Julie Dowling is one of Australia’s leading contemporary artists. This exhibition is a selection of some of the portraits that make up her oeuvre. They tell stories about family, community and nation. Painted in her unique social realist style, Dowling’s portraits have the formal qualities of sixties pop art and of surrealism, of icon painting and the art of Black Madonnas. The paintings also incorporate graphic elements from a range of popular art forms. Truly hybrid in their composition and style, these portraits reflect many of the characteristics of the postmodern age.

Dowling’s pictures present forceful political and social commentary expressed through stories that have previously been hidden. Through combining materials from public archives, oral histories and family memorabilia, sometimes combined with fantasy and masquerade, Dowling reconfigures the genre of portraiture, producing her own distinctive art.

The artist’s Badimaya ancestry and her upbringing in the Roman Catholic Church work together to produce paintings in which the life of Indigenous communities and the history of Christianity in Western Australia are brought into a powerful juxtaposition. Freedom fighters and the saints compete for space in her work. Her paintings repeatedly express themes of suffering and transcendence, grace and compassion. The surfaces of Dowling’s pictures are remarkable for their rendering of detail and for their unusual reflective qualities. She is a fine colourist who dazzles the spectator with the luminous quality of her compositions. Dowling also entertains the spectator with humour and satire.

Family photographs play a role in many of her paintings but she equally takes from the greats of the history of art, powerfully inventing compositions that unsettle the viewer as she speaks with authority about the past and the present in contemporary Australia.

Jeanette Hoorn, guest curator