The Kate Challis RAKA Award commemorates Kate Challis's support for Indigenous cultural activities. Challis, the late wife of eminent art and cultural historian, the late Professor Emeritus Bernard Smith, was known in her youth as Ruth Adeney (RAKA is an acronym for the Ruth Adeney Koori Award). Managed by the university's Australian Centre, the prize is awarded in a five-year cycle to a single work in the fields of creative prose, drama, visual arts, script-writing and poetry. This exhibition presents artworks made in the last five years by the nine artists from around Australia who are shortlisted in the 2013 award category, visual arts.

Throughout the distinct geographical zones of contemporary Indigenous art practice, custom and innovation coalesce. Many artists revitalise long-held artistic traditions through painting and sculpture which refer to other forms of material culture. Regina Pilawuk Wilson, a Ngan'gikurrungurr woman from the community of Peppimenarti in the Daly River region of the Northern Territory, is an accomplished weaver who adapts the wefts and threads of her fibrework processes as the subject of her paintings. Yolngu artist Garawan Wanambi, from the East Arnhem Land community of Gangan, adorns larrakitj, the hollow log, with the figure of the pointed stick after which he was named, as well as with the geometric designs of the Marrangu clan. For Alick Tipoti, a member of the Argan and Wakaid clans of Badu (Mulgrave) Island in the Torres Strait, the acknowledgement of his ancestry is as important as contemporary revival of his culture.

With different aims, artists Timothy Cook and Daniel Boyd challenge audiences to embrace thoroughly new ways of seeing. Cook, from the community of Milikapiti on Melville Island, conveys his world view through a series of evocative, celestial paintings about the sacred Tiwi ceremony, Kulama. His work belongs to the tradition in Indigenous art of affirming one's place and culture through repetition. Sydney-based Boyd references cultural images as well as colonial documentation and collecting practices, and obfuscates both their form and meaning with a veil of reflective dots. Boyd's dot is a multivalent device. On one level it stands for an artificial lens through which the viewer processes images of 'traditional' Indigenous cultures.
The various belief systems that underpin social and cultural life in Indigenous communities throughout Australia, often referred to by the term 'Dreaming', find extraordinarily diverse expression. From separate communities in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjarra (APY) Lands in the north-west corner of South Australia, two Pitjantjatjara artists from different generations take unique approaches to the representation of their Tjukurpa (Dreaming). Teresa Baker learned to paint under the guidance of the late Jimmy Baker, a pioneer of the APY Lands painting movement. Baker defines sites and trajectories of the Tjukurpa handed down to her. She employs a rhythmic visual language that evokes the storytelling tradition which gave rise to the contemporary painting movement.

Hector Burton, a senior law man from the community of Amata, has recently initiated a major series of paintings in which the figure of the tree represents the resilience of his people’s culture, and also serves to conceal his belief systems. Taking a radical stand, Burton asserts that sacred stories must not be shared with outsiders.

The late Kunmarnanya Mitchell, a Ngaarnyatjarra elder from Warakurna at the edge of the Gibson Desert, painted his traditional lands and ancestral narratives by knitting together numerous rectilinear fields with cadenced colour and dotted line-work. The iconography of his painting is, to outsiders, cryptic, but the detail reflects an intimate knowledge of the topographical features of the country.

In contrast to the detail and vibrant colour seen in the paintings of artists of the APY Lands and the Western Desert, Mabel Juli represents her key Ngarranggarni (Dreaming) using the spare, understated style characteristic of art of the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. Juli, a senior Gija artist who lives in the settlement of Warmun, sees painting as a vehicle for the transmission of her rich cultural knowledge to younger generations of Gija people.