

THE AUSTRALIAN
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Life & Luxury Arts & Culture

The 10 most culturally powerful people in Australia in 2024

What does it mean to be Australian right now? These 10 people made the biggest mark on our culture this year. AFR Magazine's hotly anticipated Power issue is out on September 27.

Michael Bailey
Rich List co-editor

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1. Vincent Namatjira

Artist

It's hard to remember when another Australian painting attracted this much attention.

Namatjira's work *Australia in Colour* was hung without fuss for most of 2023 in the Art Gallery of South Australia. It features wonky portraits of 21 people, including Cathy Freeman, King Charles and a double-chinned, bug-eyed Gina Rinehart.

In March, it shifted to Canberra's National Gallery of Australia, where the work caught Rinehart's attention, and she became the first of its subjects to complain: to NGA chair Ryan Stokes, Opposition Leader Peter Dutton and Arts Minister Tony Burke.





Vincent Namatjira. Louise Kennerley

She also had some 20 elite swimmers send letters, led by Paris silver medallist Kyle Chalmers. Rinehart has given at least \$40 million to Australian swimming since 2012.

It was all to no avail. Revelations that Australia's richest person was trying to have the portrait removed gave the National Gallery its best box office in years.

The "Streisand effect" extended to the point where comedian Dan Ilic began crowdfunding to get Namatjira's Rinehart portrait on a billboard in New York's Times Square.

Ilic stopped when the artist said he wanted no part of the stunt, his intention never to humiliate but to humanise the billionaire. "[I like to paint with a little bit of humour](#)," Namatjira, an Archibald prizewinner, has said of painting Rinehart, whom he's never met. "Humour takes away some of their power and keeps us all equal."

What the panel said

Vincent really did provoke a conversation this year. Can a benefactor control their image?

Jo Porter

He's an essential Australian artist, who paints with complete honesty and truth. He could've taken this and really gone to town if he'd wanted to, but he managed it very elegantly.

Tony Ellwood

The NGA did a brilliant job standing up for him.

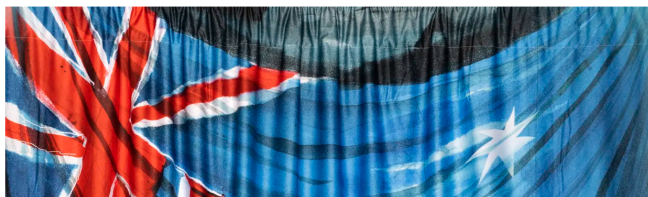
Lucy Turnbull

He got me to go to Canberra for the first time in a decade.

Liana Rossi

2. Jessica Fox

Olympic canoeist





Jessica Fox. Louise Kennerley

With Australia winning a record-equalling 18 gold medals at the Paris Olympics, debate on the panel was vigorous as to which athletes would linger in the public's memory, and most inspire the crop of 2028.

Yes, Raygun came up. The breakdancer had the most media mentions in the Games' aftermath, but only one panellist included her in their top 10 – which was more votes than she received from the judges of Paris – reflecting its view that her appeal would barely outlast her memes. Some suspected the cultural studies lecturer had planned for those all along.

Instead, our panel plumped for canoeist Jessica Fox, who has now stood on the podium at four Games. When the western Sydneysider jumped into the water to celebrate her younger sister Noemie's win in the kayak cross, having already won two slalom golds herself, it created the definitive image of a Games where 60 per cent of Australia's medals went to women.

What the panel said

The Olympics, like the Matildas, was a licence again for Australians to get behind something and be patriotic - which we've struggled with in recent times. Jess and Ariarne [Titmus] were symbolic of that, and gave us all a reason to be proud Aussies.

Dan Rosen

She's been voted onto the IOC Athletes' Commission, so she's got the agency to keep shaping things all the way to Brisbane in 2032.

Matthew Drummond

3. Archie Moore

Artist





Archie Moore, *Paul Harris*

The Venice Biennale is often likened to the Olympics of the art world. And an Australian has never won gold, until this year when Moore won the top prize, the Golden Lion.

It was a moment of triumph for Australian First Nations artists, not that the work itself fostered a celebratory mood. A monumental reckoning with 65,000 years of history, kith and kin was the Bigambul-Kamilaroi artist chalking a personal genealogy going back 2400 generations, interspersed with stark reminders of its disruption by introduced disease and over-incarceration.

It took three months to create by hand, covering the walls of the Australian Pavilion. It's possibly the best use by any artist so far of the Denton Corker Marshall-designed building, which opened in 2015. A small window on to the Venice Lagoon – its water linked to the water that surrounds Australia – pointed to humanity's interconnection, and hope for reconciliation.

What the panel said

A lot of people didn't think Archie was the right choice [to represent Australia] in Venice, but kith and kin was the most sophisticated, culturally powerful and meaningful subject matter I've seen in the international pavilions.

Tony Ellwood

When he won, it was a headline story. It went around the world.

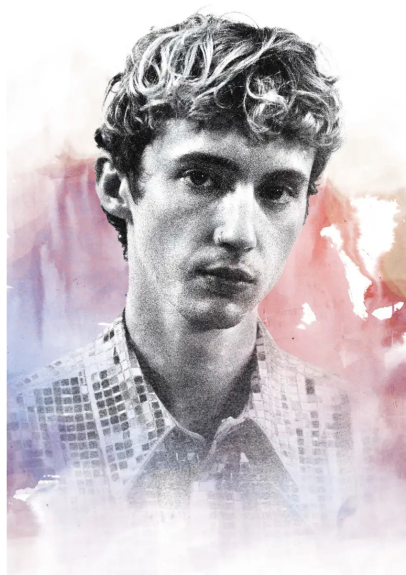
Lucy Turnbull

What Vincent and Archie have done is incredible for the broader culture, which has had a very one-dimensional view of Aboriginal art.

Liana Rossi

When we use a distinctly Australian voice, it can resonate on the world stage in a unique way.

Dan Rosen



Troye Sivan. Sam Bennett

4. Troye Sivan

Singer

That Sivan is the only repeat from last year's cultural power list attests to a star on the rise.

The Perth-raised, Melbourne and Los Angeles-based celebrity has serious cultural power in several disciplines. His electropop songs have racked up 22 billion streams, he's the new face of Gap jeans, [his home in Melbourne is akin to a museum of Australian design](#) and in November, he will pack out the Sydney Opera House forecourt and Melbourne's Sidney Myer Music Bowl as part of his first Australian tour in five years (he has been busy touring with fellow pop star Charli XCX).

Such is Sivan's confidence in his cachet that his homewares brand, Tsu Lange Yor, this year offered a recycled brass bowl with the bottom cut out. "It's a glory bowl," posted one of Sivan's 15 million Instagram followers. Jokes aside, the \$700 item sold out.

What the panel said

The fact that Troye's on tour in the US with Charli XCX – her *Brat* album and its green cover is probably the biggest cultural phenomenon on the planet at the moment, and he's at the epicentre of this movement.

Dan Rosen

I was just listening to a podcast with Hunter Schafer, this huge breakout star from [HBO series] *Euphoria*, talking about when she bought her first house; she called Troye and asked for his architects. So beyond music, Troye is helping Australian talent to be seen on an international stage.

Liana Rossi

I'm still chuffed that we had him on this list last year, even though his latest album was yet to come out. How zeitgeist is that?

Matthew Drummond

5. Michael Lee

Federal Court judge





Michael Lee. Louie Douvis

The #MeToo era has become a mainstay of the power lists; Brittany Higgins' overt power was recognised in 2021, and fellow sexual assault victims Saxon Mullins and Grace Tame topped the cultural power poll in 2018 and 2021 respectively.

But a fruitful national conversation on violence against women needs men to listen. And in the "he said, she said" world of sexual assault, it ultimately requires a judgment. In April, the judgment on the three-year-and-running Bruce Lehrmann defamation case was delivered by Federal Court justice Michael Lee.

The defamation action he heard by Lehrmann against Channel Ten created feverish interest as the first time a de facto rape trial (after Lehrmann's criminal trial was abandoned to preserve Higgins' mental health) was livestreamed. Lee's judgment found Higgins had indeed been raped, but also made judgment on the wide cast of *dramatis personae* who had been drawn into the affair.

"It is a singular case," said Lee. "Indeed, given its unexpected detours and the collateral damage it has occasioned, it might be more fitting to describe it as an omnishambles." Key days in the hearing drew a livestream audience that sometimes hit 15,000. In August, Justice Lee reportedly knocked back an offer to become the host of ABC TV's *Media Watch*.

What the panel said

That line [on Lehrmann] "having escaped the lion's den ... made the mistake of going back for his hat" must be one of the few quotes from a judge that's entered mainstream culture.

Lucy Turnbull

His impeccable handling of the case and considered judgment felt like we could still believe in our judiciary to rise above and remain impartial and dignified.

Dan Rosen

6. Clancy Overell & Errol Parker

Founders, Betoota Advocate



Betoota Advocate founders Archer Hamilton and Charles Single with Betoota writer Wendell Hussey (middle) at Bar Reggio in Darlinghurst, Sydney.

The names of several journalists were bounced around by the panel – including Nick McKenzie and David Marin-Guzman for their work in blowing up the CFMEU. But it's a measure of how the consumption of news is changing that the spot on the cultural power list went to satirists Clancy Overell and Errol Parker, the pen names for *Betoota Advocate* founders Archer Hamilton and Charles Single.

With more than two million followers across social platforms, the fictional country town paper has become the favourite way for young and young-at-heart Australians to share the headlines. At its best, the *Betoota* captures the zeitgeist in about 15 words: "Inner City Pub Renames Garden Salad To 'Radicchio With Vinaigrette' To Justify Price Hike" [is a recent classic](#).

The *Betoota's* take has even made it onto page one of this masthead, when Phillip Coorey [quoted its observation on Peter Dutton](#): "Man Who Was Paralysed With Fear Over Lack Of Details About Indigenous Voice Provides A One-Page Media Release For His Half A Trillion Dollar Nuclear Plan".

Behind the zingers, *Betoota* is becoming a serious media contender with a string of podcasts, a publishing division and even a digital marketing agency to its name.

What the panel said

I was having a conversation with someone about the Vivid Festival, and they were like, "I heard that 50,000 moths actually migrated to Sydney". And I'm like "no, mate, that was a *Betoota* headline".

Liana Rossi

How we think about the news is often filtered through what *Betoota* wrote about it. When news breaks, it's *Betoota* that gets shared.

Matthew Drummond

7. Ariarne Titmus

Olympic swimmer



Ariarne Titmus photographed on the Gold Coast in September. **Paul Harris**

In the lead-up to Paris, the 400m women's freestyle final was billed as one of the marquee races of the entire Olympics. On the blocks would be three world record holders – Katie Ledecky from the US, Summer McIntosh from Canada and Ariarne Titmus from little old Launceston.

All were considered contenders. But instead of it being a nail-biter, Titmus won by almost a second. It was our first gold in the pool, and began a haul of 19 medals brought in by our swim team, the bulk of them from women.

Titmus became the first woman in nearly a century to successfully defend the 400m Olympics crown, and the first Australian woman since Dawn Fraser to go back to back in any swimming event. Screaming herself hoarse in the stands at Paris La Défense Arena was billionaire Katie Page. The Harvey Norman boss has sponsored Titmus since 2019, following a global trend among female entrepreneurs (think Michele Kang's \$6 million gift to the US women's rugby team) that could supply cultural power lists for years to come.

What the panel said

She will go down in history as one of our greatest Olympians. Winning two medals on the same night, beating Katie Ledecky, it was just incredible. And she was a big part of Tassie being overrepresented among our medallists too.

Gabrielle Trainor

Some 19 million Australians watched the Olympics, on TV or by streaming. It's basically the whole population.

Matthew Drummond

My eight-year-old daughter had her athletics carnival yesterday. She

competed in every single event she could, because she's been watching the Olympics and has been inspired. That's the power of these great female role models.

Dan Rosen

8. Peter V'landys

CEO, Racing NSW; chairman, Australian Rugby League Commission



Peter V'Landys. Louie Kennerley

He is thought of as a businessperson, but V'Landys' influence shows up in many cultural ways. It might be received wisdom that Generation Z is shunning horse racing, but V'landys is ensuring the sport will have buckets of money to entice it.

The man who helped privatise the TAB for a \$1 billion racing industry windfall in 1998 has now turned his politician-whispering skills to the sale of Sydney's Rosehill racecourse, for what the son of a Greek migrant steelworker says could be as much as \$23 billion if done gradually. He's taking on the TV networks over the future of [the anti-siphoning list](#), and The Everest is seeking to outclass the Melbourne Cup. (It's not confirmed that King Charles will attend this year, but he will be in Sydney when it's on.)

V'landys is not as cool as Troye Sivan, but he's doing his bit to export Australian culture. He's taken rugby league to Las Vegas, and is working to establish a team in Papua New Guinea, figuring the Australian government might be happy to help bankroll anything that counters the growing influence of China inside our nearest neighbour.

What the panel said

He's jumped between the cultural and covert lists in the past. He could probably fit on any three of our lists.

Matthew Drummond

His ambition for The Everest was crazy bold, but in years to come, if momentum continues, you'd predict that the Melbourne Cup won't be the only race that stops the nation.

Gabrielle Trainor

We've now got three sportspeople on the list – Jessica Fox, Ariarne Titmus and Peter V'Landys.

Lucy Turnbull

Peter may be amused you've called him a sports person, but he's certainly a person with a huge influence on sport.

Dan Rosen

9. Sarah Snook

Actor

With Margot Robbie taking a breath (and having a baby) after *Barbie*, the panel decided on Snook as this year's exemplar of Australia as an acting powerhouse.

The daughter of an Adelaide swimming pool salesman is best known for playing Shiv Roy across four seasons of the HBO hit *Succession*, for which Snook was awarded an Emmy in January.



Sarah Snook. Sam Bennett

A month later, she transformed into Dorian Gray in a “cine-theatre” adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s novel, conceived by outgoing Sydney Theatre Company artistic director [Kip Williams](#).

It required her to play all 26 characters, hitting hundreds of marks each night amid a dizzying array of on-stage live cameras and pre-recorded scenes. Snook won a Laurence Olivier Award for *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*’s sold-out run on the West End. It’s transferring to Broadway in 2025, and another world-famous Aussie, Cate Blanchett, has picked up the film rights.

What the panel said

Sarah is shooting a new series [NBC Peacock’s *All Her Fault*, based on the novel by Andrea Mara], Although set in Chicago, it will be filmed in Melbourne, which means she can work at home and be with her family. That’s cultural power.

Jo Porter

I would put Kip Williams on there rather than Sarah Snook, given he did the adaptation of the play. But would that play have made it to the West End if she wasn’t in the lead role?

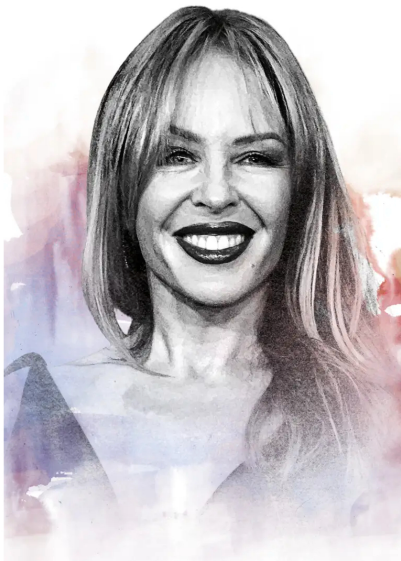
Matthew Drummond

10. Kylie Minogue

Singer

Cultural power in the music world has been upended by streaming, where an old song is the same as a new one to a kid hearing it for the first time. The might of the back catalogue has been exemplified in Australia by Cold Chisel, which has sold out 26 arena-sized venues for its 50th anniversary tour starting in October. That's a remarkable effort for a local band, and it can't just be Boomers buying that many tickets.

However, pure nostalgia wasn't enough for our panel, who voted instead for Minogue as a catalogue act who is still having pop hits. Between this year's Las Vegas residency, and her second Grammy for 2023 anthem Padam Padam, the panel concluded that America could soon fall for Minogue the way the UK did nearly 40 years ago.



Kylie Minogue. Sam Bennett

With 16 million monthly listeners on Spotify and more than 10 million followers on the major social platforms, she is as popular as ever and has teased an Australian tour in 2025. It could yet give the Cold Chisel boys a run for their money.

What the panel said

She's a 56-year-old pop global star. I think that's a kind of cool thing for old ladies everywhere. She has had an amazing 12 months.

Jo Porter

And she won the global icon award at the Brits earlier this year.

Dan Rosen

And *Padam* has been likened to the new national anthem.

Matthew Drummond

The cultural power panel

- ♦ **Liana Rossi** | Creative consultant
- ♦ **Lucy Turnbull** | Businesswoman, philanthropist
- ♦ **Dan Rosen** | President, Warner Music Australasia
- ♦ **Jo Porter** | Managing director, Curio Pictures
- ♦ **Gabrielle Trainor** | Acting commissioner Infrastructure Australia; AFL commissioner
- ♦ **Tony Ellwood** | Director, National Gallery of Victoria
- ♦ **Matthew Drummond** | Editor, *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*
- ♦ **Mark Di Stefano** (chair) | Rear Window columnist, *The Australian Financial Review*

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