

BARRANGAL DYARA (SKIN AND BONES)



A collaborative temporary artwork that records and recognises multiple Aboriginal perspectives on Australian history

The gypsum shields are contemporary, temporal artefacts, evoking loss, but also symbolising the artist's and collaborators' ongoing, living connection with history and place.

Image: Anna Kucera.

Quick facts

Project type:
Public art project

Location:
Yurong Point, Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney, NSW

Aboriginal language landscape group:
Gadi (Gadigal/Gadigalleon)

Project time frame:
17 September to 3 October 2016

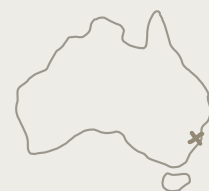
Client:
Kaldor Public Art Projects

Project scale:
Large-scale art project:
2 ha

Project team:
Artist
Jonathan Jones

Aboriginal Advisory Board
Dr Christine Evans, Jason Glanville, Professor Michael McDaniel, Uncle Charles Madden, Hetti Perkins

Curatorial assistance
Emily McDaniel
Kaldor Projects Team



barrangal dyara (skin and bones) was a large-scale temporary public artwork installed in the Royal Botanic Garden in Sydney over a period of two and a half weeks in September and October 2016. The result of a collaborative effort involving a large group of contributors, this project was highly symbolic in its ambition to recognise, rewrite and record multiple Aboriginal perspectives of Australian history.

Key outcomes

Healthy Country

This project was a catalyst for bringing people together to share stories, participate in ceremonies, and promote a greater awareness and understanding of First Nations' perspectives, experiences, knowledges and deep connections with Country.

Healthy community

The project supported Aboriginal communities' connection to their cultural identity and values, providing a place in which many Aboriginal people were given an opportunity to speak and where they felt safe, respected, valued and supported. This supports pride in culture and heritage, and contributes to the positive health and wellbeing of First Nations people and communities.

Cultural competency

The project made visible the richness of stories and histories of Aboriginal culture and connections to this place through multiple means of engagement, both directly on the site and through an extensive program of talks, videos, research and writing. This provided an educational opportunity for the project team, client and public.

Updating recorded history: few people were aware of the existence of the Garden Palace, or the multiple stories and consequences of the fire that destroyed the building and its contents

Image: Garden Palace, Royal Botanic Garden Sydney, c. 1879;
collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.



Spatial implications / tips for designers

Projects that tell the stories of Aboriginal culture should be led by Aboriginal curators, practitioners and consultants so Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP) can be appropriately respected.

Stories of place should inform the concept. Often there are multiple stories and layers of history to uncover on a site.

Consider multiple ways of experiencing the work: how it will be experienced up close or from afar, or by touch, sound or sight.

Consider how people of different ages and cultural backgrounds might experience the work and what they might need to better understand it.

Multisensory, audio and digital experiences and documentation can enable people to engage with a project beyond its site and time frame.

Jonathan Jones, a member of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi nations of south-east Australia, was commissioned to create the artwork by Kaldor Public Art Projects in 2014. The commission was in response to an initiative called Your Very Good Idea – an open call-out to Australian artists for public art ideas.

The project occupied a large area in the Royal Botanic Garden and incorporated 15,000 white gypsum shields and a native kangaroo grassland (*Themeda triandra* species). It also included a soundscape of Aboriginal languages and a program of workshops, talks and events that were held over the course of the project at the site and at other public institutions in Sydney.

The project presented Aboriginal place making as a temporal approach that highlights living cultural knowledge and practices. It offered an opportunity to consider both the tangible and intangible aspects of a project, the built and the living, and acknowledged these as having an equally important and powerful role in identifying and celebrating a living culture and community.

Updating recorded history

barrangal dyara means 'skin and bones' in the local Sydney Language. The title of the project reflects the malnourished version of Australian history taught today, where few people (either in Australia or internationally) are aware of Aboriginal history and, in particular, most lack an Aboriginal perspective of history.

Moreover, few people are aware of the existence of the Garden Palace that once stood on Yurong Point in the Royal Botanic Garden in Sydney. In 1882 the Garden Palace burnt to the ground in suspicious circumstances, razing convict records, government archives, as well as thousands of Aboriginal objects and ancestral remains.

Jones's work grew initially from a deeply personal experience of researching his own Aboriginal ancestry, and the immense sense of loss he felt in discovering that virtually all of his nation's artefacts had been completely destroyed in the Garden Palace fire. The name of the work also refers to its ambition to honour the ancestral remains of those who never received a proper burial. For Jones, the work is also about 'peeling the layers of skin back off this site and revealing these bones in the landscape'.



Aerial view of Kaldor Public Art Project 32 – barrangal dyara (skin and bones). The artwork consisted of thousands of bleached white shields, made specially for the project, marking out the extensive 250 m by 150 m footprint where the palace originally stood in the Royal Botanic Garden. The shields were made from gypsum, often used in south-east Aboriginal mourning ceremonies.

Image: Peter Greig.

And [the Garden Palace] was filled with things that were collected from us. Things that we hold close to our hearts. And Jonathan's project is about remembering those things. And what they mean to Aboriginal people and the remembrance of Aboriginal landscape. Because no matter what gets built on our galambans [homelands], the essence of our ancestors and ourselves still walking around today, is encased in the Country. It can't go anywhere, no matter what was built on it.

... We lived in Eden here. And things altered dramatically and these buildings may look like wonderful, historical things but they almost destroyed us. The clearing of the land, the taking of the species, the eating of everything that was balanced so well. That whole thing altered our landscape ...

—Aunty Julie Freeman, words from Spotfire Symposium SF1, used on barrangal dyara Optus App, 2016



In 1822 the Garden Palace, that once stood on Yurong Point in the Royal Botanic Garden in Sydney, burnt to the ground in suspicious circumstances, razing convict records, government archives, as well as thousands of Aboriginal objects and ancestral remains. *barrangal dyara* (skin and bones) was Jones's response to the immense loss felt due to the destruction of these culturally significant items in the fire, and represented an effort to commence a healing process and a celebration of survival of ongoing living culture despite the many traumatic events that have been endured.

Image: Lithograph, Burning of the Garden Palace, Sydney. Gibbs Shellard & Company 1822; collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.

Symbols of culture

The artwork consisted of thousands of bleached white shields, made specially for the project, marking out the extensive 250 m by 150 m footprint where the palace originally stood. The shields were made from gypsum, often used in south-east Aboriginal mourning ceremonies. They were based on 4 typical designs from Aboriginal nations of the south-east. Records of historical engravings depict the use of shields for ceremony rather than exclusively for warfare. However, the shields for the artwork were devoid of any unique markings, symbolising the erasure of cultural complexities when Aboriginal artefacts were destroyed in the Garden Palace fire.

Scattered on the ground like the rubble and ash that was left after the fire, they evoked a sense of loss and mourning. This reference to fire had a dual purpose – referring not only to the fire that destroyed the palace and the countless Aboriginal artefacts stored there, but also symbolising regeneration.

Fire is essential to Aboriginal cultural practice. Burning for plants and animals, stories and places is an important way of looking after Country and people – the campfire for warmth, light, cooking and sharing stories, smoking ceremonies for welcoming and cleansing, burning for maintenance of camping areas, clearing pathways and for tending resources. In a contemporary context, cultural fire is about leadership, empowerment and cultural practice. It creates a pathway for recognition and to rebuild cultural frameworks that exist in the landscape, when clans, families and larger language groups act together to look after Country.

—Oliver Costello, words from Spotfire Symposium SF1, used on *barrangal dyara* Optus App, 2016

Forming the heart of the artwork is a native meadow of kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra*). Located at what is known today as the Pioneer Memorial Garden, the grassland marks the original location of the Garden Palace's proud dome, which crowned the city for international visitors as they entered Sydney Harbour. Aboriginal agriculture in the south-east of Australia saw grasslands cultivated and harvested over generations, supporting many nations and diverse cultures. Seeds were transformed into flour to produce bread with grinding stones. Controlled fire was an important tool in the development of these grasslands, and here it acts as a dual metaphor – it was responsible for the destruction of the palace and the objects held inside, but serves as a symbol of rebirth due to the large number of Australian plants, such as kangaroo grass, that thrive through regular burning. Today, Aboriginal Australians are considered the very first bread-making people with the discovery of a grinding stone dated over 30,000 years old at Cuddie Springs near Brewarrina in northern New South Wales.

—Jonathan Jones, *barrangal dyara* (skin and bones) 17.09–03.10.16, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Project 32, <https://kaldorartprojects.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/project203220visitor20guide20final11.pdf>

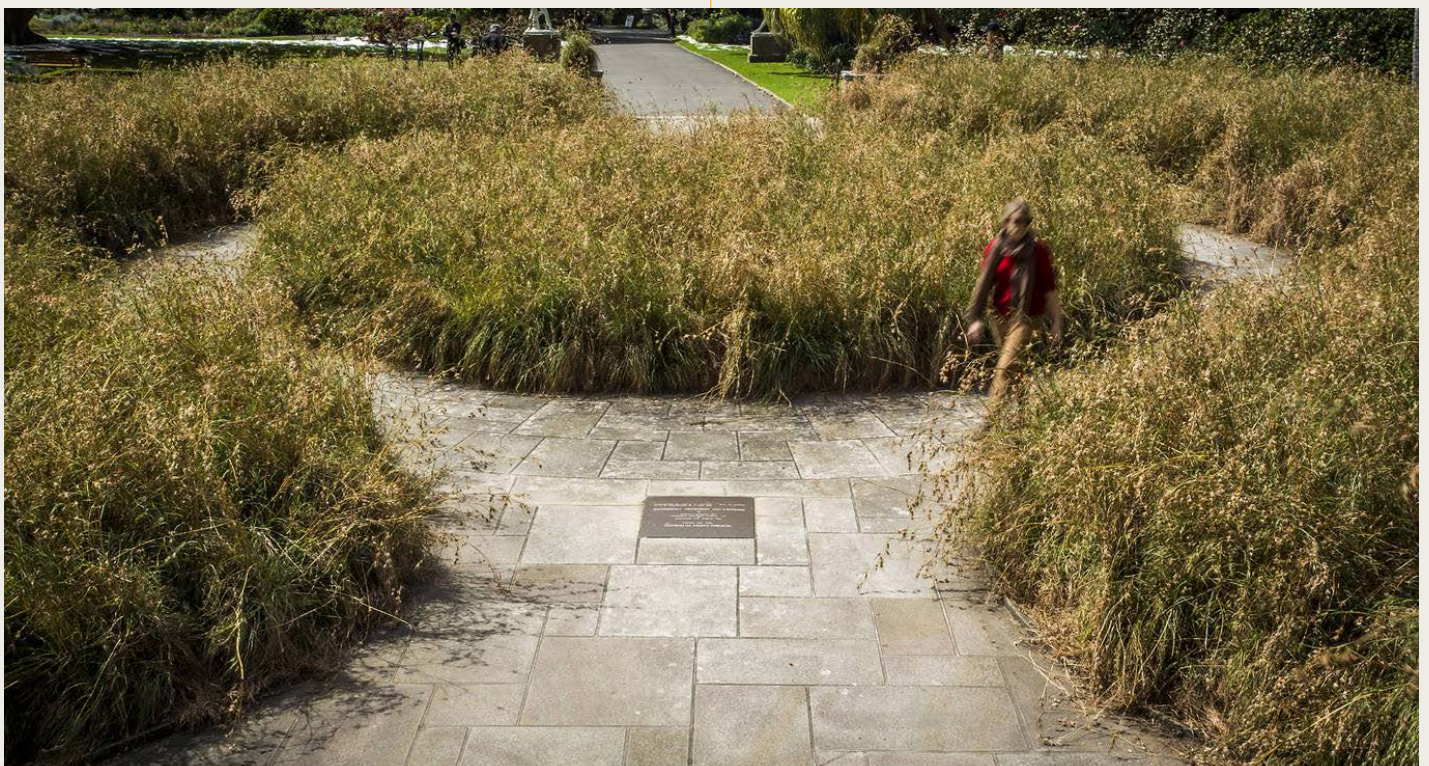
Restoring native grassland

At the centre of the installation, native kangaroo grass was planted over the Pioneer Memorial Garden, a formal garden of sandstone paths that marks the location where the Garden Palace's great dome once stood. The grassland is a reference to Aboriginal agriculture where native grasslands are maintained through burning – where fire is a way of regenerating life.

This is a quietly defiant act, picturesque in its quality, but deeply symbolic as a rebuttal to the commonly believed myth that Aboriginal people were agriculturally unsophisticated before Europeans arrived. Here, Jones draws attention to the fact that the early settlers recorded in their diaries evidence of Aboriginal populations cultivating vast areas of land, constructing irrigation systems and traps, and harvesting, storing and milling grain crops – as documented in *Dark Emu* (Bruce Pascoe 2014), *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Bill Gammage 2011) and *Australia and the Origins of Agriculture* (Rupert Gerritsen 2008).

Native kangaroo grass planted over the Pioneer Memorial Garden. After the period of installation, the grasses were donated to the Botanic Garden and were planted in areas within the gardens and the Domain.

Image: Anna Kucera.



Singing is really effective ... it's easier to learn how to do a song in a language that might be foreign language or a revitalisation language ... and you can, by doing that you're embodying the word of your ancestors; you're also doing something that is performative, something that's very social. And it's got all these wellbeing results as well, which is really powerful.

—Clint Bracknell, words from Spotfire Symposium SF1, used on barrangal dyara Optus App, 2016

Making language heard

The grassland was enlivened by an 8-channel soundtrack of 8 Aboriginal languages, bringing about a greater public awareness of Aboriginal languages and how they sound. Aboriginal languages are intended to be spoken so it is important they are heard – to create a greater understanding and awareness of them.

To prepare for the artwork, Jones sought the assistance of the community to resurrect and use Aboriginal languages, some of which had been forbidden, others lost. The soundtrack included the Sydney Language, Gamilaraay, Gumbaynggirr, Gunditjmarra, Ngarrindjeri, Paakantji, Wiradjuri and Woiwurrung languages.

Programmed events, including invigilators who were guides for the work, were the most important part of the project for the artist. They provided opportunities for people to hear stories of Country, on Country. First Nations invigilators were recruited with the assistance of Solid Ground, an initiative established by Carriageworks and Blacktown Arts Centre to provide education, training and employment.

Image: Peter Greig

A program of associated events

In conjunction with the artwork was a series of performances, talks and workshops; a historic photography exhibition; a publication about the project and history of the site; and a series of educational symposiums about Aboriginal language, knowledge and culture. This diverse program brought together several leading public and educational institutions as collaborators, including the Art Gallery of NSW, the State Library of NSW, the Australian Museum, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney Living Museums, the University of Sydney, the University of Technology Sydney, and the University of New South Wales.

Documentation of the process and events associated with the project was an important part of the work. This included photography and video recordings of the work and events, an app to engage further with the work, a book about the project that records the process, research and academic writing relating to the work, and a series of videos and audio recordings that remain accessible on the Kaldor Public Art Projects website as an ongoing publicly accessible resource.



Engaging with a broad cross-section of the community

Throughout the process of research, preparation and realisation of the project, Jones collaborated with a broad group of contributors of varied generations and backgrounds. He drew together views and knowledge from many sources, including other artists, academics, cultural and environmental researchers, writers, and Aboriginal Elders and knowledge-holders from a number of different regions around Australia. At the start of the process he sought the permission of the local and regionally related Aboriginal communities, and gained their support. His project aimed to provide multiple perspectives from various Aboriginal points of view, and sought to generate public discussion on topics such as language revival, habitat restoration, the loss of cultural objects, and the importance of ongoing cultural practice.

Bringing with him his own perspective on Aboriginal issues, as a member of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi nations to the west and north-west of Sydney, Jones sought to engage with the broader current local Aboriginal community of Sydney, and in particular wanted to show his respect for the Gadigal Nation on which the work would sit. In doing this he engaged with Gadigal Elders, Uncle Charles Madden and Uncle Allen Madden, to listen to and record their stories as part of the work.

The ongoing life of materials

After the period of installation in the Royal Botanic Garden, half of the shields were gifted to the Art Gallery of NSW (currently in storage) and the other half (which were more damaged or worn) were processed through a gypsum recycler. The kangaroo grasses were donated to the Botanic Garden and were planted in areas within the gardens and the Domain.

Recognising living culture

Representing such a broad cross-section of the Aboriginal community in a highly public and well-publicised forum created an opportunity to educate the broader public on the multiplicity of perspectives, views, histories, knowledges and living cultures of Aboriginal peoples in Australia.

The project has created a greater awareness of the richness and tragic history of loss and destruction of Aboriginal culture that has been experienced. It has forged bonds and built greater understanding – through the process of working together for those directly involved in the project – and provided opportunities for the broader public to connect and better understand the perspectives of Aboriginal people.

Building greater awareness of contemporary Aboriginal cultural practices

Jonathan Jones's selection, through an open ideas competition run by an internationally renowned and recognised public art organisation, has contributed to his recognition, nationally and internationally, as a significant contemporary Australian artist.

The project also supported and promoted other Aboriginal designers, professionals, researchers, craftspeople and artists through the diverse platforms and outputs created as a part of the work, including the publication, videos and lecture series. This approach has enabled a broad and ongoing reach for the promotion and dissemination of Aboriginal knowledge, skills, perspectives and voices.

Placemaking beyond the physical site

This project presented a new way of considering Aboriginal placemaking – beyond just a singular physical manifestation. The project's diverse program of public events engaged on multiple levels with a broad range of ages. Its successful process of collaboration demonstrated a multidisciplinary and multifaceted approach to art practice and cultural output. This approach also illustrates how the other aspects of a work – that document the process, research and events around it – can provide an ongoing resource and source of inspiration for others.

The programmed events, including the active invigilators who were guides for the work, were the most important part of the project. Having thousands of people on Gadigal Country, hearing stories of that place, under the trees, was really the heart and soul of the project.

Non-Aboriginal Australians more and more want meaningful connections with Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal people, to our credit, have never stopped trying to put out our hand in friendship. This project enabled that to happen.

There are too many programs to name and too many favourites, but one that stands out in my memory was on the last day when Uncle Bruce Pascoe talked to hundreds of eager audience members about Aboriginal agriculture. For this talk to happen in the Botanical Garden, a space filled with exotic plants, on the site of the Garden Palace which was central to the colonial construction of the Australian identity, with a meadow of kangaroo grass in the background, was very special. This was the strength of the project, bringing together things to tell the truth about our Country.

—Jonathan Jones, artist

Additional credits

Language soundscape contributors – collaborators for the language soundscape included families who speak the Sydney languages; for Gamilaraay and Gumbaynggirr: Joel Wright, Vicki Couzens, and the Victorian Aboriginal Commission; for Ngarrindjeri: Aunty Verna Koolmatrie, and the Raukkan Ngarrindjeri people; for Paakantji: Warlpa Thompson, Kayleen Kerwin, William Mitchell, AJ Williams, and the Paakantji Language circles; for Wiradjuri: Dr Uncle Stan Grant Senior AM, Geoff Andersons, Lionel Lovett, Donna Payne, Skye Harris, Lyretta Gilby, Ron Wardrop and the children of Parkes Public School, Parkes East Public School, Middleton Public School, Parkes High School, and Holy Family Primary School (Kieran Baker, Lara Bennett, Kade Crist, Levi Edwards, Nicayden Greenwood, Caitlin Herft, Rebecca Kearney, Bayden Maran, Chelsea McGarrity, Ellynia Redfern, Trudy Richardson, Michael Riley, Samantha Riley, Kyah Turnbull, Ella Ward); for Woiwurrung: Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin.

Community Elders and knowledge-holders also contributed to the catalogue, symposia, lunchtime talks, panel discussions (UTS and UNSW), and artist demonstrations – Professor Larissa Behrendt, Clint Bracknell, Michael Brand, Kaleena Briggs, Ronald Briggs, Clothilde Bullen, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Carol Cooper, Oliver Costello, Brenda L Croft, Dr Peter Cuneo, Catherine De Lorenzo, Jason De Santolo, Aaron Ellis, Wesley Enoch, Dr Christine Evans, Aunty Julie Freeman, Professor Ross Gibson, Stephen Gilchrist, Dr Uncle Stan Grant Senior AM, Paul Irish, Michael Jarrett, Assoc Professor Grace Karskens, Dr Peter Kohane, Tasha Lamb, Dr Jeanine Leane, Shari Lett, Tim Low, Uncle Allen Madden, Uncle Charles Madden, Kim Mahood, Laura McBride, Professor Michael McDaniel, Kim McKay,

Peter McKenzie, Steven Miller, Kimberley Moulton, Keith Munro, Jacqui Newline, Bruce Pascoe, Hetti Perkins, Emma Pike, Cara Pinchbeck, Robynne Quiggin, Marilyn Russell, Greg Simms, Lucy Simpson, Nardi Simpson, Keith Smith, Russell Smith, Jeremy Steele, Thelma Thomas-Lesianawai, Kirsten Thorpe, Esme Timbery, Ann Toy, Aunty Joyce Tye, Julie Tye, Lorraine Tye, Pam Tye, Sue Tye, Dr Ilaria Vanni Accarigi, Gary Warner, Alison Whittaker, Dr Linda Young.

First Nations invigilators for this project were recruited with the assistance of Solid Ground, an initiative established by Carriageworks and Blacktown Arts Centre to provide education, training and employment.

Further resources

Audio and video recordings

Kaldor Public Art Projects, Project 32: Jonathan Jones, Episode 1: 'Gadigal Land'; Episode 2: 'The Garden Palace and The Fire'; Episode 3: 'Grasslands'; Episode 4: 'Shields'; Episode 5: 'Language' <https://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/project-32-jonathan-jones/#video>.

100 Climate Conversations, the Powerhouse, March 2022 – December 2023. Conversation 16: Bruce Pascoe, 'Nourishing Country' <https://100climateconversations.com/bruce-pascoe/>.

100 Climate Conversations, the Powerhouse, March 2022 – December 2023. Conversation 28: Victor Steffensen, 'The turning point' <https://100climateconversations.com/victor-steffensen/>.

Books and writing

Kaldor Public Art Projects (2016) *Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, Kaldor Public Art Projects, Thames & Hudson.

Gibson P (2016) 'Lighting spotfires under a palace of colonial power', *The Conversation*, 19 July 2016. <https://theconversation.com/lighting-spotfires-under-a-palace-of-colonial-power-62620>.

Kaldor Public Art Projects (no date) *Project summary, Jonathan Jones* webpage, Kaldor Public Art Projects website: <https://kaldorartprojects.org.au/projects/project-32-jonathan-jones/>.

Kaldor Public Art Projects (no date) *Project 32: Jonathan Jones* webpage, Kaldor Public Art Projects digital archive website, <https://archive.kaldorartprojects.org.au/index.php/Detail/objects/112>.

Pascoe B (2014) *Dark Emu*, Magabala Books.

Gammage B (2012) *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Allen & Unwin.

Gerritsen, R (2008) *Australia and the Origins of Agriculture*, Oxford.

Credits

Research and writing:

Isabelle Toland (Aileen Sage Architects)

In collaboration with:

Dillon Kombumerri (Government Architect NSW)