



Whispers Megan Cope

Sydney Opera House
2023 Teacher's Resources



Teacher's Notes

This teacher's note can be used to interpret Quandamooka artist Megan Cope's monumental public artwork, *Whispers*. In this resource, you will find interpretation text, an artist statement, a link to a behind the scenes video, conversation starters, activities and curriculum links.

Drawing inspiration from Tubowgule as a historic place of ceremony, gathering and celebration in Aboriginal Australia, Quandamooka artist Megan Cope transforms the Sydney Opera House. Using tens of thousands of *kinyingarra* (oyster in Jandai language) shells, Cope's installation, *Whispers*, expands the narrative of the Opera House through a First Nations lens, connecting it with land, sky, sea and Country.

Whispers

Megan Cope

On Tubowgule, now called Bennelong Point, Quandamooka artist Megan Cope introduces *Whispers*, a melding of First Nations history and environmental consciousness. With more than 85,000 oyster shells positioned across the Sydney Opera House precinct, the artist evokes the ancestral midden sites that were used on this site for Aboriginal celebrations and gatherings for thousands of years.

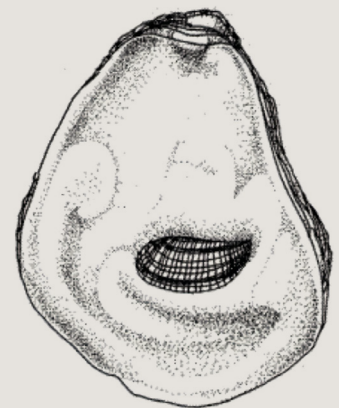
With oyster shells, Cope has reimagined the architectural framework of the Opera House itself. Two hundred timber *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba* poles - the phrase means "a place of oysters" in the Jandai language of the Quandamooka people - have transformed the Northern Broadwalk into a landscape of cultural history and community. These poles, covered with oysters, stand as symbols of ecological rebirth and ancestral homage, echoing the call of collective memory and Indigenous resilience. They connect to a 14m wall of shells that frame the eastern side of the building and emerge through the upper podium.

A singular artistic statement, *Whispers* beats with the spirit of community. Over the past year, more than 3000 volunteers have taken part in over 100 workshops in three key sites - the Opera House Forecourt, Addison Road Community Centre in Marrickville and the artist's studio in Brisbane - where they worked together to clean, polish, drill and thread thousands of shells by hand. Together, these volunteers created a rich tapestry of shared narratives and kinships, elevating the humble oyster shell into a symbol of a community, heritage and Country.

More information about this artwork is available on the QR code.

We invite you to immerse yourself in this captivating creation. Please do not touch the artwork.

Megan Cope's *Whispers* is proudly supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW Blockbusters Funding initiative.



Scan to
learn more
about
Whispers



Artist's Statement

“For the 50-year anniversary of the Sydney Opera House, I have created a series of propositional sculptures that connect to deep layers of time and the cultural history of this site to evoke discussion for potential futures for local Saltwater ways around Gadigal Country. These immersive sculptures will rest in three prominent locations that connect magnificent building with an expanded narrative that creates space to see Land, Sky and Sea Country through a First Nations lens.

All the works are informed by and trace six years of research into the history of and cultural relationships to *Kinyingarra*, from the vast reef constructions made

by our Indigenous ancestors to the early lime-burning industries to the potential extinction of oyster reefs and impact of climate change. In the process they ask questions about how art and culture can heal Saltwater Country as well as our current relationship with the environment.

In archaeological terms, a midden is a mound or deposit containing shells, animal bones and other refuse that indicates human settlement. In other words, it contains the site of Indigenous family feasts and gatherings built up across thousands of years.

The removal of these Aboriginal architectural forms, and the continued

mining operations and excavation of sacred sites, renders a landscape void of Indigenous culture and markers once used by our ancestors to navigate through Country.

This work provides a space to learn local histories and see Country through an Indigenous lens, It has also provided an opportunity for the community of Sydney to participate in the project through the evolution of the sculptures themselves.”

Megan Cope



Teacher's Notes

Conversation starters

- Can you imagine what Tubowgule (now called Bennelong Point) could have looked like before the Opera House was here? Share stories with your peers about what life might have been like for First Nations people – think about the land, sea, sky, people and Country.
- How do you think Megan Cope built the *Kinyingarra* poles and midden? What might have been easy, and challenging?
- Discuss the importance of improving and restoring our waterways and natural sites using First Nations and Western knowledges.

Activities

- Sketch the *Kinyingarra* poles and middens from a range of angles. Consider drawing the artwork with and without the Opera House in the background. How does this change your artwork? You might like to take photographs and use ProCreate or another digital drawing app to edit your images.
- Look closely at the patterns in the landscape, on the artworks themselves and on the Opera House – create a drawing of some of your favourites. How do they reflect each other? How are they different? Share your favourite patterns with your peers to create a collaborative artwork.
- On your drawings you might like to add interesting facts about the artworks, what the weather looked like that day, and how you have seen people interacting with the artworks.



Teacher's Notes

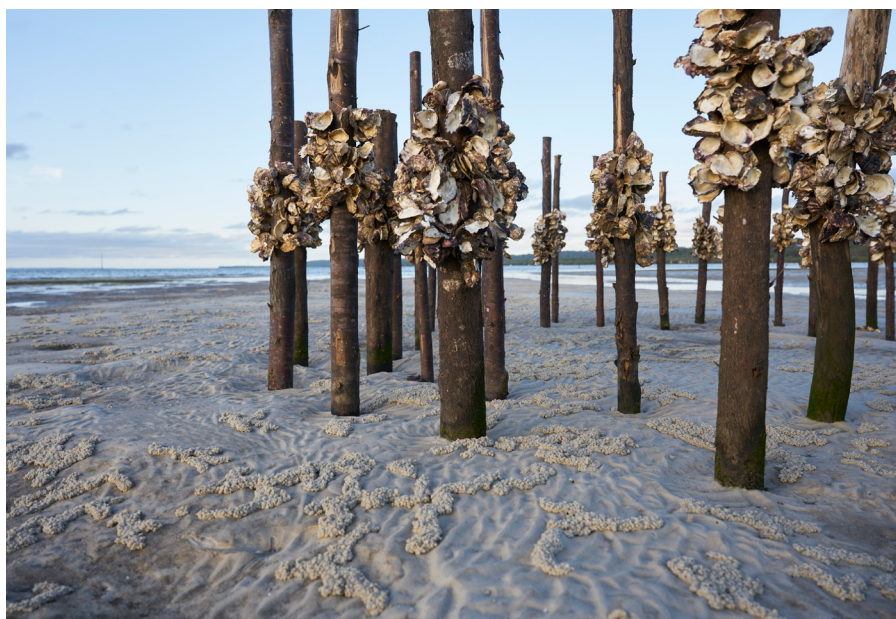
Links to curriculum

[Link to digital platform](#)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority supports students to further develop their knowledge of the world's oldest continuous living cultures. This priority encompasses the concepts of Country and Place, People, Culture and Identity.

Students are provided with opportunities to:

- Understand that contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities are strong, resilient, rich and diverse
 - Explore a range of experiences and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the links between identity, cultural expression, language and spirituality
 - Understand the relationships Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have with places and their interconnectedness with the environments in which they live
 - Deepen their knowledge and understanding of the importance of contributing to the ongoing development of a just and equitable society
- Learn about the continued roles played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.
 - When planning and programming content relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, teachers are encouraged to:
 - Involve local Aboriginal communities and/or appropriate knowledge holders in determining suitable resources, or to use Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander authored or endorsed publications
 - Read the [principles and protocols](#) relating to teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and the involvement of local Aboriginal communities.



Classroom Context and Curriculum Links

Aboriginal Studies Year 7-10, Stage 4-5

AST4-1 identifies the factors that contribute to an Aboriginal person's identity
AST4-2 outlines ways in which Aboriginal Peoples maintain identity
AST4-3 recognises the changing nature of Aboriginal cultures
AST4-4 outlines changes in Aboriginal cultural expression across time and location
AST4-5 identifies the importance of families and communities to Aboriginal Peoples
AST4-7 describes the roles and significance of Aboriginal Peoples locally, regionally, nationally and internationall
AST4-8 describes the range of relationships between Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples
AST5-1 describes the factors that contribute to an Aboriginal person's identity
AST5-2 explains ways in which Aboriginal Peoples maintain identity
AST5-3 describes the dynamic nature of Aboriginal cultures
AST5-4 explains adaptations in, and the changing nature of, Aboriginal cultural expression across time and location
AST5-5 explains the importance of families and communities to Aboriginal Peoples
AST5-7 assesses the significance of the roles of Aboriginal Peoples locally, regionally, nationally and internationally
AST5-8 analyses the range of relationships between Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples

Classroom Context and Curriculum Links

Science (Years 7-10)

- **SC4-15LW** explains how new biological evidence changes people's understanding of the world
- LW1 There are differences within and between groups of organisms; classification helps organise this diversity (ACSSU111)
 - explain how the features of some Australian plants and animals are adaptations for survival and reproduction in their environment
- **SC5-14LW** analyses interactions between components and processes within biological systems
- **SC5-15LW** explains how biological understanding has advanced through scientific discoveries, technological developments and the needs of society
- LW2 Conserving and maintaining the quality and sustainability of the environment requires scientific understanding of interactions within, the cycling of matter and the flow of energy through ecosystems.
 - assess ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' cultural practices and knowledge of the environment contribute to the conservation and management of sustainable ecosystems
- **SC4-17CW** explains how scientific understanding of, and discoveries about, the properties of elements, compounds and mixtures relate to their uses in everyday life
 - research how a knowledge of physical properties of natural materials is used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in everyday life, eg tools, weapons, utensils, shelter, housing or bush medicine



Classroom Context and Curriculum Links

Visual Arts (Years 7-10)

- Students can investigate the types of works produced by Aboriginal and Indigenous artists and some ideas, issues and concepts of traditional and contemporary significance in local, national and international settings.
- Students can investigate a variety of traditional and contemporary cooperative structures and collaborative practices from groups working in and across different locations.
- Students can explain how artists interpret the world in making artworks and how they seek to represent concepts through a range of styles and approaches
- 4.4 recognises and uses aspects of the world as a source of ideas, concepts and subject matter in the visual arts
- 4.7 explores aspects of practice in critical and historical interpretations of art
- 4.8 explores the function of and relationships between artist – artwork – world – audience
- 4.9 begins to acknowledge that art can be interpreted from different points of view
- 5.7 applies their understanding of aspects of practice to critical and historical interpretations of art
- 5.8 uses their understanding of the function of and relationship between artist – artwork – world – audience in critical and historical interpretations of art



Image credits

Forecourt scrub club (pg 5)

Image of Sydney Opera House
Forecourt Scrub Club, Sydney,
Australia. Photo: Katje Ford.

Studio images (Cover, pg 6)

Image of Megan Cope Studio, Addison
Road, Marrickville, Australia. Photo:
Zan Wimberley.

Work installed (pg 3,4)

Megan Cope, *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba*
(On Country), 2021-ongoing.
Documentation by Cian Saunders.
Image courtesy of the artist and Milani
Gallery, Meanjin / Brisbane.

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