

PROJECT 32

Jonathan Jones

2016

barrangal dyara (skin and bones)
17 September – 3 October 2016
Royal Botanic Garden Sydney

Sydney's Forgotten Ancestor
17 September – 3 October 2016
Palm House, Royal Botanic Garden Sydney

BIOGRAPHY

Sydney-based Aboriginal artist Jonathan Jones, a member of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi nations of south-east Australia, works across a range of mediums, from printmaking and drawing to sculpture and film. He creates site-specific installations and interventions into space that use light, subtle shadow and the repetition of shape and materiality to explore Indigenous practices, relationships and ideas. Jones often works with everyday materials, such as fluorescent lights and blue tarpaulin, recycled and repurposed to explore relationships between community and the individual, the personal and public, historical and contemporary. He has worked on several major public art commissions, including the Commonwealth Parliament Offices in Sydney and Wagga Wagga Regional Airport.

FACTS

- At the heart of the project a meadow of native kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra*) was planted to recall the position of the Garden Palace's central dome.
- The installation was layered with soundscapes of eight Aboriginal languages – Gamilaraay, Gumbaynggirr, Gunditjmara, Ngarrindjeri, Paakantji, Wiradjuri and Woiwurrung.
- Jones received permission from community to develop shields based on four traditional designs from Aboriginal nations of the south-east.
- The shields were cast from gypsum, a material used by Aboriginal women across the south-east to create headdresses worn during mourning ceremonies.
- Jones worked with Cineart studios, Melbourne, to complete the 15,000 shields in just four months.
- The shields were installed over 9 days within the Gardens and nearby Shakespeare Place and Macquarie Street to define the Palace's original footprint.
- Following the project 3,000 shields were salvaged and donated to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The grass was donated to the Botanic Garden and planted at Mrs Macquarie's Chair.
- Sharing the story of the Garden Palace with Aboriginal communities and reflecting on the significance of the loss of cultural objects was essential to the project.

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2016, Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones presented *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, a vast sculptural installation stretching across 20,000 square metres of Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden. Jones had proposed the work two years earlier for Your Very Good Idea, a public call-out to Australian artists for a site-specific project in celebration of forty-five years of Kaldor projects.

barrangal dyara (skin and bones) traced the outline of the grand Garden Palace, where it originally stood on Macquarie Street, facing Sydney Harbour. The Garden Palace was purpose-built for the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition, the first world fair in the Southern Hemisphere. After the exhibition's close, the building held many of the colony's important records, along with countless Aboriginal artefacts and objects taken from the colonial frontier. On 22 September 1882, the Garden Palace went up in flames and all was lost.

barrangal dyara (skin and bones) was Jones's response to the loss of these cultural objects. He had come upon the story twenty years prior, on a visit to the Australian Museum. "When I first went looking for cultural material from where my family is from," Jones remembers, "I found out that much of this material...was destroyed in the Garden Palace fire of 1882. Ever since, I've been struck with the loss of our cultural material, what that loss means for our communities and how you can move forward as a culture when you can't readily point to your cultural heritage in museums".

The title, *barrangal dyara*, comes from the local Sydney Language—the project took place on Gadigal country with approval from the community—and is translated as "skin" and "bones". The installation featured 15,000 bleached-white gypsum shields, a material used in Aboriginal mourning ceremonies, to mark the extent of the building's footprint and echo the masses of rubble left after the fire. A native meadow of kangaroo grass formed the heart of the work, on the site of the Palace's original dome. Moving through the installation, visitors encountered eight different Aboriginal languages spoken across south-east Australia, through soundscapes created by Jones in collaboration with communities. *barrangal dyara* was open to the public for just over two weeks, and each day the site was activated through talks, performances, workshops and special events.

"The Garden Palace has become a symbol for the repercussions of forgetting", Jones said. "Aboriginal communities have often been the victims of Australia's ability to forget... I've also been struck with the way we as Aboriginal communities remember, and through this project I've begun to see Aboriginal communities as the nation's memory holders".

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SYDNEY'S FORGOTTEN ANCESTOR

As *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*) was centred on the traditional practice of oral storytelling, no images were displayed on the main project site in the Royal Botanic Garden Sydney. Visitors were instead encouraged to participate in conversations with the dedicated team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal invigilators, and reflect on the layered histories of the site.

To accompany the project, a selection of historic photographs was displayed in the nearby Palm House. Designed in 1876 by James Barnet, architect of the Garden Palace, this small greenhouse is a survivor of the devastating fire of 1882.

The photographic exhibition, *Sydney's Forgotten Ancestor*, included spectacular exterior and interior views of the Garden Palace, along with haunting images of the expansive rubble left in the wake of the fire.

Featured in the exhibition was the sole known photograph of the Ethnological Court, in which Indigenous artefacts were displayed as part of the Sydney International Exhibition. These cultural objects which had been acquired, often in violent circumstances, from across south-east Australia and the Pacific, were tragically lost in the Garden Palace fire.

SPOT FIRE SYMPOSIA

The ferocious fire which destroyed the Garden Palace in 1882 ignited spot fires across Sydney, reaching as far as Woolloomooloo and Balmain. In the lead-up to *barrangal dyara* (*skin and bones*), a series of three events – the Spot Fire Symposia – was held to discuss themes that emerged from the ashes of the historic fire. The series was developed in collaboration with Ross Gibson, Centenary Professor of Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra, and took place at three major cultural institutions with profound historic connections to the Sydney International Exhibition – the State Library of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Australian Museum.

Spot Fire Symposium 1: Landscape and language
Saturday 7 May
Library of New South Wales

Spot Fire Symposium 2: Spectacle, manifestation, performance
Saturday 16 July
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Spot Fire Symposium 3: Loss and resilience
Saturday 6 August
Australian Museum

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Photo: Pedro Greig



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