAN’s contacts in India — makers who had refined new felting techniques and for whom she had an existing regard — Covid quickly tested commitments, concept, time frames and fabrication.

“Suddenly, there was a possibility that none of it would deliver on time,” says McEoin, who recalls mooted manufacture elsewhere. “But Patricia was super committed to the ecological footprint and making it in India, because a significant investment was being made and she wanted it to go to these people.”

Aesthetics and big design identities aside, what McEoin considers most amazing about this project is that the NGV backed the risk and bought into the collective commitment. “Sure, on the surface of it, this appears to be a famous designer, creating beautiful objects in a nice colour selection, with a sense of humour, but for me emotionally, it is a work about this moment in time and about the boundaries of design,” he says. “A commitment to the environment, a commitment to ethics within the supply chain, and a commitment to people.”

Urquiola responds from the other side of the planet, recalling the photo sends of the human faces and hands committed to getting her upcycled felt made in India and given form in Spain. “I saw little videos of them working the last days,” she says, beaming in memory of the doors closing on a shipping container bound for Melbourne. “A chain of relations that make something fantastic, that is the human miracle.”





Photographed by Philip Sinden

## Faye Toogood

It's morning in the UK, evening in the eastern states of Australia, as designer Faye Toogood 'Zooms' her way in cross-continental conversation and speeding car through bucolic English countryside. It's an impressive feat of lane-change in both thought and carriageway as she responds to the questions firing from the device fixed to her dashboard. "I did say that I'd be juggling," she says, with apologetic glance to her smartphone's screen. "But it's night-time for you, so just sit tight and I'll have you on my desk in about 10 minutes."

As she negotiates the school drop-off, renegade drivers and a detailed explanation of her concept for the major installation commissioned by the NGV, Toogood, a mother of three who magics modern design poetry from an elemental primitivism, curses the 'gotta-do-everything' impact of Covid-19.

"It's become so much worse during lockdown," she says as she veers into the driveway of her home — a Victorian house, ringed by green fields, far from the industry of House of Toogood in East London's artsy Shoreditch. "It's like going back to the 1950s. Just another reminder of when it all goes wrong, how we [women] bear the brunt."



An installation view of *Downtime: Candlelight wall scenography and Family busts* (2020) by Faye Toogood.

She elaborates on the stress of it all while having to evolve her pre-Covid idea for the Triennial away from its presumptions about access to museum archives, manufacturing, people and funding, and explains how her concept quickly cast in a different light.

“The NGV had bought one of my pieces for its permanent collection and [design curator] Simone [LeAmon] kept talking to me for a number of years about the possibility of a project — something similar to *The Drawing Room*,” she says of the sketchy autobiographical interior set within Somerset House that was the hit of the 2015 London Design Festival. “She wanted something along those experiential lines for the Triennial, using light as my theme.”

But it wasn’t going to include a chandelier, avows Toogood of her refusal to jewel up the allocated European salon, a room dressed with 17th-century Dutch masters that quietly allude to an age when reason shifted from superstition to science. No, the designer’s concept was to issue a counterintuitive riposte to set topic.

“I told them that I would like to work with the absence of light,” says Toogood, turning the engine off and remaining cosseted in the car’s bubble. “I particularly wanted to respond to those Dutch still-life paintings, the Rembrandt portraits and candlelit domestic settings of the time. That discussion extended into moonlight and daylight — the other light sources in art of the period. Pretty soon I needed three rooms, not one.”

But all plans for a research trip to Australia were put on pandemic hold as Toogood pivoted to a remote response. She cast her eye over past creativity and matched bronze pieces, patinated in a celestial silver-nitrate, from her Assemblage 5 collection to the proposed Moonlight Room and made her Maquette 72/Masking Tape Light (2020) into a giant lunar orb seemingly fallen from its gravitational anchor in the night sky.



Family Bust No.4 (2020) by Faye Toogood.

The Daylight Room, in contrast, was to dress with “a few of those amazing Dutch still-lives of flowers,” Toogood says. “Blooms that would never naturally be together because the seasons would not allow.” She amplified their super-naturalism with neon light and commissioned large-scale tapestries (evocations of Daylight and Moonlight) to be made in Belgium’s famed Flanders Tapestries workshop from the collaged cut-ups of digital captures of details in the Dutch paintings. LeAmon describes the Daylight tapestry as a landscape littered with a rich symbology — an airborne white napkin encoding the then obsession with hygiene.

Annemarie Kiely, “In conversation with two of NGV Triennial’s biggest stars,” *Vogue*, February 1, 2021.



“The tapestries are a direct association with female work and feel like the first time that I have let my guard down,” explains Toogood, who has long been at pains to assert her female strength by steering clear of the decorative arts. “There is a softness and vulnerability within those salons that I haven’t exposed before, but now I see things a little differently.” This perspective shift is both a function of motherhood and the curatorial finding that Dutch women in the 1600s were confined to private domestic interiors to view art.

“This marked the rise of the salon movement,” says LeAmon in recall of the pair’s joint curatorial dive into the “magnificence” of the NGV’s European collection. “This was the moment when women became more engaged.”

Toogood spot-lit this female captivation within the sanctity of a domestic context by dropping painting hangs down to a ‘homely’ eye level and adding her lithium-barium crystal Element table and Roly-Poly chair. Their precious clarity and construct repeats across Toogood’s curation of 17th-century glass vessels (pulled from the NGV archives) and crystallises the moment when ‘Golden Age’ science gave glass its brilliance.



Downtime: Family busts (2020) by Faye Toogood.

The resulting scenography shimmers with subtexts on enlightenment and the evolution of humanism; one reaching crescendo in the Candlelight Room, where Rembrandt presides over portraits past and present. In its low-lumen glow, Toogood imagined the

Annemarie Kiely, “In conversation with two of NGV Triennial’s biggest stars,” *Vogue*, February 1, 2021.



painterly faces of 17th-century Dutch nobles in dialogue with a 21st-century British family — effigies of her nearest and dearest, first idealised in bronze, but ultimately realised in the resource allowed by London's Covid lockdown. "Amazon boxes, wood, car paint, plaster, canvas, literally anything I could get my hands on at the time," says Toogood of ready-mades that LeAmon later likens to the papier-maché lumpiness of Franz West's sculptures spliced with classicism.

These busts are the arresting best of a studio relay that saw staff adding and subtracting bits over 12-hour days to create a surprising whole. "I was so impressed with their way of working," recalls LeAmon of her first meeting with Toogood and staff in 2015. "Faye is an exceptional genre-defying creative director who has nurtured a team that passionately practice her ethos."

According to Toogood, all the forced reappraisal of process opened up her practice and brought an excitement and joy that fed into the painting of a 35-metre-long canvas scenography that templates the positions for portraits. "We could only approximate their placement in these tableaux and it will all likely be a bit imperfect," she says. "But there's a lot of beauty in that," and a lot of illuminating thought on identity, gender, resource, strength and the surety that light persists in darkness.

The NGV Triennale runs from 19 December 2020 to 18 April 2021. Visit: [ngv.vic.gov.au](http://ngv.vic.gov.au)