

Reclaiming what was lost in the fire: a review of Jonathan Jones' *Barrangal Dyara*

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The site-specific work titled *Barrangal Dyara (Skin and Bones)* was exhibited in the Royal Botanical Gardens in Sydney from the 17th of September to the 3rd of October 2016. The artist behind the display, Sydney based Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi man Jonathan Jones (born 1987) is a young contemporary Aboriginal artist who specialises in site-specific works, which discuss the historical uses of locations around Australia. The name *Barrangal Dyara* means skin and bones in the local Gadigal language, and the work took place on Country with community approval from Gadigal elders Uncle Charles Madden and Uncle Allen Madden.

Barrangal Dyara commented on the colonial and anthropological history of Australia, as it paid memorial to and reinvoked discussion about the Garden Palace. The Garden Palace was a 244-meter-long, 19th Century timber building that extended, from where the State Library currently stands, to the Conservatorium of Music. The building was constructed in 1879, and burned down on September 22nd, 1882 from suspected arson, although the official cause was never confirmed.

The Garden Palace was built for the 1879 International Exhibition, which aimed to display a reinvigorated British colony, that desired to separate itself from its convict past. The Garden Palace held approximately 500-1000 Aboriginal objects collected on the colonial frontier (mostly made of wood and bark), all of which were lost in the fire, and therefore were never returned to their rightful owners. Jones responded to the deep loss felt by the destruction of the culturally significant items and attempted to start a healing process through his artwork.

Barrangal Dyara comprised 15 000 gypsum shields over 20 000 square metre area, which had formed the footprint of the Garden Palace, that could only be seen from above (See Figure 1 and 2). Jones made several significant choices with his artistic practice, using gypsum, a material that is traditionally used for mourning, and requires fire to strengthen the



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shields. The fire in the process of the creation of the shields symbolically reversed the destruction that fire had on the Garden Palace. The use of fire in Jones' process created and strengthened the artwork, rather than destroyed. The shields were in four different shapes, taking inspiration from traditional shield designs from South East Indigenous nations, where the objects that were lost were taken from. Through the recognition of these nations in the work, Jones provided an act of resistance to the theft of the objects. Jones' actions continued what Reynolds describes as a form of 'resistance that runs through the politics of post contact Aboriginal society' (1990, p. 21). Jones also challenged the complex history of the area, through a circle of native Kangaroo grass, which still remains to this day, and was positioned at the heart of the exhibition. The majority of the plants that sit on the site of the Botanical Gardens are introduced species, unlike the native Kangaroo grass, which was the dominant grass of the area, pre-colonisation, and was cultivated and spread by the Gadigal people. Through his material choices, Jones spoke to the 'materiality of Australian history' which contains 'stories held in stone and sand, ochre and ink, lore and local knowledge' (Griffiths 2018, pg. 291).

The Garden Palace was a symbol of the strength and superiority of the British colonisers and represented the version of Australian history that started with the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. As Moreton-Robinson explains, this version of history 'privileges the exploits of white Australians by representing them as the people who made this country what it is today' (2003, pg. 24). Through rebuilding the footprint of the Garden Palace, Jones highlighted the way this version of Australian history denies the extremely long precursor of Aboriginal history, which was never acknowledged at the time the building existed. Jones commented that the historical fire was almost 'a form of cultural burn' which helped to erase the symbolism of this version of Australian history from the landscape (Kaldor Art Projects 2016, para. 7).

Barrangal Dyara also commented on the forcible removal and anthropological collection of significant Aboriginal cultural items from all around the South East of Australia. Moreton-Robinson discusses that the early process of colonisation was focused around 'dispossession of the original owners of the land and the denial of their rights' (2003, pg. 23). Through the collection of these objects, and their subsequent loss in the fire, these objects left Aboriginal Australians dispossessed of significant items, and meant that they could never be returned to where they were stolen from. Gibson highlights the damage that such object collections have had where he states; 'Aboriginal people and their culture have been appropriated, possessed and dispossessed through the housing of their artefacts and art works in institutions' (2012, pg. 204).

By tackling complex issues such as dispossession, theft of cultural items and differing interpretations of Australian history in understated ways, Jones made his message comprehensible to an unknowledgeable new generation of the public. *Barrangal Dyara* tackled what Stanner referred to as 'The Great Australian Silence', caused by the missing representations and accounts of Australian Indigenous peoples' place in the collective Australian history (1969, pg. 27). Jones raised the forgotten history of the Garden Palace and

the objects it contained in a way that unsuspecting members of the public, who may have been simply taking a walk in the park, were able to access and process. Along with the site-specific installation, Aboriginal language presentations, performances, talks, special events and workshops held by the State Library of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Australian Museum, allowed for the space to be active, enlivened and reclaimed.

Jones attempted to create a statement about the shared Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal history of the Royal Botanical Gardens, and comment on current cultural tensions. These current tensions are described by Griffiths as ‘a settler nation still struggling to come to terms with its deep Indigenous history’ (2018, p. 291), exemplified through current discussions around issues such as Invasion Day and Constitutional Recognition. The Garden Palace as a building had important significance to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. As Jones stated about *Barrangal Dyara*, ‘this massive building can be a wedge for better understanding of a whole bunch of histories that have just dropped off the radar’ (Kaldor Art Projects 2016, para. 8).

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