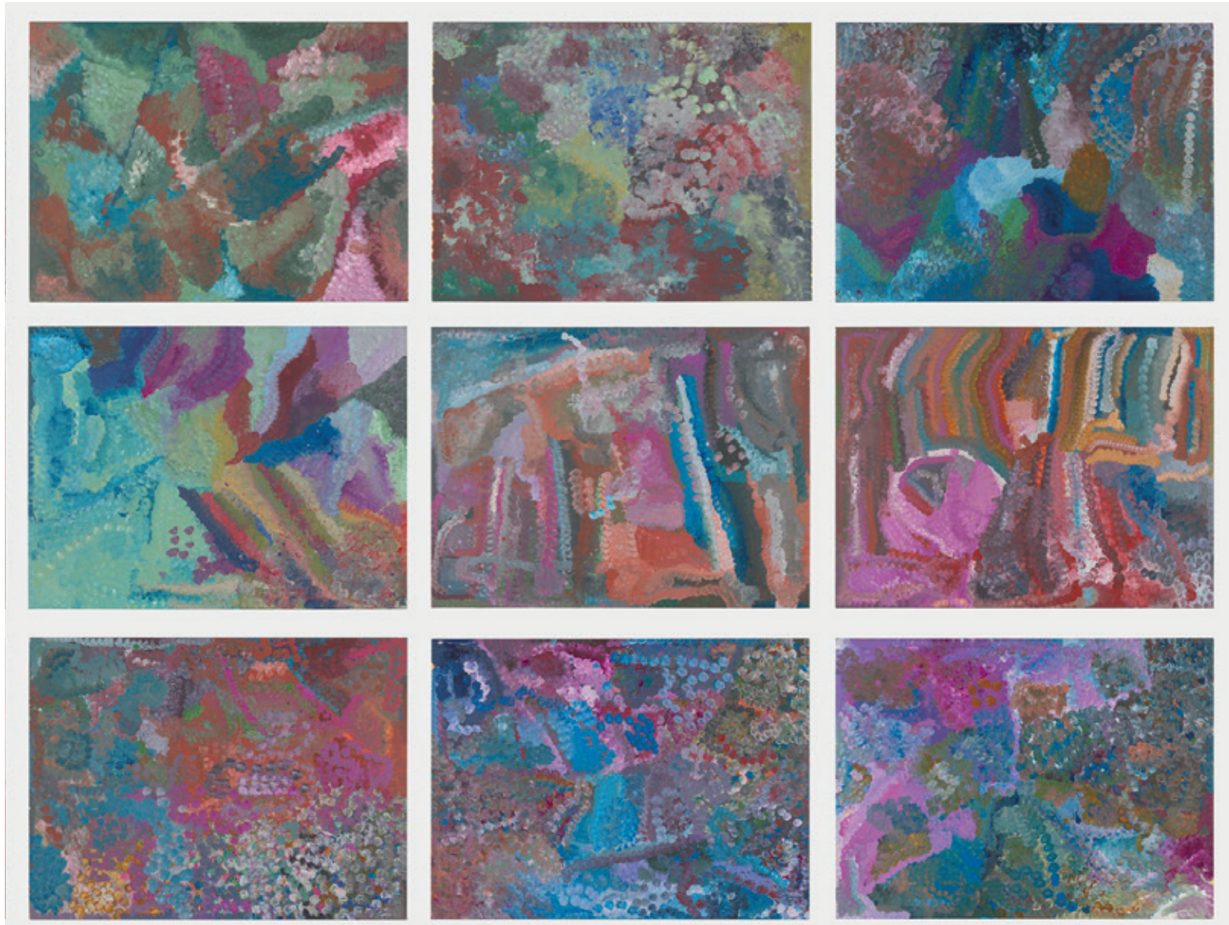
American artist Anna Mary Robertson Moses (1860-1961), circa '50s.

Photography: Archive Photos/Getty Images (opener); Emily Kam Kngwarray/Copyright Agency – licensed by DACS 2025.



The Alhalker suite 1993, by Emily Kam Kngwarray. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

COMING OF AGE

words SARAH MACDONALD

As a number of highly lauded artists prove, age is no barrier to creating art that resonates. Meet the late-blooming women whose vigorous creative output and command of their craft have garnered critical acclaim

French artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010).

Photography: Porter Gifford/Getty Images.

SYDNEY'S OLD COLONIAL JAIL IN DARLINGHURST, now the National Art School (NAS), was once a brutal place where bushrangers and murderers were chained, caged and hung. Yet after 35 years of prosecuting criminals, Virginia Lydiard sought freedom within its walls; retiring from the law at 75, she sought a liberation of creativity that only ageing could bring.

The former jail is hallowed turf for generations of artists who have gone on to great success. Charles Blackman, Max Dupain, Brett Whiteley, Margaret Olley, John Olsen and Cressida Campbell attended when young. Now a fifth of the students are mature aged and finally feel free to embrace their artistic talents.

"You walk through the doors into a different world. It's so peaceful, so lovely despite the horrific history," says Lydiard. "And I just loved the mix of ages – not once did I feel like the older, invisible woman."

Since graduating at age 79, Lydiard has had two exhibitions and is now working on a special commission to paint Sydney's most famous face – the grinning Luna Park entrance – for the Environment and Planning Law Association's annual conference delegate bags.

Lydiard walks in the footsteps and paints in the brushstrokes of many late-blooming artists. She's particularly inspired by Emily Kam Kngwarray, who began to paint ceremonial work on batik in her sixties as an elder of the Anmatyerr people. In her mid-seventies, she embraced acrylics and canvas and, in her eighties, heralded an Aboriginal artistic revolution. Kngwarray's meteoric rise to fame made her perhaps the most celebrated and sought-after Australian artist of her time. She posthumously represented Australia at the 1997 Venice Biennale and her work has been hung all over the world. A major exhibition, Emily Kam Kngwarray, is currently on at the Tate Modern in London, created in collaboration with the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) – the first large-scale presentation of Kngwarray's work ever held in Europe.

Late-blooming artists inspire joy and represent hope. Their success is a beacon that shows it's never too late to discover creativity or for your creativity to be discovered. New York interior designer-turned-fashion icon Iris Apfel studied art in her younger years and restored fabric and furniture in the White House for nine presidents in her middle years. But her signature style of flamboyant colour, chunky jewellery and big glasses gained global attention much later in life. Born nearly four decades before Barbie, she inspired her own doll in her 96th year and, at 97, signed with IMG Models, the world's biggest modelling agency. Apfel's style was particularly playful because it refused to play by the rules of what being 'elderly' looks like.

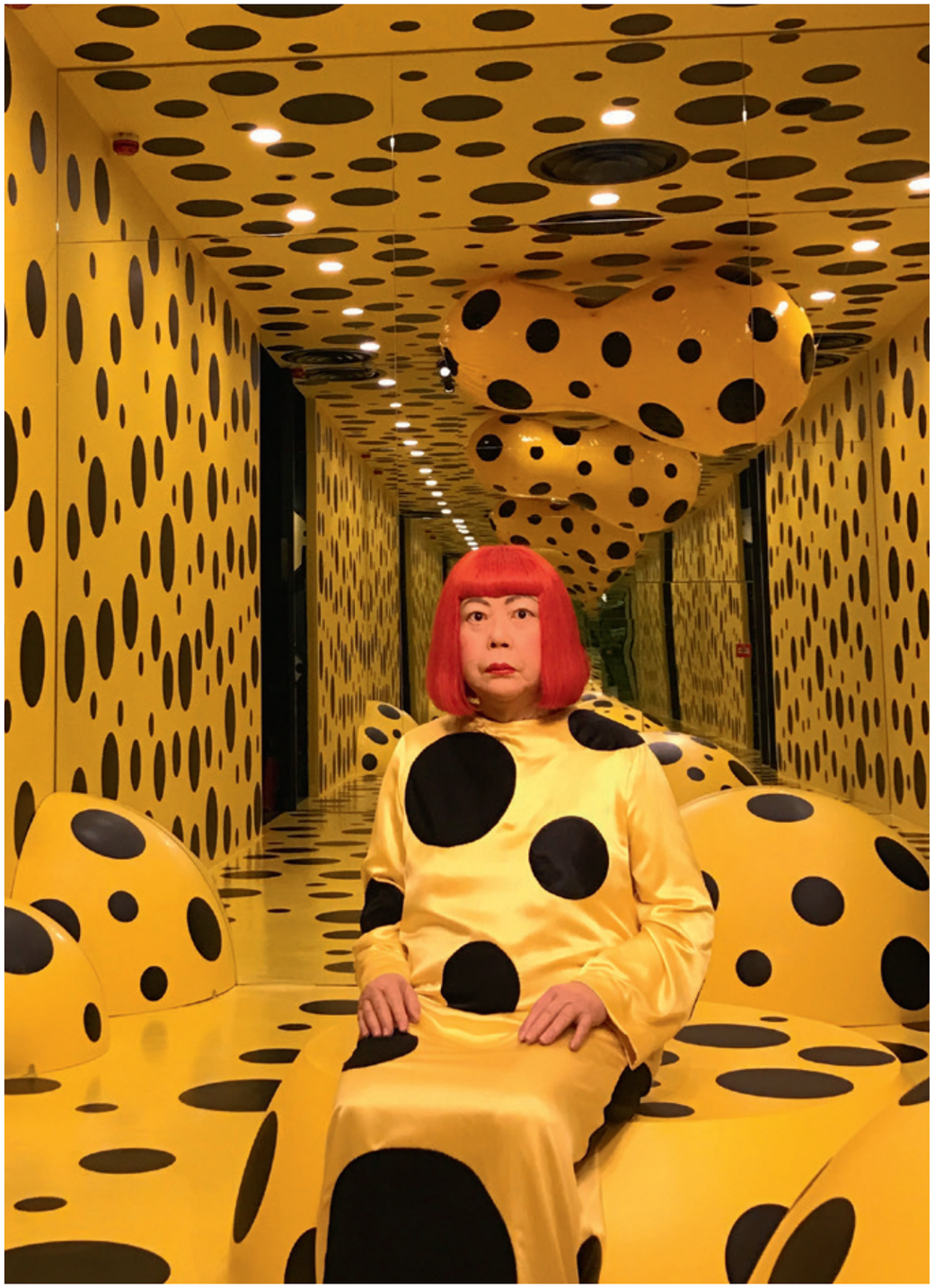
For those who grew up in the golden age of television, old age looked like Granny Moses of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. With a severe grey bun, spectacles and a quavering voice, she sat on a rocking chair holding her knitting or a shotgun. The show was one of the most watched in American television history, but few knew Granny was an homage to the most famous of art's late bloomers. The real Grandma Moses – Anna Mary Robertson Moses, who grew up on a farm in upstate New York – embroidered and dabbled in hobby art throughout her life as a domestic helper, farmhand and mother. At 78, she began painting simple depictions of rural life, fair days and national holidays. A keen New York City collector, Louis J. Caldor, spied her work, grabbed a bargain and her first solo exhibition of paintings (and preserves) followed, opening in October 1940 at Galerie St. Etienne in New York City, a month after her eightieth birthday. Grandma Moses became an artistic and national treasure whose work was widely dispersed in stamps, Hallmark cards and fabrics and was hung on walls from the Met to The White House. She died in 1961, aged, 101 shortly before The Beverly Hillbillies discovered black gold and moved to LA.

"When you are older you are also freer – you are not limited by constraints, by expectations; you're less inhibited, less self-critical. I let it flow"
– Virginia Lydiard

While the lookalike Grandma Moses rode atop a jalopy car, artist Carmen Herrera compared her late fame to waiting for a bus that eventually came. The Cuban-born, Manhattan-based artist became the Next Big Thing just before she reached 90. Her sculptures and brilliantly coloured, minimal and geometric abstractions became part of the permanent collections of the Smithsonian, Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Hirshhorn and Tate Modern.

The year she turned 94, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama became the world's highest-selling contemporary artist of 2023, according to the Hiscox Artist Top 100 report. While recognised as an influence for Andy Warhol and the development of pop art, and a figure of New York City's avant-garde art scene of the '60s, her work was perhaps too ahead of its time. A revived interest in her art occurred in the '80s after a number of solo international exhibitions, while the rise of social media in the 2000s helped further drive her popularity. Kusama's sculptures of dotty pumpkins, her flowers and light installations and the placing of herself in her art in red wigs and matching outfits have been embraced by a generation that adores her immersive multi-sensorial work and her openness about mental health struggles. Kusama's recent NGV exhibition, attended by more than 570,000 visitors, set the record for the gallery's highest-attended ticketed exhibition.

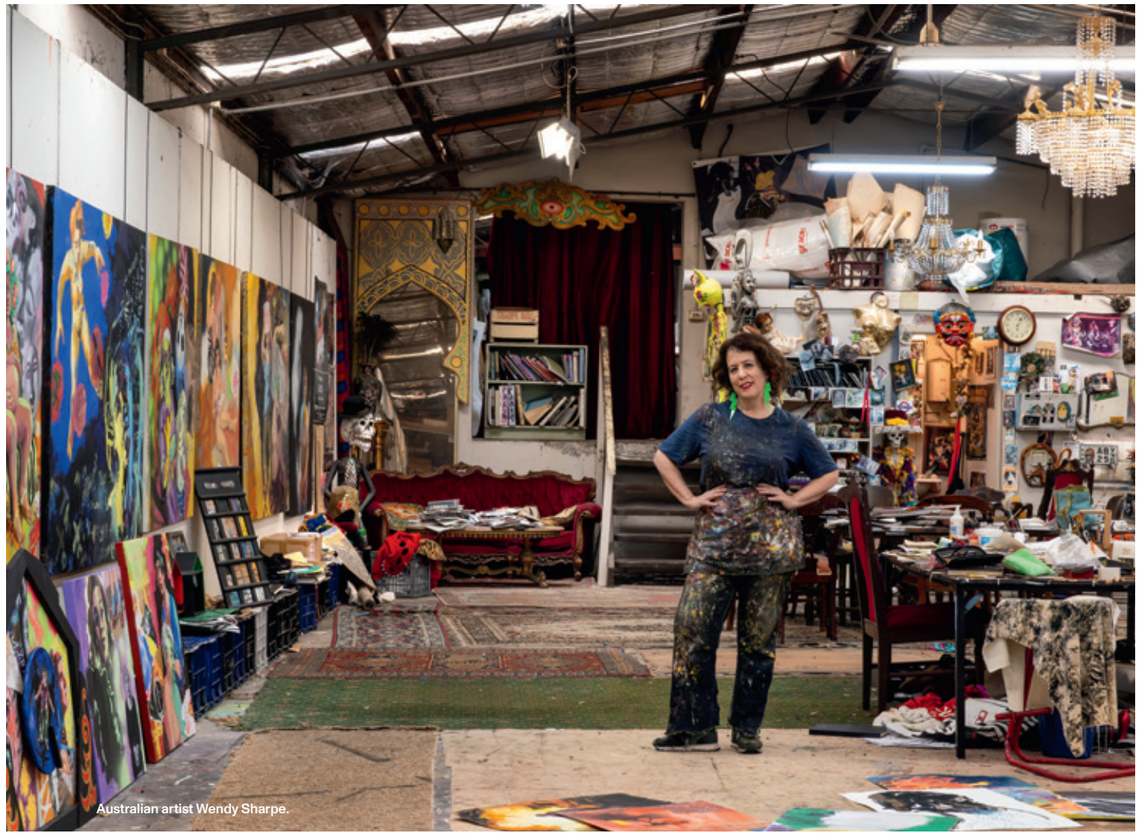
One of the most shared Instagram shots of Sydney's summer before last was Louise Bourgeois' giant sculpture of a bronze spider with an abdomen of marble eggs. *Maman* (1999), part of her exhibition Louise Bourgeois: Has the Day Invaded the Night or Has the Night Invaded the Day?, loomed nine metres above the entrance to the Art Gallery of NSW; a predator, a protector and an homage to mighty mothers, it attracted a new generation to fly into the web of Bourgeois' art. Modern, powerful and cool, *Maman* was created by Bourgeois at age 88 and represented a



Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama.

Photography: VCG/Getty Images (Kusama); Desiree Navarro/Getty Images (Apfel).

Iris Apfel (1921-2024).



Australian artist Wendy Sharpe.

pivotal point in the artist's career: launching her as a world-famous superstar of modern and contemporary art. Of course, Bourgeois, Kusama and other late-blooming artists don't rise out of nowhere. The head of undergraduate studies at the NAS, Lorraine Kypiotis, says a lot of older artists who are discovered as overnight sensations started when young, but then are finally recognised when they've mastered their craft.

Acclaimed Australian artist Wendy Sharpe is not a late bloomer. At 25, she burst onto the scene in 1986 as joint-winner of the Sulman Prize for her triptych *Black Sun – Morning to Night*, a "metaphorical journey from youth to old age and wisdom". Now in her sixties, she's relishing the mastery that age and wisdom brings. Taking a break from making huge mono prints in a Sydney studio, Sharpe is riding a sweet spot – a coming together of knowledge, years of work and practice and the continual creativity of being challenged while still being physically able.

She loves watching women who lived other lives come to embrace their creative minds as they age. "There's a liberation that comes from later years. Women say to themselves, if not now, when? I'm doing the same thing myself."

Sharpe has encouraged friends to go to art school and wants even more celebration of older artists as well as an encouragement of the young. "I think of the fantastic women in their [older age], brilliant people working right now: Elisabeth Cummings, who's 91, Suzanne Archer [80] and Ann Thomson [92] are all painting as we speak and are all fabulous." Public prosecutor turned artist Lydiard says Elisabeth Cummings is her hero. Cummings painted most of her life but came to prominence in later years. "I just love her work, and I have a self-portrait by her above my desk which inspires me and encourages me to keep going," says Lydiard.

Margaret Olley is still an inspiration for so many in still life and beyond. One of Australia's most significant and widely recognised figures in art, Olley continued to paint, despite deteriorating health in her final years, and had completed a new body of work for an exhibition when she died in 2011.

Lydiard says age has some advantages for art – because art mines our experience and late-age artists have experienced so much.

"I've still got so much to express. When you are older you are also freer – you are not limited by constraints, by expectations; you're less inhibited, less self-critical. I let it flow."

Sharpe agrees that art is ageless and the bravery of expression that comes with age cannot be denied. Kypiotis says this is why older students are particularly welcome at the National Art School. "Art is not a career, it's a vocation," she says. "You don't retire from art. You do it till the day you die."

In the art world, it's never too late for success. But perhaps true success comes not in sales, or Instagram hits, but in the embracing of any creativity before it's too late. Sharpe has a friend who occasionally asks a great question – "If you could do anything in the whole wide world, what would you do?" – and says it always clarifies her vision.

"What you don't want to happen is to be sitting there in your nineties and see something and think, *I always wanted to do that, and I didn't.* If you can do it, you should." HB

Photography: John Fotiadis (Sharpe); Patrick Riviere/Getty Images (Olley).

Australian artist Margaret Olley (1923-2011) in her studio in Sydney's Paddington, November 2005.