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'Hi Vis Women' wanted, no vest required



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Mel Thomas is a frontline domestic violence prevention expert who knows about family violence and assault from experience.

She grew up around violence, then in her late teens was assaulted by a stranger.

Thomas learnt the value of being able to protect herself, and has since earned a black belt in Korean martial arts.

“A guy I was dating took me to a martial arts class and I was more impressed by the women doing the class than by the guy,” Thomas says.

She runs the KYUP! Project (pronounced key-up! and named after a martial arts power shout) which she began in 2013 with a scholarship with the Layne Beachley Foundation to empower girls and women to champion their safety and wellbeing in their communities.

With more than 20 years of specialist self-defence training in Hapkido Korean martial arts, this year Thomas is looking to recruit 50 female black belt artists across the country to teach women how to defend themselves.

“I want to make self-defence like surf life-saving; you don't need to save a life to be a lifesaver, and you don't need a black belt to defend yourself, but I'd like everyone to know how to,” Thomas said.

Thomas is now the subject of a painting by award-winning artist Kathrin Longhurst, who is looking to recruit other “kick-ass” women as potential sitters for a show at Flinders Lane Gallery in Melbourne next year.

Longhurst, who won the 2021 Archibald Packing Room Prize with her portrait of singer Kate Ceberano, says the show Hi Vis Women, which will open for International Women's Day 2024 and women's history month, wants to paint women with bright backdrops to increase the visibility of women in the arts.

“My entire painting career has been about painting powerful stories about women – it is about changing the discourse about how we portray women in the media, arts and culture, where for too long the woman – preferably nude – has been seen as the side gig to the male,” Longhurst said.

The artwork will be unveiled on Wednesday at an event run by Collabor8Women, a networking group where the two women met. It was formed post-pandemic to get professional women out of their homes and working bubbles and to support each other.

Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore will be the guest speaker at Wednesday's lunch at Bistro Rex, where attendees ranging from entrepreneurs such as Michelle Grand-Milkovic (love.fish, Barangaroo) and Pauline Nguyen (Red Lantern, Darlinghurst) mix with other women from all walks of life.



Artist Kathrin Longhurst with her painting featuring martial arts expert Mel Thomas at Bistro Rex in Darlinghurst. Credit:Janie Barrett