



Nerine Martini

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02 9328 0922 | 37 Ocean Street, Woollahra, Sydney, Australia, 2025

Nerine Martini - Precarious

Nerine Martini's work as an artist shifts between her studio-based art practice and her custom of working with communities; a practice that has become widely referred to as 'socially engaged' or 'social art practice.' This relatively new form of art aims to recompose art's relationship to its social basis and organisational structures. For the studio-based artist it opens up possibilities to deviate from the modernist preoccupation with the signature and towards a synergetic process involving other people. Like the title of Nerine's new solo exhibition, Precarious, this new modus operandi of the artist is in itself an uncertain and unstable practice, but one in which Nerine is well-versed. In 2009, she presented a new work entitled Heaven Net / Luoi Troi for the exhibition Nam Bang! at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, an installation that cast tiny boats, made from paper, bamboo and small LED lights, across a large fishing net suspended from the concrete and steel vault which once housed the vast machinery of the power-generating building. The artwork, referencing the spiritual afterlife and the precariousness of journeys made by refugees crossing seas, was made during an artist residency which included craftsmen and women in the old Imperial capital city of Hue, Viet Nam, and to this day is one of the most memorable site-specific installations at Casula Powerhouse, pitting the industrial scale and material of the architectural history against the fragility of human life and the perilous process of migration.



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Nerine Martini

Heaven Net/ Loui Troi 2009

Do paper, bamboo, fishing net, wire, LED globes, microprocessor
controlled lighting sequencer

6 x 8 m

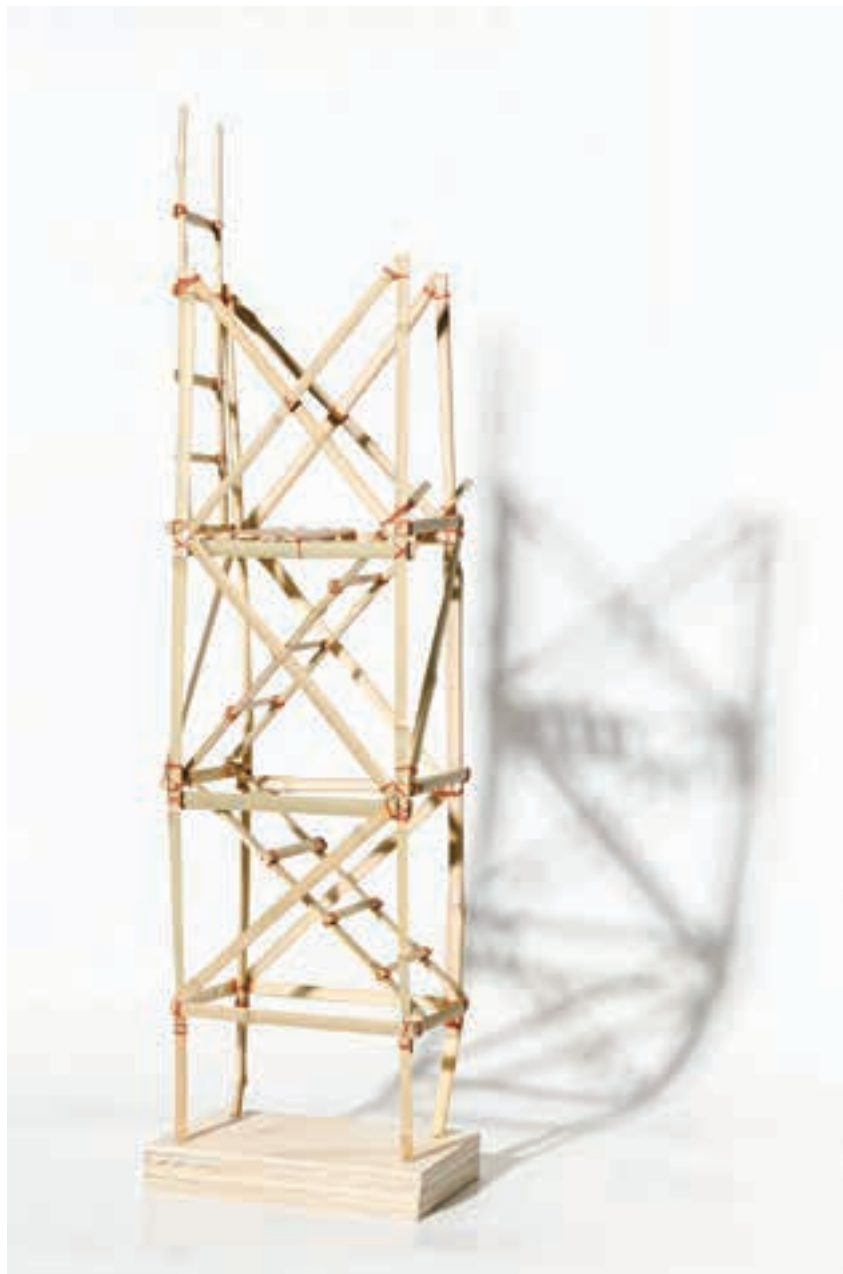
Not For Sale

Cultural migration, and its connectedness with the current uncertainties of our time, remains at the heart of Nerine's new exploratory work through her studio-based art and her participatory art practice, in which she works with people who identify as non-artists. Nerine's work is both personal and generic, and can be read simultaneously through its autobiographical reflexes and the more universal themes that emerge through her work with recent migrants and people at risk of social and economic exclusion. Often miss-read or poorly represented in the media and misunderstood by society in general, the migrants, the 'other,' the 'boat people,' the socially excluded, form an integral part of the narrative of Australian cultural history. Nerine's own story includes a lot of domestic migration, moving alone from Perth to Canberra at a young age, that precipitated further movement and a desire towards greater stability and certainty.

In 2016, the artist was recovering from a serious illness, but determined to continue with her art practice, she worked from her small apartment in Sydney's inner west suburb of Five Dock, where she developed a concept based on her observations of the ubiquitous scaffolding in the area, which has become synonymous with growth and change across the expanding city. Nerine perceived these structures in terms of her own physical dysfunction and as a metaphor for the migrant experience, and produced a series of layered drawings and split bamboo maquettes for larger sculptures. She made these new works in her current studio at Sydney College of the Arts, at Callan Park, a significant historical site, itself shot through with uncertainty and precariousness as the University of Sydney deliberated and finally decided to abandon the site and move to its main campus. Nerine's doctoral research topic is new socially engaged art practice and its potential to empower immigrant communities, that connects her personal observations and series of drawings and maquettes, with her new project in Blacktown, one of Australia's largest and culturally diverse cities, located in Western Sydney.



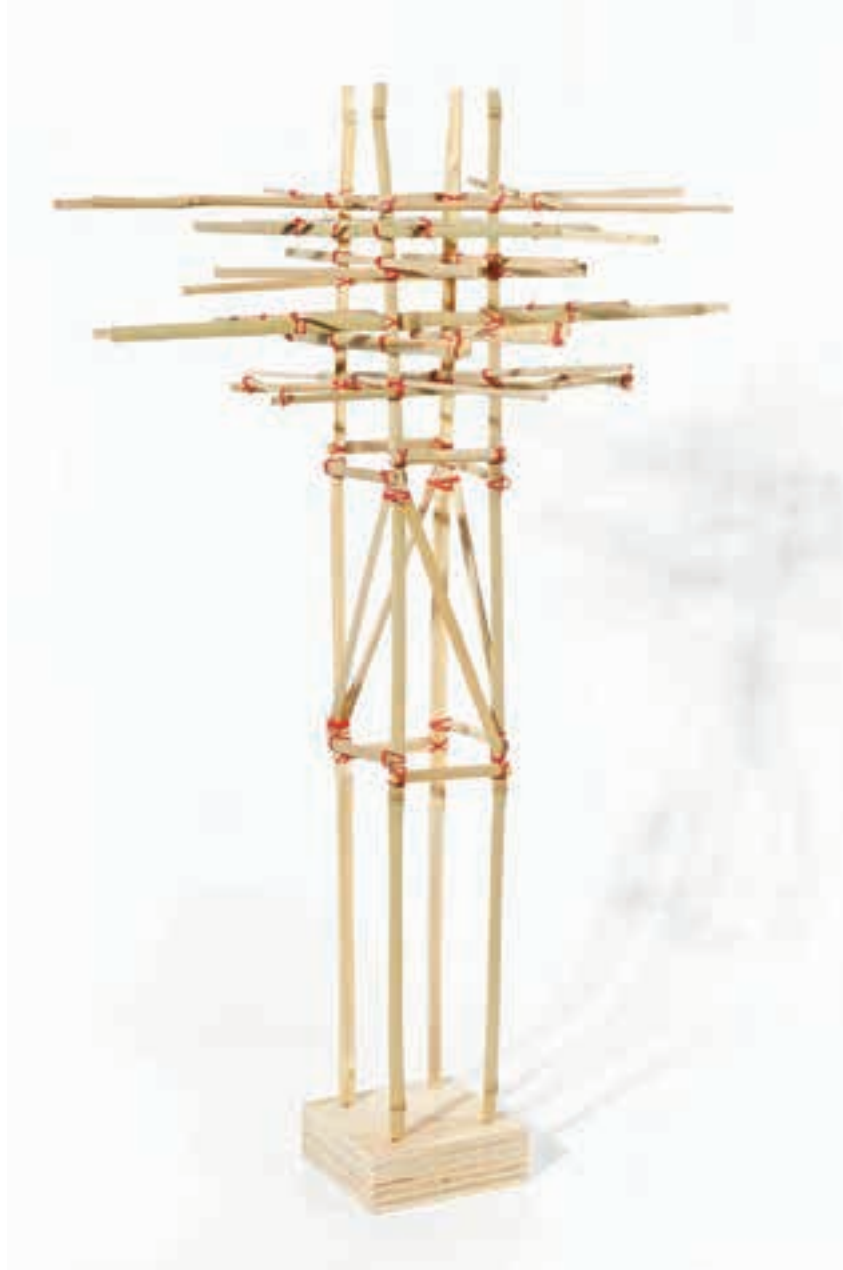
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Nerine Martini
Scaffold I, 2017
Bamboo, string, plywood
77.5 x 21 x 12 cm



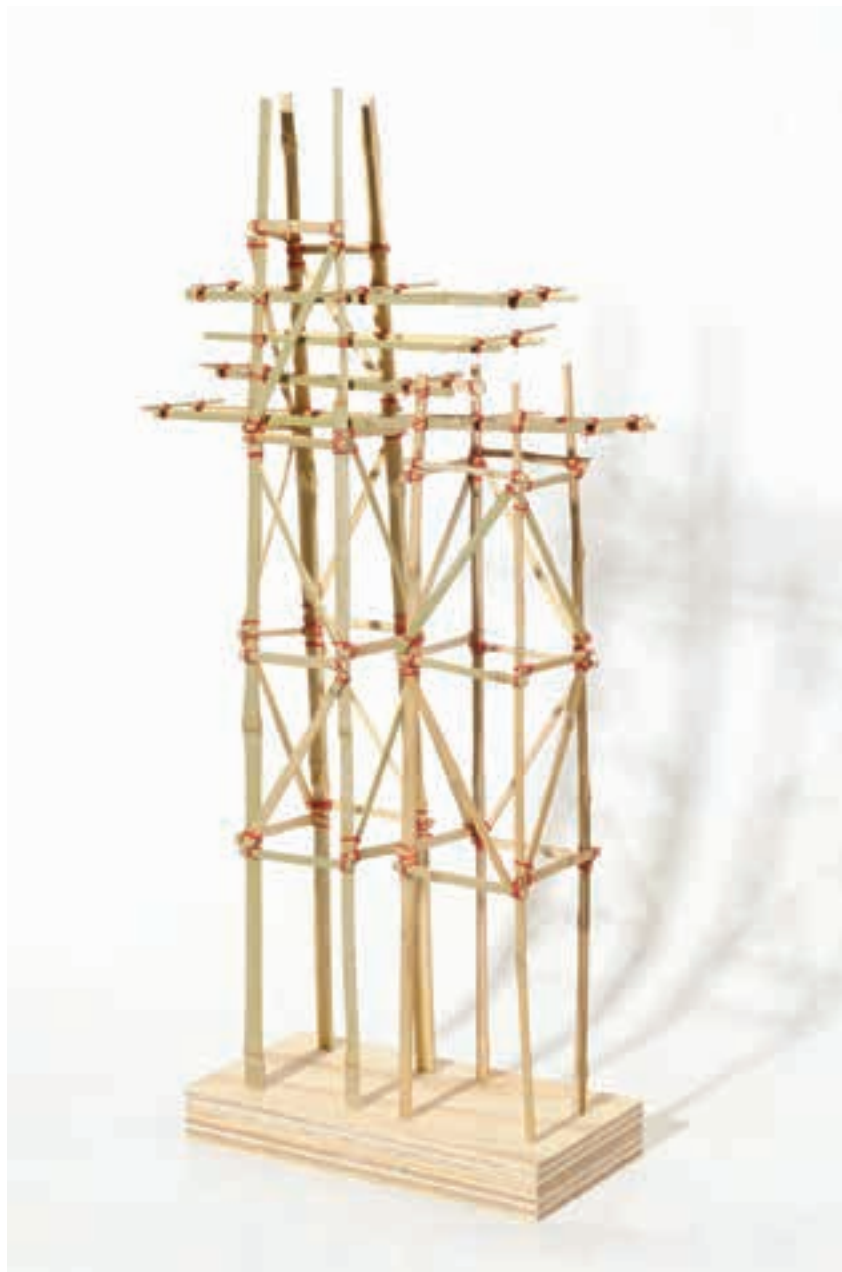
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Nerine Martini
Scaffold II, 2017
Bamboo, string, plywood
65 x 41 x 38 cm



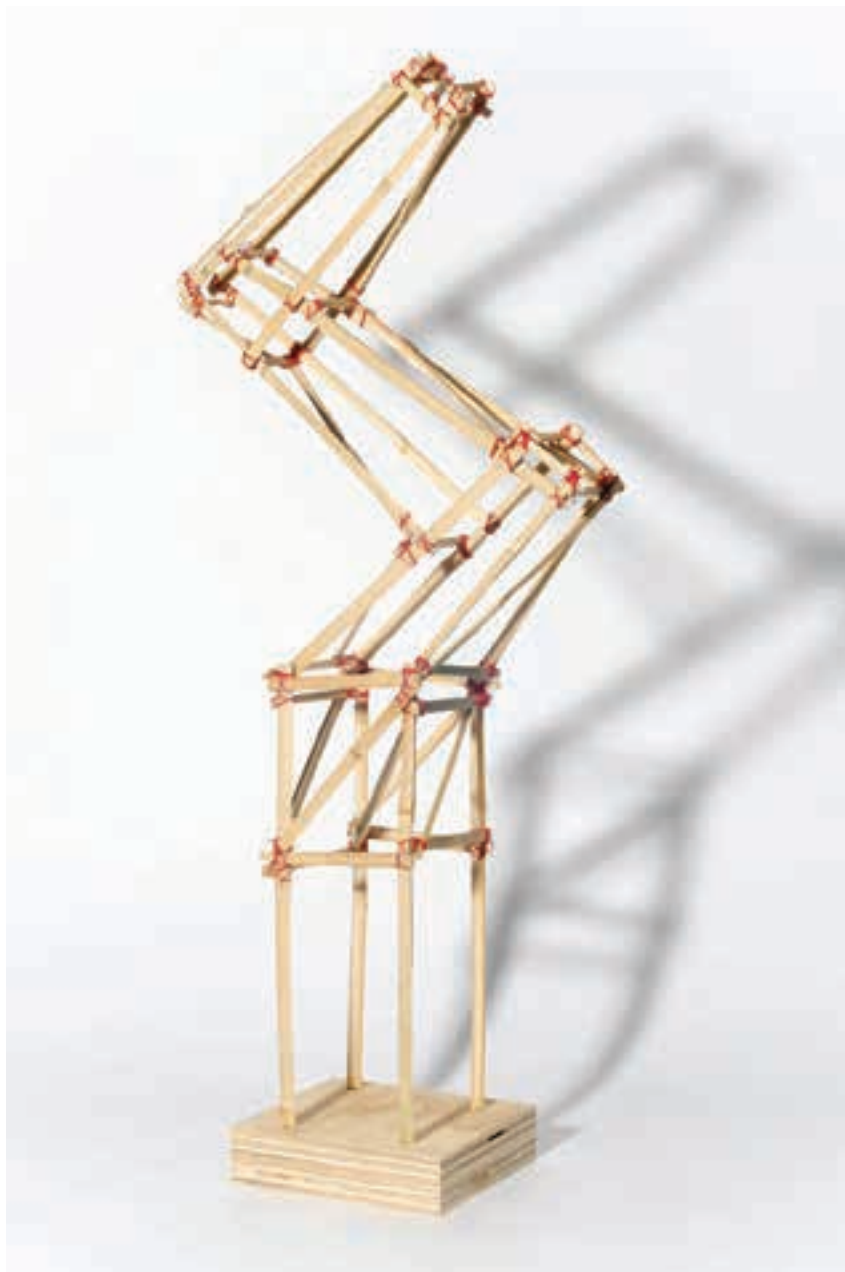
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Nerine Martini
Scaffold III, 2017
Bamboo, string, plywood
66 x 34 x 13 cm



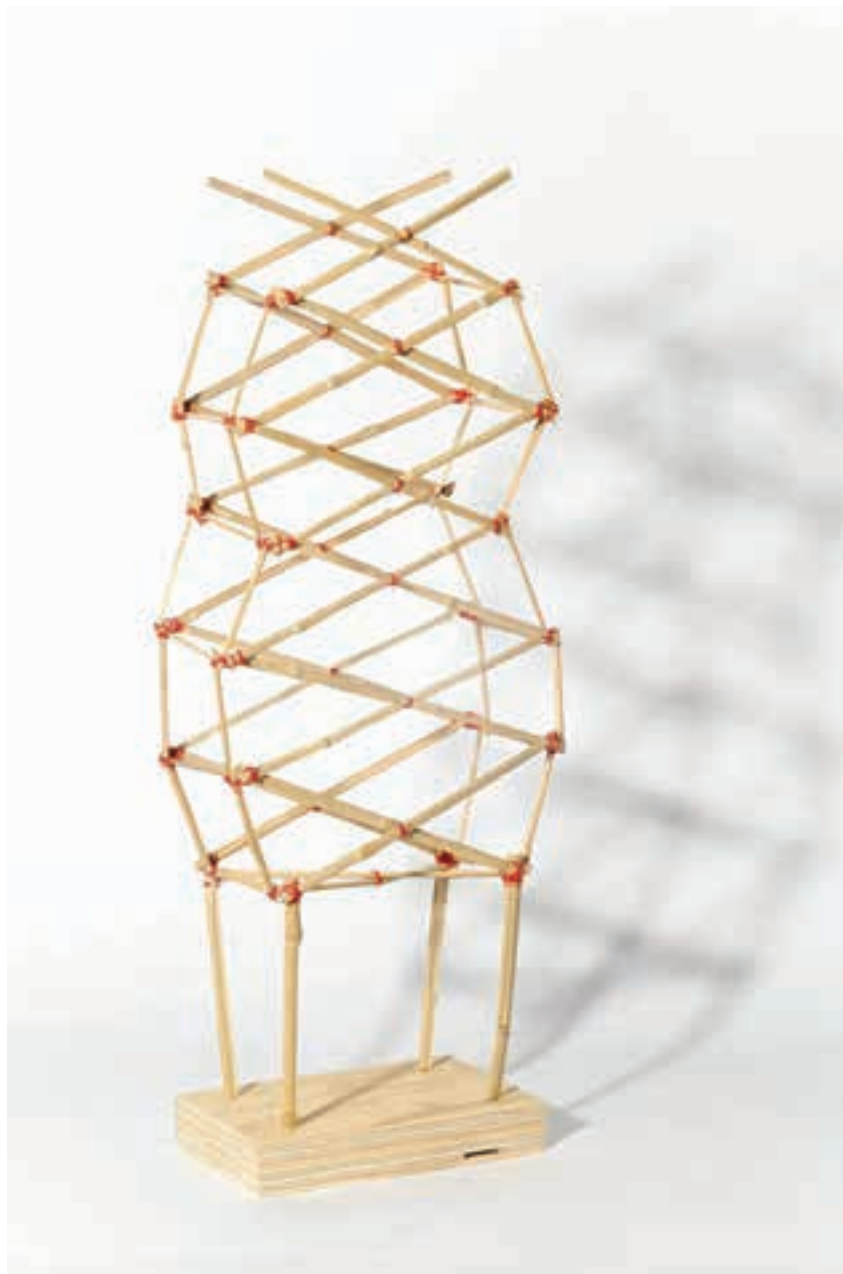
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Nerine Martini
Scaffold IV, 2017
Bamboo, string, plywood
66 x 28.5 x 12.5 cm



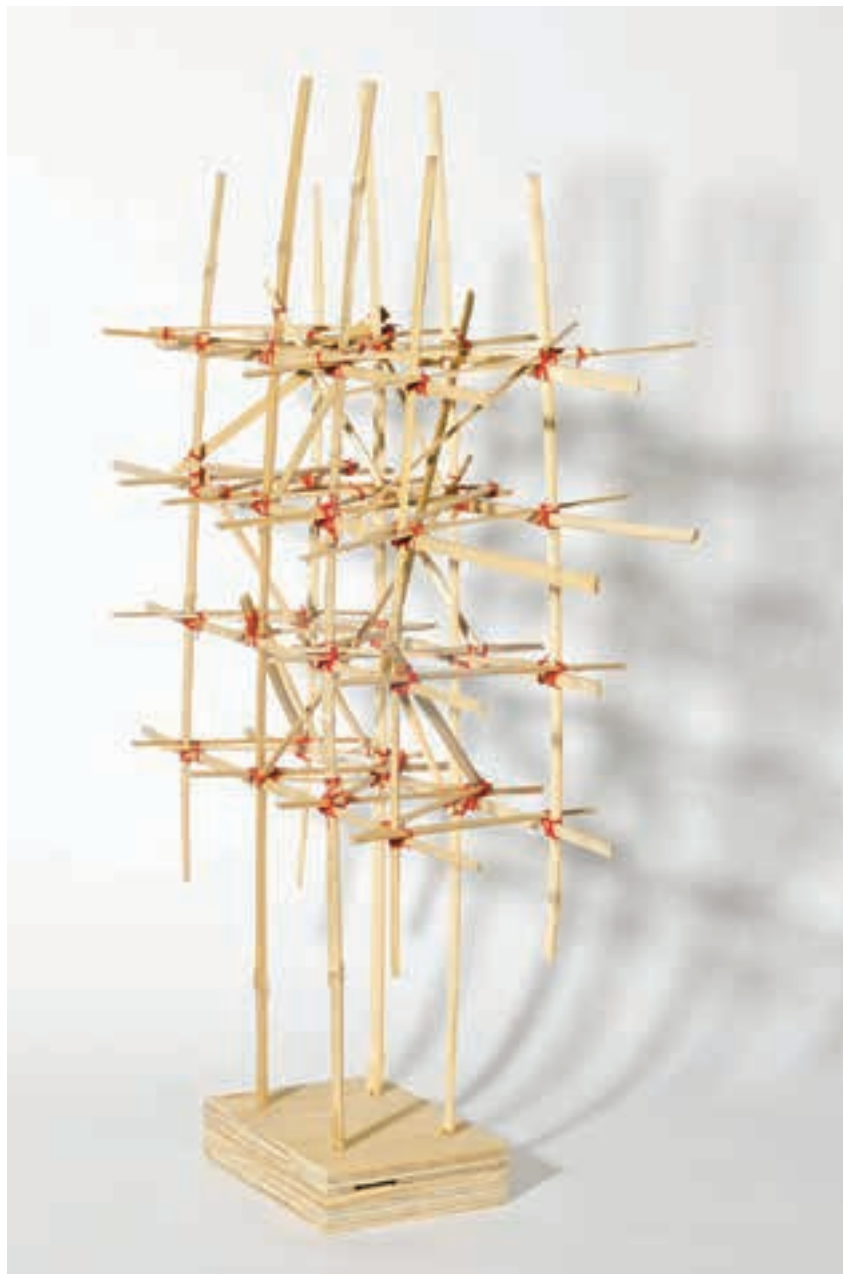
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Nerine Martini
Scaffold V, 2017
Bamboo, string, plywood
62 x 24 x 12cm



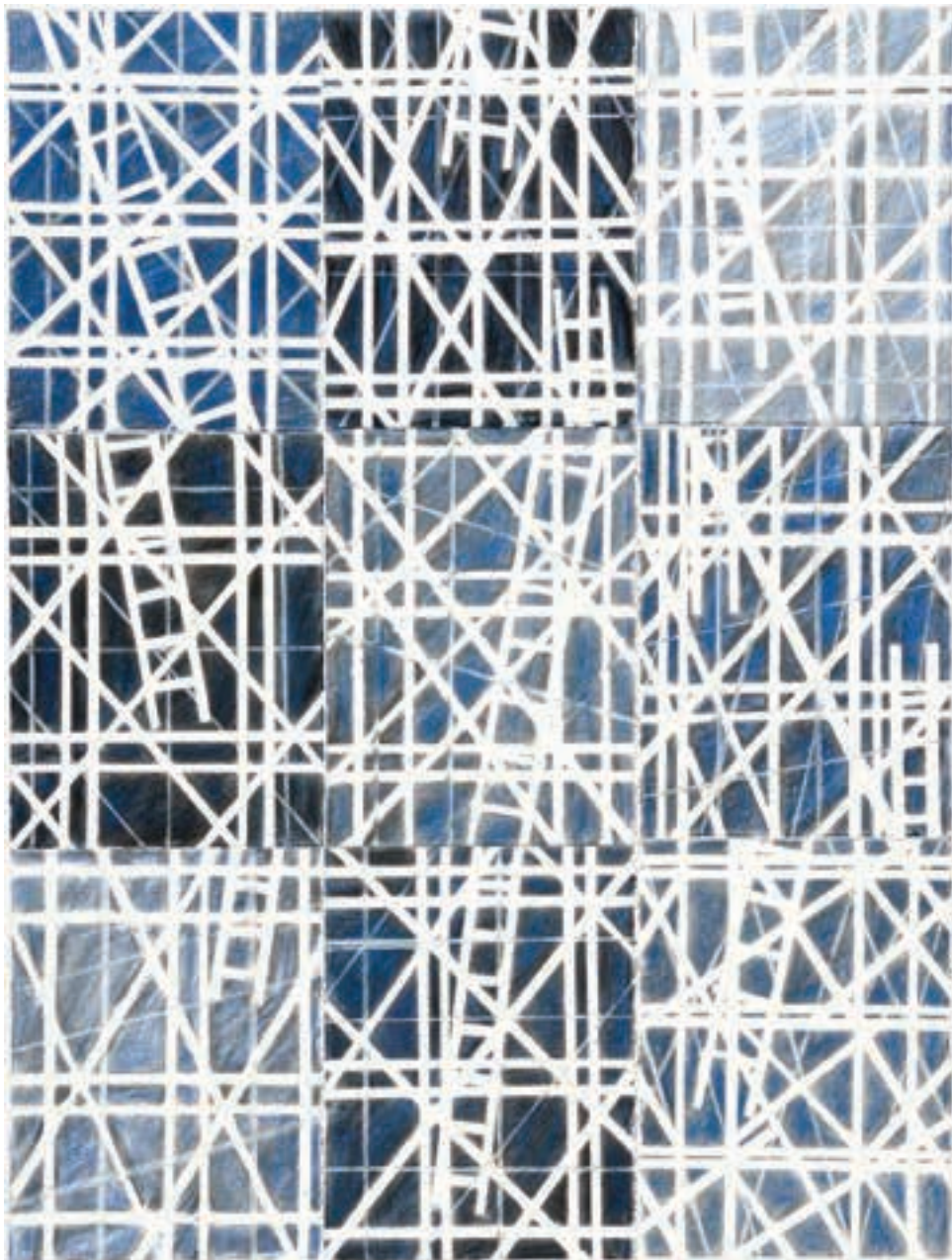
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Nerine Martini
Scaffold VI, 2017
Bamboo, string, plywood
61 x 57 x 19 cm



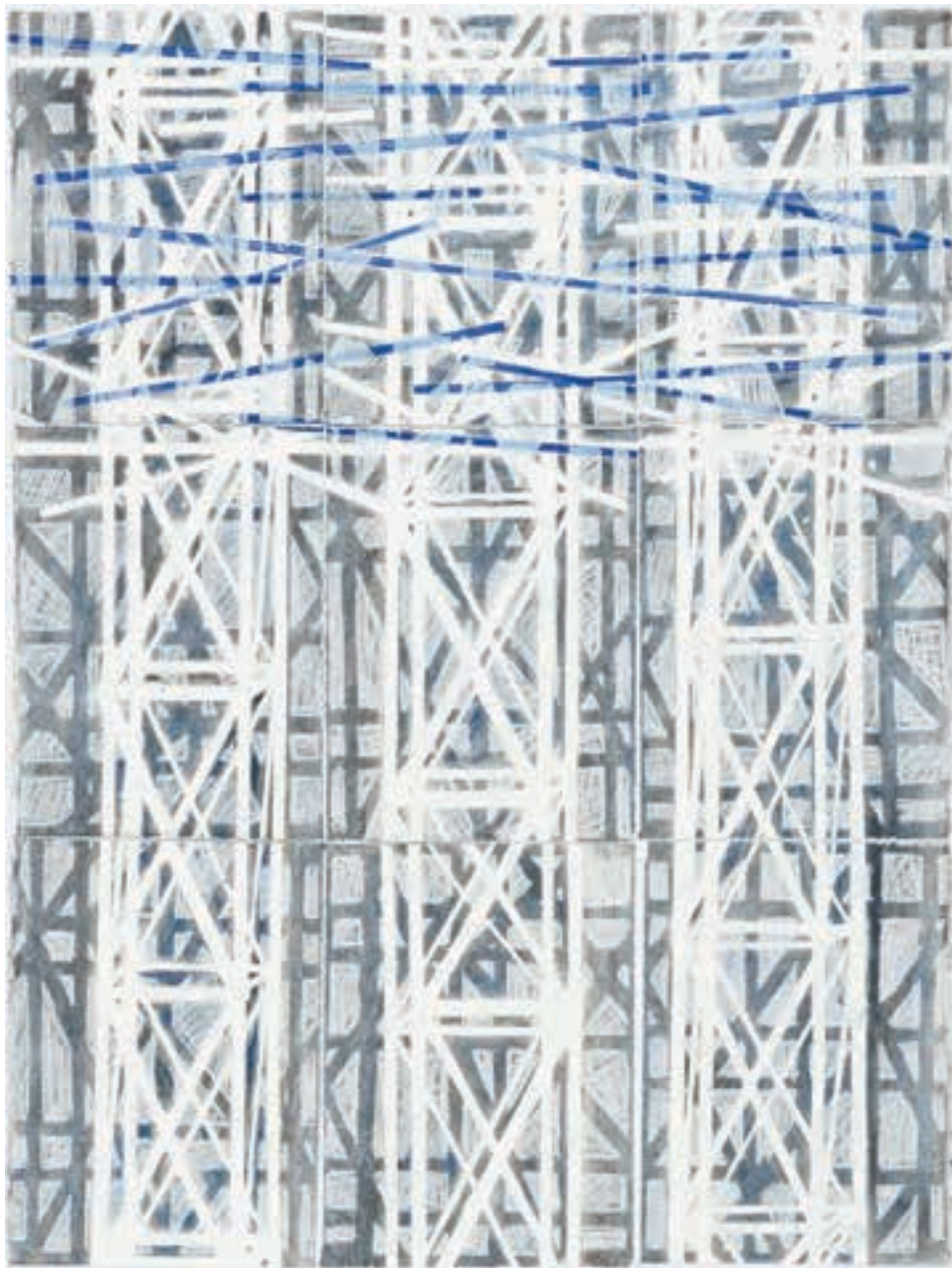
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Nerine Martini
Pulse I, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on stonehenge paper
75 x 57 cm



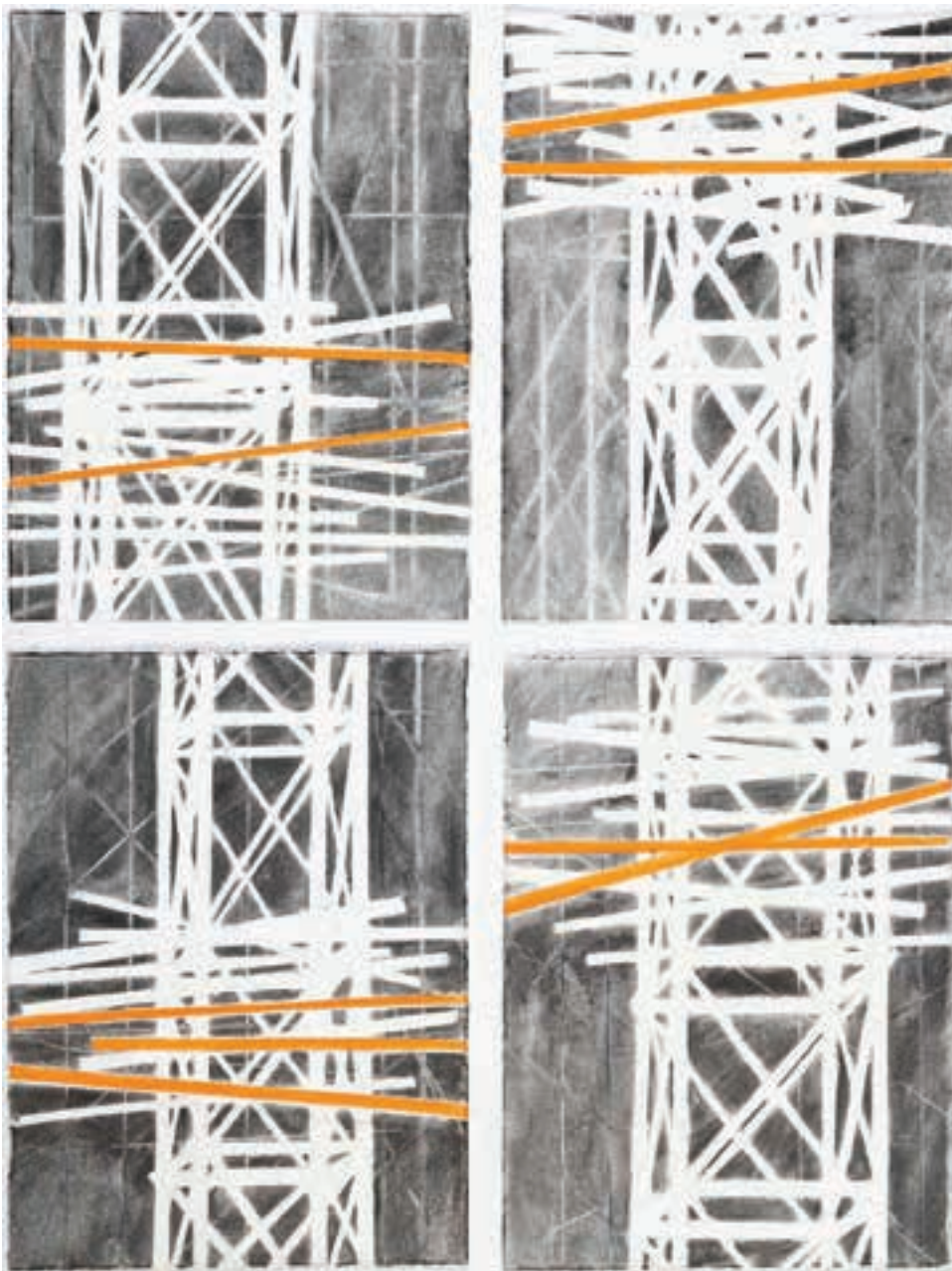
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Nerine Martini
Pulse II, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on stonehenge paper
75 x 57cm



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Nerine Martini
Oscillating, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on stonehenge paper
52 x 39 cm



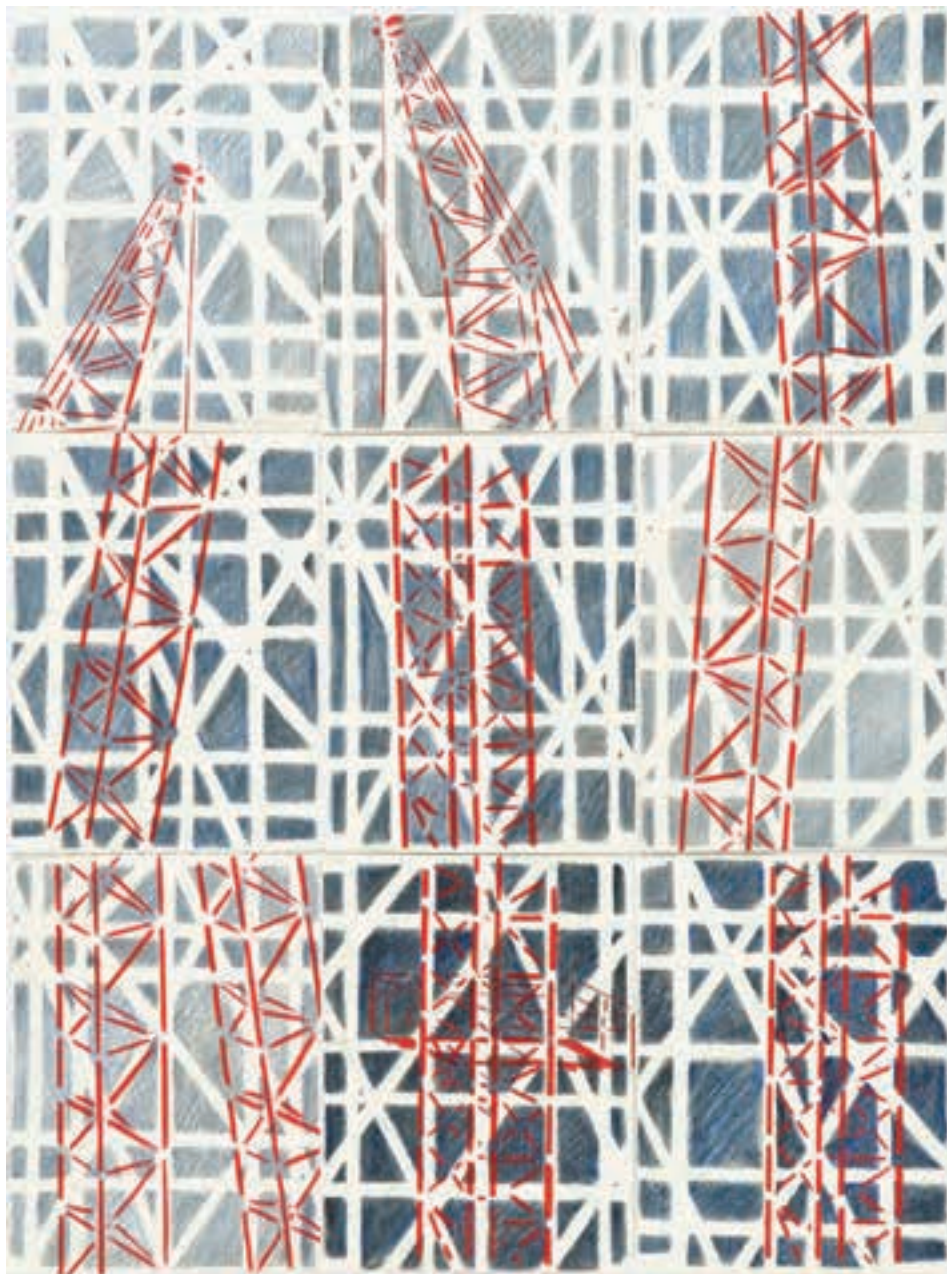
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Nerine Martini
Brace, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on stonehenge paper
52 x 39 cm



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Nerine Martini
Escalation, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on stonehenge paper
75 x 57cm



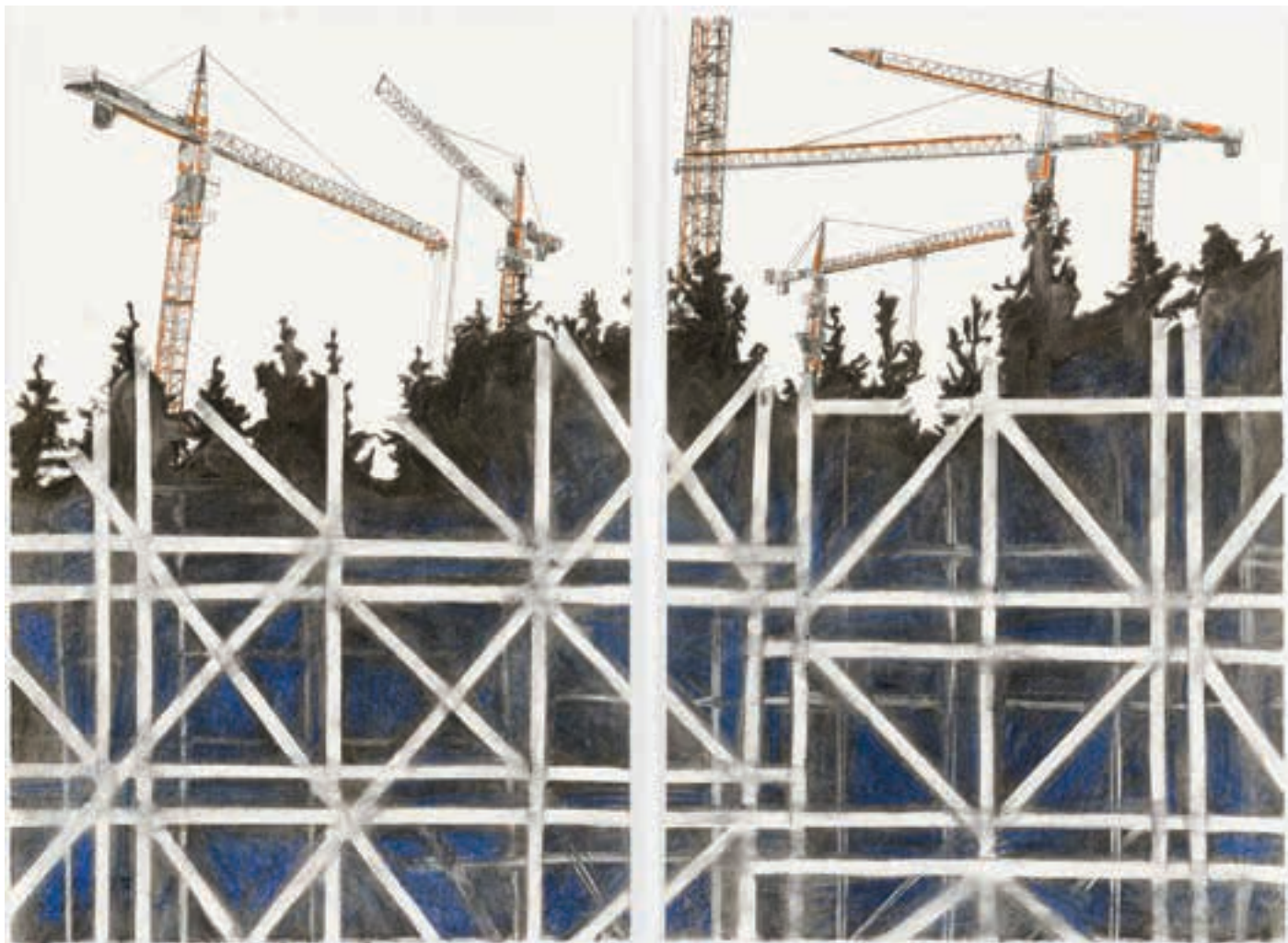
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Nerine Martini
Encroach I, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on stonehenge paper
75 x 57cm



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Nerine Martini
Encroach II, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on stonehenge paper
77 x 57cm

In an artist project which was initially conceived for the exhibition, diaspora-making machines, in 2016 at Blacktown Arts Centre, Nerine developed a series of workshops for adult students from MTC Blacktown, a subsidiary of MTC Australia, a social enterprise, which has been helping people gain employment, skills training, work experience and greater self-confidence for over two decades. Over six sessions in 2017, Nerine brought together a mixed group of recent migrants and local people from Blacktown, mostly women, to allow them to share their stories and experiences through drawing, frottage (the technique of drawing by rubbing materials through paper), plaster mold-making, photography and sound recording. As part of this process, the participants interacted with two key exhibitions at Blacktown Arts Centre, in which they could relate their own cultural backgrounds, and understand that the points of connection between the people featured in the exhibitions was the form of the artwork. This was a new experience and perception for the group to re-consider their own project with Nerine and move beyond the notion of art-making solely as the mark, or signature, of the artist. The Italian sociologist and political philosopher, Antonio Negri, reconsiders this paradigm as a revolutionary cultural practice that involves shifting from individuals to 'singularities,' from community to an 'alternate commons.'¹

1 See A. Negri and M. Hardt, *Multitudes: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, London: Penguin (2005).



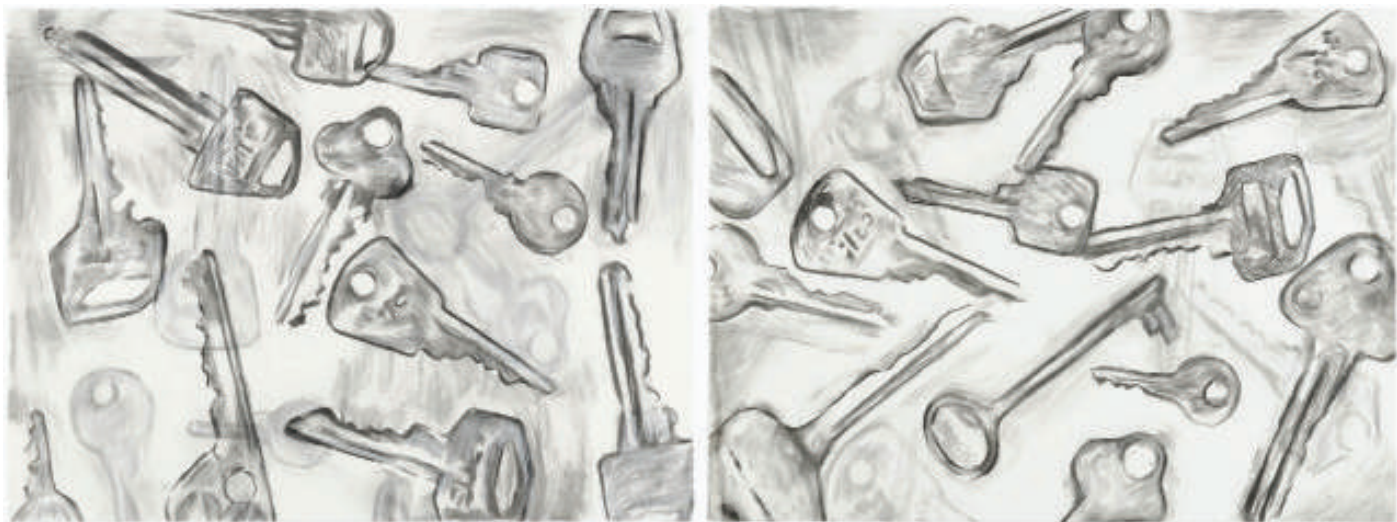
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Nerine Martini
Lost and found I & II, 2017
Charcoal on paper
77 x 57cm



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Nerine Martini
Lost and found III & IV, 2017
Charcoal on paper
77 x 57cm



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Nerine Martini
Lost and found V & VI, 2017
Charcoal on paper
77 x 57cm

Ethical issues circulate around socially engaged art practice, in which an artist often leads a group of non-artists in the realisation of a new artwork that is claimed by the artist. Who benefits in the process, and how? What is the artist giving as well as taking? Nerine is mindful and questioning of the practice of ‘mining the participants for stories’; she approaches the practice as a form of exchange, acknowledging the benefits to the artist, to the participants and the causal sequence for the wider community. (Integral to Nerine’s current research is the interviewing of other Australian artists on their methods of social interaction and ethical questions surrounding their own socially engaged practice.) In Nerine’s Precarious project in Blacktown, the outcomes have been to increase the participation and attendance rates for the group of people at MTC through demonstrating the value of the group’s enjoyment of creating a collaborative artwork, sharing and listening to others’ stories, and the benefits to their own creativity of interacting with contemporary art exhibitions. In combination, these outcomes create a greater sense of belonging and identity amongst the participants through the process of making a series of cultural objects based on their own lives. This reflects French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus, which refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences. The habitus ‘produces individual and collective practices’, and is the outcome of collective history. ¹

Nerine introduced the idea of the key to the group, a universal object, but one which we can all relate to on an individual level, and in this instance was used as a catalyst to begin conversations about people’s lives, their memories and dreams. And like scaffolding, a key can represent change. Keys are symbolic of security, to keep our property safe and importantly to afford access to home, car, work, online security even; items that are taken for granted in everyday life but are vital components to building a new life in a new place, and the effect can be amplified in a foreign country. The key in the work Social Scaffold, mirrors the metaphor of the scaffold (as constituent components to building a new form of life) in which they hang, almost like carrots on sticks.

Each key can represent a specific place where one’s been, or one could remember; how difficult is it to throwaway a key? We now generally pass them on or share them with those we respect. The tradition of the ‘key to the city’ came from the medieval practice of granting respected citizens freedom from serfdom, and evokes medieval walled cities. Still practiced in predominantly Anglophone countries, the key to the city, or ‘freedom of the city,’ symbolises the freedom of the recipient to enter and leave the city at will, as a trusted friend of city residents, and entitlement perhaps to special privileges. The artist, Paul Ramirez Jonas, recently reinvented the key to the city as a master key that could unlock more than 20 sites in New York City, and invited people to exchange the keys. Another example, in the context of Precarious, is the symbolic power of keys that are kept as mementos by many Palestinians who left their homes in 1948 and are common Palestinian symbols of support for the ‘right of return’ to their homeland. Thus keys are synonymous with notions of citizenship and cities. Arjun Appadurai and James Holston suggest that citizenship concerns ‘more than rights to participate in politics. It also includes other kinds of rights in the public sphere, namely, civil, socioeconomic, and cultural’. ²

¹ See P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge: Polity, (1990); and P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, (1984).

² A. Appadurai and J. Holston, *Cities and Citizenship*, page 14, Duke University Press, (1999).

In Nerine Martini's *Social Scaffold*, the keys are made of fine porcelain clay by the diverse group from Blacktown and have no function anymore; they are like ghost keys. And by changing the material (from metal to porcelain) the meaning of the object is changed. Their functionality is lost; they can no longer open doors but now bear witness to a collective interaction imbued with personal meanings and memories, opening doors of a different kind. Suspended by plain string in the overall architecture of the split bamboo scaffold, the keys take on a corporeal quality, of figures hanging from the scaffold, 'hanging by a thread,' reinforcing the idea of a very precarious condition. The relationship to the body partly reflects the process of making, in which participants made comparisons between the look of a key and the look of the individual maker, establishing a gendered perception of the object. The makers of this artwork uncannily became its first audience.

Both porcelain and bamboo are utilised in Martini's sculptures as delicate and perilous materials (even though large-scale bamboo as an architectural and building material is used widely across Asia for its strength, quickness of growth and environmental sustainability). The material dialogue across the new sculptures continues in the small sandbags, that not only give physical support to the vertical sculptures, but carry with them the language of floods, catastrophic weather and warfare, each event invested heavily with notions of the precariousness of human life and the land. Like the keys and the bamboo scaffolding, the sandbags are also too small to be functional in any real sense. Instead the sculptures relate more to the human body in scale, and recall Giacometti's standing figures that reflected the human condition as it passed through the horrors of the twentieth century. In Nerine's structures, small amounts of thin, delicate string are used to bind the bamboo together, reinforcing the instability of the sculpture and its wider connotation with precarious conditions in the real world. Paradoxically the string does not bolster the sculptures, rather it is their undoing. Some of the maquettes are also bound with red string at the joints, drawing a further comparison with blood and the human body. Similar in original meaning to Bourdieu's use of *habitus* is *hexis* that may refer to health, knowledge or character. In Nerine's work, we see the *hexis*: the idiosyncratic (the personal) combining with the systematic (the social). 'It is the mediating link between individuals' subjective worlds and the cultural world into which they are born and which they share with others'.³



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Nerine Martini
Social Scaffold, 2017
Bamboo, porcelain, string, hessian sandbags
Dimensions variable

Scaffolding is used here literally and metaphorically as a temporary structure, to give a support structure to a new life, and the keys are moments in time. Somewhat hidden from view are the stories behind each key, the back stories to the lived lives of the participants and the shared process of making the work. Instead, the artist, in agreement with the participants has created additional works: a series of black and white photographs, *Holding the Key*, made in collaboration with the photographer, Paula Broom, and a sound piece featuring the voices of the participants. The photographs focus intensely on the hands of the participants, which are also the hands of the makers of the Social Scaffold work, and serve as reminders of the precarious situations of the individuals and the symbolism of the fragile porcelain keys made by them. This was a project that was wholly connected.



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Nerine Martini
Holding the Key (Olivia), 2017
Giclee print on 100% cotton rag paper
19.7 x 34.9 cm
Edition 1/8
(unframed)



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Nerine Martini
Holding the Key (Olivia II), 2017
Giclee print on 100% cotton rag paper
19.7 x 34.9 cm
Edition 1/8
(unframed)



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Nerine Martini
Holding the Key (Vina), 2017
Giclee print on 100% cotton rag
paper 19.7 x 34.9 cm
Edition 1/8
(unframed)



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Nerine Martini
Holding the Key (Vina II), 2017
Giclee print on 100% cotton rag
paper 19.7 x 34.9 cm
Edition 1/8
(unframed)

Nerine Martini has produced public sculptures for the last decade, but has wanted to move on to working directly with people to articulate their stories and make connections at a human level. The process can be intangible, as opposed to public art's tangible methods and outcomes, but social art practice builds on the concept of 'new forms for life,' where the form of the work is the social gathering or assembly of people. 'Form can be conceived of as abstract idea, yet it will manifest itself as the concrete (in)formation of an embodied and material shape', suggests the cultural theorist, Sven Lütticken.¹ Social art practice raises the question, how can an artist be of value? And how can the work not be about the subject? For the artist, embedded within this practice is the quest to actually make a difference, to have an effect at the local level. Nerine asks, 'how can I make an impact in my community?' and cites artists working on large-scale projects such as Olafur Eliasson and Ai Weiwei, who with the support of large cultural institutions and corresponding media networks, are able to create massive-scale art projects involving thousands of non-artists. Commenting on social engaged practice, Nato Thompson has said, 'Ai Weiwei and other big name artists introduced people to a certain kind of political production, that is, when you talk about talking to a mass scale... Whereas I do think the stuff that's tougher is the stuff that's local and I do think that's something to read into the work.'² Nerine Martini's practice makes connections across her modes of production, and brings people together, constituting a community, that really brings about a change to people's lives. A real world form that reflects Arjun Appadurai's concept of the microutopia,³ a time and a place where artists have taken on the task to re-imagine the communities that are feared lost.

Essay by Paul Howard
Sydney, 2017

1 S. Lütticken, Concrete Abstractions: Notes on Form, www.onlineopen.org/concrete-abstractation, accessed December 4, 2017.
2 N. Thompson, On Politics and the State of Social Practice Art, interview with Harg Vartanian, <https://hyperallergic.com/407599/curator-nato-thompson-on-politics-and-the-state-of-social-practice-art/> accessed December 4, 2017.
3 See Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011, Creative Time Books, New York (2012).