

Challenging our history

AN EXHIBITION at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in South Yarra gives free reign to seven artists' versions of Australian history.

From a wall of photographs of women prisoners with shaven heads taken in the 1920s, to a garden bed that mixes exotic and native plants, the exhibition is designed to challenge the European interpretation of Australia.

It also includes a narrative by Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett, who grew up in the suburbs thinking he was white, and only realising as a teenager that the racist taunts of his friends were directed at him.

Bennett's work also touches on the resistance experienced by the continent's early explorers while trying to contact the Aborigines, when their lives depended on learning survival skills.

Anne Graham's mug shots of female prisoners, originally taken in a Darwinian attempt to put together a profile of the criminal mind, show shaven heads and scowling, defiant looks.

St Kilda artist John Wolseley's work uses the Botanic Gardens to allow viewers to look at the plants and trees that he

has spent most of his life scouring the continent to record.

"John's work is particularly interesting because you've got a sextant there, something you can fiddle with and you can enjoy and it's about geology and botany, it's about the intersection of contemporary art and personal histories, and that's what's

good about this show — it provides a new view of history," said the centre's administrator, Jennifer Colbert.

Artist Lauren Berkowitz, from South Yarra, has planted a garden where natives stand alongside pansies, a representation of the imposition of European culture on an unsympathetic land.



Juxtaposition: local artist Lauren Berkowitz is one of seven artists whose work portrays a different view of Australian history. Picture: VALERIU CAMPAN