The Australian War Memorial operates the Official War Art Scheme, the longest running and largest commissioning program of art in Australia. The Scheme makes a rich contribution to Australian art, while playing a significant role in Australia’s interpretation of its wartime history. The term “official war artist” is used to describe artists who have been expressly employed by either the Australian War Memorial or the Army Military History Section (or its antecedents). The Memorial also commissions artists outside the Scheme to produce specific works of art.

The Official War Art Scheme was initiated during the First World War and was based on similar models in Britain and Canada. The Scheme was reactivated during the Second World War, and for the Korean and Vietnam wars. Typically, the Scheme has involved an artist being embedded with Australian military forces in conflicts or peacekeeping missions, for the purpose of creating a personal and informed representation of that conflict. From the outset, the Scheme has covered both the frantic and hellish experience of soldiers in battle as well as more routine subject matter, such as service people at rest or industry in wartime.

Official war artists have always balanced an objective intention with an exploration of a visual and sensory dimension of war that is often absent in written histories or other forms of reportage. The works produced by official war artists display a highly diverse range of imagery and perceptions of conflict, and more recently of peacekeeping. Artists deployed to peacekeeping operations are referred to as official artists. What has also contributed to the diversity of this imagery has been the selection of skilled and established career artists, who work with different media and have a variety of interests, styles, and approaches to art.

With the deployment of Australian troops to East Timor in 1999, the largest overseas commitment since the Vietnam War, the Australian War Memorial saw an opportunity to revive the Official War Art Scheme and commissioned artists to record all aspects of Australia’s involvement in the INTERFET peacekeeping operations. Three official artists have been sent to East Timor: Rick Amor and Wendy Sharpe in 1999, and Jon Cattapan in 2008.

In 2009 the Memorial commissioned eX de Medici to observe the peacekeeping activities of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Australian troops have been deployed in the Solomon Islands since the introduction of RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) in 2003. Other commissions have seen artists deployed to Afghanistan and other regions in the Middle East.

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**Special Exhibition**

*Perspectives: Jon Cattapan and eX de Medici* displays the creative personal vision and artistic style of two well known Australian artists. These two diverse contemporary artists are interpreting the same subject matter: peacekeeping. Both artists make a point of engaging with their audience, creating something that is visibly beautiful.
Jon Cattapan has been interested in night scenes and the nature of nocturnal light since the mid-1980s. The Timor–Leste night vision works continue this fascination; they arose from his experience of viewing the landscape and soldiers through night vision goggles:

“When you go out at night – and it’s very still and it’s very dark because there’s very little street lighting – there is this sense of the unexpected … this sort of slight anticipation … Those night vision goggles … had that glowing green look which automatically says to you surveillance, military … covert, potential danger.”

Jon Cattapan

When wearing night vision goggles, your peripheral field is cut off. This creates a sense of unease and suspicion that something is just about to happen just outside your field of vision. How has Cattapan portrayed this “covert, potential danger” in this triptych? Does the work give you the impression of tentativeness or unfamiliarity? Why or why not? What elements of the painting support your argument?

Note that Cattapan has overlaid his work with a contour map of the Maliana area, just a few kilometres from the border with Indonesia. Contour maps are shown at daily briefings and used by ADF patrols. Without this layer, the painting could be portraying soldiers anywhere, in almost any peacekeeping location. Is this an effective way to convey a sense of place? Give reasons for your interpretation.

Cattapan also overlays his night vision canvases with dots and lines. These represent codes, maps, or systems of unknown data. Why do you think Cattapan has done this? How does this triptych connect with Cattapan’s theme of depicting people interacting and communicating with each other?

Art tells us a story without words; how has Cattapan depicted peacekeeping in Timor–Leste?
eX de Medici is a contemporary Australian artist and a tattooist. She was deployed to the Solomon Islands during the wettest weeks of the year, making it impossible for her to complete paintings, or out-of-doors sketches. Instead, she took hundreds of photos across Guadalcanal. Back in her Canberra studio, de Medici worked from photographs by viewing them on a computer screen. This watercolour incorporates images from approximately 25 photographs to create one work of art, known as a composite. Painting from photographs is not de Medici’s preferred style. Consider this process and identify the advantages and disadvantages of this method. Does a composite work give a different interpretation to themes and issues? Discuss.

De Medici’s series is designed to tell stories of the past and present: the effects of colonisation; the wreckage left over from the Second World War; and the foreign investment in the islands’ natural resources. Look carefully at this painting and identify what is happening. What key messages do you think the artist is attempting to convey in this painting? How has de Medici used art elements, for example, shape, colour, texture and form, to communicate these themes?

The painting incorporates a number of conflicting images: can you identify some of these? For example, the natural versus the man-made, history versus the present. What is the artist trying to communicate by incorporating such things?

Why has eX de Medici placed the Australian peacekeepers within this scene? And what do they look like they are doing? What is complex about this peacekeeping operation and how has the artist conveyed this complexity?

De Medici uses symbols in her work to convey meaning; for example, the red and yellow flowers in the righthand corner of the painting symbolise toxicity. Identify some other symbols within the piece and explain their possible meaning.