The Kate Challis RAKA Award commemorates Kate Challis's support for indigenous cultural activities. Challis, the late wife of eminent art and cultural historian, Professor Emeritus Bernard Smith, was known in her youth as Ruth Adeney (RAKA is an acronym for the Ruth Adeney Koori Award). The $25,000 prize is awarded in a five-yearly cycle to works in the fields of creative prose, drama, the visual arts, script-writing and poetry. This exhibition presents the work of six artists from around Australia who are shortlisted in the 2008 award category, the visual arts.

Pauline Sunfly Nangala is a second generation artist from Wirrimanu (Balgo) in central Australia. Nangala is the daughter of renowned artists Murtiyarru Sunfly Tjampitjin and Bai Bai Napangardi, and her paintings vividly convey the spiritual resonance of her father’s traditional country known as Liltjin, located near the vast salt lake of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay) in the Tanami Desert. The reductive and dynamic imagery of Nangala's paintings conveys the fluency with which she extends the iconography passed down to her to express her own connection to country and family.

Gali Yalkarriwuy Gurruwiwi from Elcho Island in north-east Arnhem Land is a senior custodian for the spiritual and religious Morning Star poles, or Banumbirr. Concepts at the core of Yolngu cosmology, such as the cycle from birth to death and the interconnectedness of the spirit and the living realms, are communicated through the Banumbirr’s vertical eucalyptus trunk embellished with feathers, hand-spun string and painted ochre designs. Banumbirr are performative objects that play an important role in mortuary ceremonies; they represent the journey of the spirit as it passes from this world into the next.

Christian Bumbbarra Thompson is a Bidjara man of the Kunja nation in south-west Queensland. Thompson investigates the complexity of cultural and personal representation through his photographic series titled Australian graffiti. Comprising peculiar self-portraits where the artist wears a headpiece made from Australian native flowers, the works draw attention to the use of the signs and symbols of Aboriginal culture in the construction of a uniquely ‘Australian’ iconography.
Samantha Hobson was born in Lockhart River on the east coast of the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. Her abstract paintings mirror the frequent chaos of everyday life in Lockhart River, but also echo forms in the natural world, evoking stormy nightscapes, big seas and the organic processes of nature. Hobson’s gestural paintings demonstrate her love of paint’s plastic qualities; its ability to be dripped, spattered and applied wet-on-wet in slippery washes. In Hobson’s paintings, courageous disclosures about social distress sit side-by-side with depictions of the abundant beauty of her homeland.

A Badtjala woman from Fraser Island, Queensland, Fiona Foley typically uses symbols and signifiers in her art to dissect established discourses of visual language. Produced in the style of anthropological portraits, the series of photographs titled HHH (Hedonistic Honkey Haters) refers to the Ku Klux Klan and its institutionalised racism. The HHH is a secret society formed in 1965 in response to the KKK, and, like the KKK, their members wear costumes that identify their allegiance but mask their identity. These powerful portraits draw uncompromising and uncomfortable attention to difficult histories of racism, violence and oppression.

Lisa Michl Ko-manggén is a Kokoberrin woman whose traditional country lies along the lower west coast of the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. Michl’s paintings comprise stylised motifs and fields of dots and lines that represent cultural activities such as gathering bush food and collecting material to make ceremonial body adornments. These luminous paintings reflect Michl’s contemporary engagement with long-established traditions, and her deeply-felt respect for the spiritually sustaining relationships with country that have been formed over generations.