

Changing the Conversation about Australia's Deep History

The Impact of the CABAH Art Series

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Acknowledgement

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH) team recognises that all our activities take place on Indigenous lands and waters. Australia is an exceptional country with a unique cultural heritage and biodiversity that has been under the care of Indigenous Australians for millennia. CABAH is thankful to those communities who partner with us in our research.

We acknowledge the Mudburra, Marlinja, Jingili, Elliott, Jawoyn and Larrakia communities, the Miriuwung and Gajerrong Traditional Owners, the Dingaal community, and the Kaiadilt, Lardil, Yangkaal and Gangalidda Traditional Owners who led and collaborated on the artworks in the Art Series. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication may contain images or names of people who have since passed away.

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Unseeded on display at Drill Hall Gallery, ANU. Image credit: Lizzie Crouch

Front cover image: Audience members interact with natural materials from Jiigurru during *Mangal Bungal*. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

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Forewords

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiveristy and Heritage (CABAH) was created to tell Australia's epic story. Covering 130,000 years, encompassing the last Ice Age and the settlement of the continent by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, this story of vast environmental and cultural transformation must be told by many voices. CABAH brought together researchers from the Earth and biological sciences, history, and archaeology, working in partnership with Indigenous communities to change the conversation about Australia's deep past and inform its present and future.

The Art Series was a major initiative within our education and engagement program that sought to involve the public in CABAH's research. The Art Series invited artists to respond to and interpret CABAH research for public audiences. The aim was not only to increase understanding of Australia's unique cultural and natural history, but to support "two-way learning", enabling dialogues that foregrounded Indigenous culture and knowledge. CABAH committed to evaluating the impact of the Art Series to understand the effects of this initiative and inform future endeavours.

This report shares the results of this evaluation, revealing the impact of the Art Series on both the public and the practitioners involved, including the researchers, artists, and cultural and community partners. Through the lenses of voices, contexts, perspectives and actions it shows how the artworks helped to tell a more inclusive, sophisticated and truthful account of Australia's deep history.

CABAH thanks all the participants in the Art Series, and the members of the public who gave their time to the evaluation. Through their generosity we learned how art helps people know more by feeling differently, builds collaboration between researchers and communities, supports Indigenous leadership, and enables difficult conversations. We hope the Art Series inspires future researchers to embrace the power of art to transform how knowledge is created and shared.

Professor Tim Cohen,

Director,

CABAH



Video still of researchers conducting fieldwork from *Where Lakes Once Had Water*. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

The partnership between Queensland Museum, CABAH and the Dingaal, Kaiadilt, Lardil, Yangkaal and Gangalidda communities demonstrates the vital role museums play as sites for knowledge co-creation. This publication, reporting on the outcomes of the CABAH Art Series, exemplifies that mission and provides a blueprint for future projects across our organisation and beyond.

Collaborations not only deepen our partnerships with First Nations communities and research institutions but also catalyse a profound Indigenisation of the museum, demonstrating the power of creative practice to bridge cultures and share knowledge. By telling their own stories, these communities help us all to grasp the scale of deep time and its ongoing relevance to contemporary issues.

The Cultural Reclamation *Mangal Bungal* represented was an authentic shift, challenging the institutional bias of centring historical artefacts by prioritising continuous, living culture. Through the generosity of lead artist Tanya Yoren and the Dingaal clan, a deep spiritual and embodied connection to Jiigurru Country was established in the heart of our museum, leading to a transformative experience for visitors and staff alike.

The reflective impact of *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin: Stone Fish Traps of the Wellesley Islands*, exhibited in the round, was brought home in a panel discussion that highlighted the ongoing transition of cultural knowledge as well as the challenges of continuity in the face of colonisation.

Both projects made the museum a safer and more welcoming place for First Nations staff and visitors, who felt encouraged to express their cultural knowledge and identity. While the sector as a whole must continue to improve cultural safety for all, the outcomes published here suggest we are moving in the right direction, paving the way for the museum sector to embrace inclusive, culturally responsive practice that values First Nations perspectives.

Dr Bianca Beetson AM

Executive Director, First Nations, Cultures and Histories

Queensland Museum



Introduction and Summary

The CABAH Art Series was a significant national experiment in arts-led research engagement. It was initiated by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH), a transdisciplinary research centre that ran from 2017 to 2025.

CABAH brought together researchers and communities through a network of institutional nodes and partners to explore the environmental and cultural changes that have shaped Australia over the past 130,000 years. CABAH designed an education and engagement program to extend the impact of its work beyond academia. A key initiative of this program was the CABAH Art Series, which commissioned artists to engage with CABAH research and produce original artworks that would contribute to the Centre's mission to "change the conversation" about Australia's deep history.

Envisaged as a process of co-creation rather than research communication, the Art Series supported artists to work closely with CABAH researchers to explore deep time through creative practice. Grounded in local knowledge, and often in longstanding research relationships with Indigenous communities, each artwork reflected the specific geographies and histories of the places where it was created. The four commissions developed between 2020 and 2024 used different media and a range of collaborative approaches to produce diverse audience experiences:

- ***Where Lakes Once Had Water*** (2020), by Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, was a large-scale audiovisual installation combining imagery of both laboratory work and fieldwork conducted by CABAH researchers with Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.
- ***Unseeded*** (2022), by UK Frederick, was a sculptural installation of 35 hand-blown glass boab nuts, some etched with photographic images, reflecting on the process of archaeological exploration experienced during a field survey in the Ningbing Range, Western Australia.
- ***Mangal Bungal: Clever Hands*** (2023), was a three-day cultural festival at Queensland Museum Kurilpa, Brisbane, led by the Dingaal community from Cape York, which brought the sacred Country of Jiigurru (Lizard Island) to life through performance, storytelling, immersive video and hands-on workshops.
- ***Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin: Stone Fish Traps of the Wellesley Islands*** (2024) was a 20-metre collaborative painting by ten artists from the Kaiadilt, Lardil, and Gangalidda communities, celebrating the stone-walled fish traps central to their identity and care for Country.

CABAH researcher Lizzie Muller (UNSW) led an evaluation of the impact of the Art Series to explore whether – and how – the series achieved CABAH's aim to change the conversation about Australia's deep history. The evaluation also aimed to use the Art Series as a case study to discover more about the value of arts-led research engagement.

To conduct this research an Impact Evaluation Team (IE Team) was formed, combining expertise in curating, audience research, Indigenous knowledges, and art-science collaboration, including:

- Lizzie Muller, Professor and Director of Research at UNSW's School of Art & Design, who combines reflective curatorial practice with psychosocial audience research to investigate how knowledge is created and shared through art experiences.
- Lizzie Crouch, a creative producer and CABAH Senior Research Associate (UNSW), whose research explores the relational work behind inclusive art–science practice.
- Stephanie Beaupark, a Ngugi artist, scientist, and curator, CABAH Research Associate (UNSW) and Lecturer at the University of Wollongong whose work focuses on Indigenous-led science and culturally grounded methods of engagement.

How Artworks Change a Public Conversation

In response to CABAH's aim to change the conversation about deep time, and drawing on international literature on research impact, the evaluation was based on a dialogic definition of impact. This means that impact refers both to the changes research creates in the world and to changes within the research itself that are stimulated by engagement.

To capture this two-way impact, the methodology was designed to investigate the experiences of both the public who saw the artworks and the practitioners involved in creating them. Practitioners included the artists, Indigenous communities, CABAH researchers, and cultural workers in museums and art centres.

In consultation with the practitioners, tailored evaluation strategies were developed for each artwork. These drew on Indigenous research methodologies, reflective practice, and psychosocial methods to gather qualitative data about the personal, societal, cultural and institutional impacts of the Art Series.

To focus analysis of this data, the IE Team developed the **Changing the Conversation Framework**. Grounded in the dialogic view of impact, this framework provides a multi-dimensional model for how artworks effect changes in public discourse, and how to recognise when change has occurred. The framework, which is explained in more detail in the methodology, includes four interconnected areas to examine as indicators of change: **voices, contexts, perspectives, and actions**. Its critical contribution is showing that public conversations are about more than messages or content. Meaningful change depends on *who* is included, *how* they are listened to, and *in what conditions* the conversation happens. Change requires dialogue, rather than broadcast, that shifts the perspectives of everyone involved. Crucially, a new conversation will enable new possibilities for action in the world.

Through the Changing the Conversation Framework this report illuminates the impact of the CABAH Art Series. It shows how the art works amplified diverse **voices**, including non-human actors such as water, insects and technologies, and introduced new forms of expression that registered the emotional aspects of deep history.

It reveals how the art works expanded the **contexts** in which deep time knowledge is created and shared, connecting specialised research sites, like laboratories, and remote places with public spaces such as museums. These changes matter because they make the public conversation about deep time richer and more accessible.

The report also shows how the artworks enabled profound shifts in **perspective** for non-Indigenous audiences about the dynamism and continuity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. This included challenging inherited racist narratives that shape Australia's Indigenous and colonial histories, revealing how changes in public conversations sometimes require a difficult unlearning of old stories.

The report describes how Indigenous audiences recognised valuable possibilities for allyship with museums and researchers through the creative collaborations represented by the artworks. It shows how Indigenous communities and members of the public used the artworks to connect the deep past to pressing contemporary issues such as climate change and Indigenous land management, finding new opportunities for future **action** and becoming advocates for a more sophisticated and truthful account of Australia's deep history.

The report concludes by applying these discoveries about the impact of the Art Series to the larger question of how art can change public conversations more broadly. The conclusion of the report identifies four lessons for arts-led research engagement generated from the example of the CABAH Art Series:

1) **Art can help people know more by feeling differently.**
2) **Art can build partnerships that connect researchers, communities and public spaces.**
3) **Art can support Indigenous leadership.**
4) **Art can enable difficult public conversations**.

These four lessons reflect the success of the Art Series, not simply as a tool for communicating research outcomes, but as an integral part of collaborative knowledge-making. The evaluation presented in this report provides evidence for the value of arts-led research engagement that will support researchers, artists, and institutions to follow the CABAH Art Series example and harness the power of art to create more inclusive and impactful research.

CABAH Art Series Development and Context

CABAH Art Series Aims

The CABAH Art Series was designed to help achieve CABAH's mission to change the conversation about Australia's deep history. Examples of changes that CABAH hoped to see in public understanding included greater awareness of how human and natural forces have transformed the continent in the past 130,000 years, and appreciation for the value of combining western research with Indigenous knowledges to understand Australia's past and future.

CABAH recognised that changing the conversation required more than a shift in public understanding. It called for a more inclusive approach to how deep time knowledge is created and shared based on reciprocal relationships where knowledge flows in both directions between researchers and the public, particularly the Traditional Owners of the land where research takes place.

The Art Series was intended to help achieve this shift by inviting artists to respond to, question, and interpret CABAH research for public audiences.[1] By supporting collaboration between artists and CABAH researchers, the initiative sought innovative ways to engage the public in both the research process and its outcomes.

The Art Series, therefore, was more than an experiment in research communication. It was an experiment in how a field of research can transform itself, and its relationship with the world through creative engagement.

CABAH Art Series Commissioning Process

CABAH Deputy Director, Amanda Lawson, led the original vision and development of the Art Series. Art-science specialists Bundanon Trust were engaged to support the first commission, and Bundanon CEO Deborah Ely AM proposed Sonia Leber and David Chesworth be the first commissioned artists for what would become *Where Lakes Once Had Water* (2020).

An open call to CABAH researchers was circulated for the remaining commissions, with three proposals reaching fruition.[2] Archaeologist Sue O'Connor (ANU) proposed a collaboration with artist UK Frederick, that resulted in *Unseeded* (2022). Anthropological archaeologist Sean Ulm (JCU) proposed two projects with remote Aboriginal communities: one related to pottery fragments discovered on Jiigurru (Lizard Island), and another that focussed on fish traps in the Wellesley Islands.

Between 2020-22, COVID restrictions and CABAH staff changes slowed the progress of the commissions. Independent curator Judith Blackall, who had worked with Bundanon Trust on the first commission, was engaged to develop exhibition opportunities for *Where Lakes Once Had Water*, support the production and exhibition of *Unseeded*, and develop catalogues for both artworks.

In 2022, curatorial and audience specialist Lizzie Muller (lead author of this report) joined CABAH as a Chief Investigator to steer the completion and evaluation of the Art Series. Following a strategic review of the series Lizzie Muller and IE Team member Lizzie Crouch identified *Connections Across the Coral Sea* – an exhibition co-developed by CABAH with Queensland Museum (QM) – as an opportunity for an Indigenous-led, participatory commission connected to an existing public platform. Building on Sean Ulm's proposal for an artwork related to Jiigurru, QM invited the Dingaal community to lead what became *Mangal Bungal: Clever Hands* (2023).

Finally, in 2023, when access to remote communities resumed after COVID restrictions eased, MIArts in Mornington Island were engaged to support the production of the fourth commission *Ngurruwarra/ Derndernyin: Stone Fish Traps of the Wellesley Islands* (2024).

The flexibility of the commissioning process allowed the Art Series to adapt to changes in personnel, partnerships and external events over CABAH's seven-year lifespan. It resulted in a range of distinctive artworks that responded to existing relationships and emerging discoveries. The commissions activated different types of collaboration, from close relationships between individual artists and researchers in *Unseeded*, to large-scale community co-design in *Mangal Bungal*. As a result, the artworks produced diverse impacts: some reached large and broad public audiences, others affected specific communities, and others created more personal transformations. This diversity is reflected in the methodology designed for the Impact Evaluation, which utilised individual strategies to uncover each artwork's unique impact story.

Context: Evaluating Impact in Engaged Research

The CABAH Art Series and this report contribute to a global effort to understand how research impact is created and evaluated. CABAH's attempt to build impact through creative commissions reflects a growing consensus that impact is not achieved by simply sharing research results with the public. Instead, it emerges from carefully planned, meaningful activities that engage a range of people throughout the entire research lifecycle.

This means that to produce impact the process of research itself must shift towards a model described as *engaged research* – where reciprocal relationships with communities and partners are embedded within, and shape, the process of knowledge creation.[5,6] This model is especially important in Australia and other settler-colonial contexts, where there is a need to decolonise research through Indigenous-leadership, partnerships and co-design.

Despite increasing support from funders and universities for engaged research, there remains a critical gap in how the resulting emergent and dialogic impact is evaluated. Traditional metrics often fall short because measures of success cannot be pre-determined, and the boundaries between "scholarly" and "societal" impact are blurred. Methods to measure more diverse form of impact are still emerging.[7]

To address this challenge in evaluating the CABAH Art Series, the IE Team designed a methodology to capture multidirectional, attitudinal, affective and informal impacts that signal a change in public discourse. The Changing the Conversation Framework for analysing impact, combined with the qualitative data-gathering methods described in the Methodology section of this report, offer a toolkit for researchers and administrators seeking evidence of the diverse impacts of engaged research.

Context: Arts-led Research Engagement

The Art Series is a significant example of a growing international interest in arts-led research engagement. There is good evidence that art experiences help produce reflective individuals and engaged citizens, suggesting creative practice is a valuable tool for involving the public in knowledge creation.[8] Researchers in the pioneering field of art–science argue that integrating art into STEM research does not merely illustrate or communicate scientific findings but seeds reciprocal processes of discovery that shift both art and science through public experiments.[9]

As historian Billy Griffiths has argued, understanding deep time is a challenge to the imagination.[10] Previous work by members of the IE Team has demonstrated how art-science projects expand collective cultural imaginaries, allowing people to take-on new ideas: a capacity that is vital for changing public conversations.[11]

While creative practices have long been used in deep time research to visualise historic scenarios, artists and arts methods are more recently being integrated into practices of archaeology itself. Advocating for this movement, visual archaeologist Doug Bailey notes its proponents seek new physical and conceptual ways to work "beyond the traditional limits, boundaries, and discourses of archaeology but also of art".[12]

In developing the Art Series CABAH recognised the potential of art to support two-way engagement where both the public and the researchers are impacted by the process. This report provides evidence of how the Art Series expanded the disciplinary norms of deep time research, including what counts as knowledge – making room for emotion, story, and imagination. It also shows how arts-led engagement revitalises the contemporary role of cultural institutions such as museums and galleries as sites for publicly-engaged knowledge creation.

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Methodology

To evaluate the CABAH Art Series the Impact Evaluation Team designed a methodology based on three guiding principles drawn from international literature on research impact and cultural value, and our own previous work on art-science evaluation:

1) **Impact is dialogic**[1,2] so evaluation must consider effects on both the public and the practitioners involved in creating the artworks.

2) **Aesthetic experience is central** to evidence-based enquiry into the impact of art,[3] so evaluation must employ qualitative data gathering methods focused on how practitioners and the public were affected by the artworks.

3) **Impact is emergent and unpredictable** so evaluation should not be based on fixed goals.[4] Instead, we developed the Changing the Conversation Framework that defines four areas of change – voices, contexts, perceptions and actions – to understand the impact revealed in the data.

We tailored our approach to each artwork in response to stakeholder consultation, asking each artist, community, and cultural organisation what they wanted to know about the impact of their work. The specific approaches designed for each artwork are described at the start of each artwork chapter.

Data Gathering Methods

The data gathering methods were designed to generate rich, small-scale data about people's experiences of the artworks. Alongside these qualitative methods, we used quantitative data about audience numbers, provided by cultural partners to understand the reach of each artwork. Data gathering focussed on two core participant groups:

1) **Practitioners** involved in the creation of the artworks including artists, CABAH researchers, and cultural partners such as museum staff.

2) **Publics** who experienced the work including three target groups identified in consultation with practitioners:

   - Postgraduate students in environment and sustainability for *Where Lakes Once Had Water*.
   - Senior (over 65) non-Indigenous visitors to Queensland Museum for *Mangal Bungal*.
   - Indigenous undergraduate art students for both *Mangal Bungal* and *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*.

Practitioners

We used reflective interviews to capture the impact of the artworks on practitioners. The interviews were grounded in principles of reflective practice, an established methodology in arts-led research that enables practitioners to articulate knowledge generated through expert action in real-world contexts.[5]

Using open-ended questions, the interviews progressed from practitioners' descriptions of their experience of creating and/or presenting the artwork, to reflections on the project's effect on their practice, and finally to consideration of broader implications for their institution, community, or field.

The interviewees' identities are important for understanding the data, so their names and roles are included at the start of each artwork chapter. All practitioners reviewed their interview transcript and gave feedback and approval for the interpretation of the data.

Publics

To investigate public experiences, we initially used two group-based methods. With the Indigenous art students from Griffith University Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (CAIA) we used the Australian Indigenous method of Yarning Circles. And with the two non-Indigenous groups we used a psychosocial technique called the Visual Matrix.

We designed a third hybrid method called the Yarning Matrix that combines features of both Yarning Circles and the Visual Matrix in response to consultation with the CAIA students and the practitioners involved in the final commission, *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*.

All three methods produce group-based data that is recorded, transcribed and treated as a whole text. In the analysis and description of the findings, statements are not attributed to individuals and participants in the groups are not named. Quotes from data used to support the analysis presented in this report have been lightly edited for readability. The protocols of each method and their specific applications in the impact evaluation are described as follows.

- **Visual Matrix**

The Visual Matrix (VM) method was developed in psychosocial studies, a field that investigates social practice as intersubjective experience. The VM was

designed to study the aesthetic experience of artworks in small groups of between 5-20 people,[6] and has a proven track-record as a method for art-science evaluation.[7]

In a session lasting 45 minutes VM participants describe the mental images that arise in response to an artwork or exhibition, without needing to explain or analyse them. Participants speak freely, sharing remembered or imagined images or sensory impressions. Some contributions build on each other through a process of association, others fade away, creating a collage of shared imagery.

The VM enables participants to move beyond their usual narratives and opinions and give symbolic form to new ideas that are emotionally resonant but may not yet be fully formed in their minds. The method supports audiences to touch on difficult topics that may be hard to speak about openly through more direct methods such as interview or focus group.[8]

Analysis begins immediately in a post-matrix discussion where participants reflect together on the themes that emerged during the matrix. The research team then analyse the recordings and transcripts of the matrix over 2-3 group sessions that include project stakeholders and participants from the original matrix. These sessions focus initially on interpreting the symbolic and affective content of the images produced.

The final session explicitly aims to introduce wider contextual issues and ask why within a specific social context, the matrix participants used the imagery and associations they did.[9]

- **Yarning Circles**

Yarning is linked with traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of exchanging knowledge, responsibility and relationality with family, community and Country – including the physical landscape, Ancestors and future generations.[10] Yarning as a research methodology is grounded in cultural continuity through intentional, collaborative storytelling and knowledge sharing, where all voices are valued. We used yarning to work with the CAIA students as a positive way to address the harm that has been done to Indigenous people in research and museums through persistent devaluation of their epistemologies and ontologies.[11]

The Yarning Circle was facilitated by Impact Evaluation Team member Stephanie Beaupark, a Ngugi artist, scientist and curator who specialises in supporting Indigenous-led knowledge exchange between Indigenous and westernised sciences through creative practice.

A yarn for research purposes generally begins socially to build trust and establish relational context. In our case this included first sharing an informal lunch. The



CAIA students engaged in the hybrid Yarning Matrix at Queensland Museum Kurilpa after experiencing *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*. Image credit: Lizzie Muller

research topic is usually broadly agreed in advance, but the direction of the yarn is led by the participants through storytelling, rather than by the facilitator through structured questioning to respect cultural agency.[12,13] Participants in a yarn are usually seated in a circle in a comfortable space. The length of the yarn varies; in our case we allowed 1.5 hours.

We invited participants in the Yarning Circle to take part in the analysis, and to review the resulting interpretations. Our analysis followed the connections and relational threads evoked by the students. This affirmed their identity and lived experience as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their expressive storytelling that integrated Country and Ancestors.

- **Yarning Matrix**

The Yarning Matrix is a hybrid method that merges the image-led symbolic process of the Visual Matrix with the relational, grounded qualities of Yarning. We designed this adaptation to evaluate the final commission *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* in response to consultation with the CAIA students and John Armstrong, the Director of MIArt representing the artists from the Wellesley Islands. Both John and the CAIA students were curious to see what the VM might reveal about the experience of *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*. They also wanted to ensure the evaluation reflected Indigenous ways of sharing knowledge.

Like the VM, the Yarning Matrix produces knowledge through an image-led symbolic process. However, the Yarning Matrix also seeks to create a relational space grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Participants in a VM sit in a 'snowflake' configuration and are asked to avoid direct eye contact to discourage group dynamics and analytical discussion. This configuration creates a collective reverie that supports image generation. However, the prescriptive structure restricts the participants' autonomy and could perpetuate a disempowering research dynamic that undermines cultural safety for Indigenous people. Instead, in the hybrid Yarning Matrix we invited the participants to sit where they liked and offered weaving and other craft materials to use during the session. This gently achieved the reverie effect as participants' eyes were focussed on their hands and supported a sense of cultural continuity in a calm, creative environment.[14] As in the VM, we invited participants to describe the images the artwork evoked for them, and also invited reflective and narrative forms of expression in-keeping with yarning.

The CAIA students who participated in the Yarning Matrix reacted positively to this hybrid method. They told us that crafting helped them focus and feel comfortable; that the invitation to speak through images enabled them to articulate emotional responses to the artwork; and that the overall experience was sensitive to neurodivergence and cultural trauma. One student described the experience of the Yarning Matrix as being like waves, where each comment and topic was expanded on collaboratively and respectfully.

We analysed the Yarning Matrix through a series of panels that included practitioners and the students. These panels followed the VM's analytical process, focusing on imagery and symbolism, but also attended to the characteristics of yarning by following the deep connections and relationships revealed by the participants through their interwoven narratives.

Developing and applying the Changing the Conversation Framework

Our analysis of the data produced by the methods described above uncovered rich and unique stories of the impact of each artwork. The following chapters tell these impact stories, foregrounding the research participants' voices through direct quotes to support our interpretations.

In addition, we identified themes common to all the artworks, and we considered these themes in relation to CABAH's original aim to change the conversation about Australia's deep history. Through this process we developed an understanding of the different ways artworks impact public discourse, and how to recognise when change has occurred. We organised these change indicators into four interconnected lenses:

- **Voices** considers who is participating in the conversation, how participants express themselves, and what registers and modes of communication are valued and heard.
- **Contexts** relates to where and how the conversation is taking place, and the impact of these settings on the conditions of participation and the content that is possible or appropriate.
- **Perspectives** describes dynamic changes in peoples' relationship to a topic, including their points of view, attitudes and feelings. These shifts pave the way for new understanding and different narratives and opinions.
- **Actions** describes the practical changes that have been made possible, and how agency, power and capacity for action have been expanded or redistributed.

We formalised these four lenses as the **Changing the Conversation Framework:** an analytical model for how art effects change in public discourse on socially significant topics. Changing the conversation is an aspiration for many organisations and researchers seeking societal impact. The framework provides a structure and vocabulary that transforms this broad aim into tangible foci.

We used the framework to deepen and synthesise our analysis of each artwork and the Art Series as a whole, and to scaffold and communicate our findings. Each artwork chapter ends with a summary of that work's impact in terms of voices, contexts, perspectives, and actions. These findings lead to an overall evaluation of how the Art Series changed the national conversation about Australia's deep history, presented on p.69.



The impact evaluation was conducted in line with AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research and with approval from the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (HC220623 and HC230279).

Tanya Yoren arranges natural materials from Jiigurru as part of *Mangal Bungal*.
Image credit: CABAH / Jaqueline Wales

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Where Lakes Once Had Water

Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

Where Lakes Once Had Water (2020) is a 28-minute dual-screen audio-visual installation by artists Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, whose collaborative practice merges sound, video, and installation. The artwork draws on scientific research and Indigenous knowledge about ancient landscapes shaped by water in the Northern Territory, translating data and field methods into an immersive sensory experience.

AUSTRALIAN EXHIBITIONS

**Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery,
Ngambri and Ngunnawal Country (Canberra), ACT (2022)**

**University of Wollongong Gallery,
Woolyungah (Wollongong), NSW (2022)**

**TarraWarra Museum of Art,
Wurundjeri Country (Healesville), VIC (2022)**

**Charles Darwin University Gallery,
Garramilla (Darwin), NT (2023)**

**Nguku (Water) Festival,
Kulumindini (Elliot), NT (2023)**



Video still from *Where Lakes Once Had Water*, featuring Auntie Susan Kingston and Aara Welz. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

Sonia Leber and David Chesworth were selected to make the first Art Series commission based on their international reputation for producing innovative artworks that engage with scientific research. The Naarm (Melbourne) based artists joined CABAH research teams in 2018 and 2019 investigating sites in the Northern Territory including the shorelines of Lake Woods, sediments left behind by ancient floods at Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) and Girraween Lagoon near Darwin. The fieldwork was conducted in close collaboration with Elders, Traditional Owners and rangers of the Mudburra, Marlinja, Elliott, Jawoyn and Larrakia communities.

The artists documented on-Country investigations into the deep history of the landscape and subsequent laboratory analysis of materials at James Cook University and University of Wollongong. Presented at large scale with immersive sound, the film unfolds across two screens that juxtapose contrasting imagery and viewpoints. Moving between intimate close-ups and expansive drone footage, the film shows the activities of Traditional Owners, scientists, insects, birds and reptiles, highlighting the complex interactions between land, water, technology, humans and other species. The soundscape layers field recordings of natural and human-made sounds with commentary from a synthesised voice that weaves technical observations with speculative reflections.

The artwork was screened at international film festivals and experienced by more than 12,000 people during exhibitions in Australia. An exhibition in Darwin, followed by a single-screen outdoor projection at Elliott near Lake Woods, presented as part of the Nguku (Water) Festival organised by Arid Lands Environment Care and Barkly Regional Arts, marked a return to Country for the artwork.

Impact Evaluation Approach

The public-focused impact evaluation examined how the artwork's themes of ancient environmental change resonated with young people engaged in land management in Australia. Using the Visual Matrix method where participants describe the mental images the artwork provoked in them, the Impact Evaluation Team investigated the experience of a group of Australian and International students in their



Visitors to *Where Lakes Once Had Water* at the TarraWarra Museum of Art in 2022. Image credit: Keelan O'Hehir



Video still of researchers conducting fieldwork from *Where Lakes Once Had Water*. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

early twenties from the Master of Environment and Sustainability program at Monash University.

The students saw *Where Lakes Once Had Water* at TarraWarra Museum of Art as part of the larger exhibition *Rhythms of the Earth: Selected Works from the TarraWarra Museum of Art Collection*, curated by the museum's director Victoria Lynn. The installation was surrounded by six paintings by Waanyi artist Judy Watson, depicting arial views of Wurundjeri Country around TarraWarra. Three further works by Sonia and David exploring diverse sensory experiences of the environment were also on display. The students visited the museum soon after the 2022 Victorian floods, which had severely affected the surrounding landscape.



Student group analysing the data they generated through the Visual Matrix at TarraWarra Museum of Art. Image credit: Lizzie Crouch

Analysis of the data from the Visual Matrix began with a post-matrix discussion with the students themselves. It then proceeded through a series of collaborative analysis sessions that included the artists, TarraWarra's marketing and events manager Jasmin de Wolf, the students' lecturer David Robertson (Monash), and CABAH researchers including design activist Linda Kennedy (UNSW), film-maker Martin Potter (Deakin), and education specialists Shirley Agostinho, Tiffani Apps, and Lauren Knussen (UOW). The two researchers most involved in the production of the artwork, geomorphologist Tim Cohen (UOW) and palaeoecologist Cassie Rowe (JCU), were interviewed to understand the impact of the commission on their research, as well as their insights about its impact on communities in the Northern Territory, and the wider CABAH researcher cohort. They also participated in the analysis of the Visual Matrix.

Impact Evaluation Findings

The impact evaluation revealed how *Where Lakes Once Had Water* prompted students studying environment and sustainability to reflect on their fear of contemporary climate change. Experiencing the immense scale of deep time through the artwork helped the students place present-day environmental challenges in a broader imaginative and temporal context. They attempted to bring together Western and Indigenous ways of knowing to "sooth" what they saw as the damaged and dangerous force of the earth. However, their association of Indigenous lifeways with the ancient past limited their understanding of the dynamic continuity and contemporary expression of Indigenous knowledge, revealing the truth-telling work required to meaningfully engage students with Indigenous culture.

CABAH researchers Cassie Rowe and Tim Cohen saw the students' connection of deep time to climate crisis as crucial to raising awareness of the complex challenges facing the landscapes they study. Reflecting on the reactions of audiences in the Northern Territory, Cassie noted people in Darwin gained a new appreciation of the scientific value of their environment, while Tim highlighted the importance Mudburra Elder and artist Ray Dimakarri Dixon placed on the film as a way to raise awareness of his Country and culture.

The snaking ripple – experiencing deep time

The first image the students described in the Visual Matrix was of searching for water in a dry landscape:

> I felt a sort of dryness. The landscape seemed to be quite dry to me. So I think it influences my mood of the entire experience. I was basically searching for water, and the moistness of things.

They portrayed the expanse of the land and the scientists' quest for knowledge as lonely. But this alienating aridity was immediately softened by the image of a "big snaking water" that was both physical and spiritual:

> I see the big snaking water from far above looking down topographically, and associations with space, and incredible heat, and very ancient terrain, and then the spirit, sort of ancestral spirit echoing above that, looking down upon that.



Installation view of *Where Lakes Once Had Water*, featuring Ray Dimakarri Dixon. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth



Video still from *Where Lakes Once Had Water*. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

This image reflected the paintings by Judy Watson displayed around the gallery, as well as a scene in the film showing a wavy black line in a dry lakebed, which the students interpreted as a historic tree line indicating ancient water. As they described the line, they began to move their arms like a snake, and one commented:

> I was struck that everyone's doing this ripple [makes snake gesture] – that kind of shape. And it's there in what you would still call a ripple within a dry landscape.

This image of the gentle ripple in the landscape that the students enacted with their own bodies, contrasted with a series of images of harsh, straight cuts, made by scientists into the body of the earth. The students imagined the earth as a "living being" and spoke of the "pain of the landscape" caused by the "scars and incisions" left when scientists "pull out" samples.

The students associated these cuts with the division between Western scientific and Indigenous approaches to the earth. They symbolised this division through two contrasting images of stones: the first of scientists classifying stone samples; and, the second of an eagle using a stone to cut a body of water, which is part of a creation story told by an Aboriginal woman in the film:

> Because there are two visuals in many parts of the video where one activity takes place and another one takes another place, I feel the classification part, where scientists classify all the stones and everything found. On the other hand, there were Indigenous peoples doing their thing. The classification activities feel disrupted by it in a way.
>
> The image of the eagle taking the stones and tearing the waterhole, and tearing the landscape, and making that amazing body of water, that's so powerful.

Having spent time considering what they described as a "contrast of knowledge" between the "science-y aspect of all the tools" and the stone knife "cutting a river". The students began to slowly break-down the contrast by developing further images that connect birds and technologies – associating the swooping of birds with drones and describing the "bird's-eye" view of the camera.

Through the images of the snaking water, the eagle cutting the river, and other hybrid bird-technologies the students began to grasp the complexity of how the land has been shaped over millennia by many powerful forces; water, people, animals, birds, Spiritual Beings, and technologies – both ancient and modern. As the matrix continued this more interconnected understanding led them to confront their feelings about dramatic contemporary changes in their own environment.

The flood – deep time and climate crisis

Having found the water they said they were seeking at the start of the matrix, the students produced a flood of imagery about water's overwhelming strength. They connected their sense of awe about deep time environmental transformation, to their immediate fear about rapid changes they witnessed through the recent Victorian floods:

> The water is just like this – I was going to say beast or monster, but they're negative connotations – but just this powerful being.
>
> It feels strong, yeah. And that led to many emotions, I guess – from fear to safety. Strength is a word that's coming to me a lot.
>
> Overwhelmed or agoraphobia comes to mind for me, because it is so expansive, it's terrifying.
>
> And the more you dig, the more expansive. When they got the big samples, and they're like: "The water was empty. And now it's full. And now it's empty again." There's just lots.
>
> It reminds me of the flooding we're experiencing now, that we're still very

> dependent on seasonal cycles and flooding and water still is… even though we've built all these urban structures, we're still very susceptible, and affected by it.
>
> I feel so small, because of those cycles. Out of control.
>
> When we were driving through this area – I was out here last week – and the water was so high. It's only been seven days and you can't even see it really anymore. How quickly nature can change. We always think of it as slow geographical timescales. We're just seeing how different it can be, in such a short amount of time...

The students' emotional reaction to the immensity of deep time and the powerful non-human forces that have shaped landscapes expanded their imaginative context for contemporary climate change. Reflecting on this in the post-matrix discussion the students rejected the idea the film personifies the earth – saying that comparing the earth to humanity would belittle it. Instead, they came up with the word "force-onified", meaning the film revealed the enormous power of the earth and shifted their human-centric understanding of "managing" environments to a more reciprocal – if still complex and dangerous – relationship between people and the planet.



Video still from *Where Lakes Once Had Water* featuring Ray Dimakarri Dixon. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

CABAH researchers Cassie Rowe and Tim Cohen both took part in the analysis of the students' Visual Matrix. In their reflective interviews they described being struck by the intensity of the experience of earth's history evoked for the students by the film. Tim called this an "epiphany of deep time" – the "light bulb moment" when someone fully realises "the breadth of time and how it manifests in the Australian landscape". Cassie echoed this point saying:

> The scale of the landscape and space and change over time is a really difficult thing to capture and for people to comprehend, I think it can blow your mind.



Installation view of *Where Lakes Once Had Water*. Image credit: David Paterson



Video still of researchers conducting fieldwork near Lake Woods from *Where Lakes Once Had Water*. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

It was significant for Tim and Cassie that the students connected this deep time epiphany to contemporary climate change. The sites featured in the film they explained, are complex landscapes fraught with contemporary challenges. For Tim the students' desire to overcome divisions between Western and Indigenous knowledge is important for the future management of places like Lake Woods:

> It's got the shale gas mining issue, and it's got solar farm development, and it's got one of the largest cattle farms in the Northern Territory. Plus Native Title. It's a really complex array of contemporary land use dynamics. So if people walk away [from the film] with that response that climate can produce rapid changes and it might require a negotiation or communication with First Nations peoples? Well Lake Woods is such a good example of where that stuff is happening.

Cassie believed the connection between deep time and future environmental management was also important for audiences in Darwin. Girraween Lagoon is an often-overlooked site on the city's outskirts. Seeing the lagoon as a focal point for research, she felt, deepened the audience's sense of its scientific significance, offering insights into "their landscape, their environment, how it's changed. And how it may change in the future".

Soothing Country - drawing together science and spirituality

In the post-matrix discussion, the students explained that as emerging experts in sustainability, they felt a responsibility to develop solutions to climate crisis.



Public forum at ANU Drill Hall Gallery. Image credit: Jamila Toderas

After the catharsis of facing their fears about their changing environment they began to generate images of soothing and repair. They invoked an image from the film of an Elder – Mudburra musician Ray Dimakarri Dixon – singing to Country on his way to backfill one of the scientists' trenches, which the students interpret as a kind of pleading:

> When the man was pleading with the Spirits to stay, I suppose my understanding of Indigenous holistic sustainability is that it's relying on a symbiotic relationship between Ancestors and spirituality, and also the environment and Country. And his communication with the Spirits suggests that that relationship is somewhat fragmented at the moment.
>
> It definitely soothed me to know that they're accepting that there are two different actors present on the video simultaneously, and in a way asking permission from the Spirits that it's okay. Even if you can't see them, you can feel them, you know that they are there.
>
> That word 'soothed' is so interesting, because after he's finished pleading, there's that image of him smoothing the land, and it is like a stroking, like kind of an erasure, like we're erasing what we did, but also we're just kind of calming, or soothing.
>
> Soothing a fickle beast.
>
> With the gum tree branch, I think. Yeah, I thought of the gum trees having medicinal properties as well. It was like maybe soothing the scar.

The image of Ray stroking the gum tree leaves back and forth over the land evokes the shape of the snaking ripple that the students worked with at the start of the matrix. This gesture heals the cuts in the land they associated with scientific investigation, and draws together scientific and spiritual relationships to Country.

The students began to examine the implications of this drawing together for their own approach to



Video still from *Where Lakes Once Had Water*. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth



Video still of *Where Lakes Once Had Water*, featuring Ray Dimakarri Dixon. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

the environment. They considered the limitations of science through images of the sterility of laboratories, but this quickly gave way to a sense the instruments and processes of science can be beautiful. Reflecting on this in the post-matrix discussion they agreed the character of environmental science presented in the film is "inquisitive" rather than "destructive".

The students could connect this inquisitive form of science more readily to Indigenous ways of knowing. They described the sense that the scientists and Traditional Owners in the film are working closely together, and used another physical gesture – the interweaving of the fingers of both hands – to convey this integration:

> They were working together to understand and share history in different ways…they were just building an understanding together.

> And that aesthetic quality [of the scientific apparatus], the microscope and those big, long things… they're really beautiful. And then having that next to the bird's eye view of the landscape, that's a nice [brings fingers together] – sorry, this is audio recording, but I'm putting my fingers together.

The students' use of physical gestures to convey the drawing together of Western and Indigenous knowledge suggests they are feeling their way towards a new understanding which they do not yet have the words to describe.

For Cassie the evocative nature of the film was vital for conveying the richness of earth science in action, including its ineffable aspects such as care and teamwork. It was important for her that the students had grasped the role of the non-human actors at work in the creation of knowledge:

> The film communicates the concept of the landscape, the topography or rocks or the flora and the fauna bearing witness to stuff. They not only witness it but record it in some form. And learn from it as well.

As well as conveying a nuanced understanding of science to audiences, both Cassie and Tim felt the film helped them reflect on their own work. For Tim these insights arose from recognising the artists as experts from another discipline who were observing how his own discipline "goes about its trade", particularly the oscillation between minutiae and broad narrative interpretations.



Back to Earth forum at TarraWarra Museum of Art. Image credit: Keelan O'Hehir

For Cassie the film created an opportunity to think more deeply about how she does her work. Scientific journals and editorial processes steer away from the emotional aspects of research she explained, and as a result:

> There's no real forum for explaining the work behind the scenes, or *why* you work, and those connections or responses you have to landscape and environment.

Being involved in panel discussions at two of the galleries where the work was exhibited gave Cassie space to explore these themes creatively and publicly. She wrote a lyrical response to the film that shared sensory and emotional aspects of her work, describing the pleasure she feels when entering what she imagines as the "yellow space" of the Northern Savannah. Cassie's response shows how the impact of the artwork on both audiences and practitioners unfolded not only through exhibition, but also through its surrounding public programs.

Thongs and plastic bottles – outgrowing a romantic image of Indigenous knowledge

Despite their desire to integrate Indigenous and Western scientific ways of knowing, the students had a limited idea of the connection of Indigenous knowledge to contemporary life. They found the footwear of two Aboriginal knowledge holders pictured in the film anachronistically modern. One student described the sparkly plastic thongs worn by a Traditional Owner examining stone artefacts as "this element of cheap aesthetic in such a sacred place". Another noted a male Elder's boots and thought of "the ancient history of walking Country for thousands and thousands of years without shoes", wondering "when would have the First Nations people started not walking barefoot on the Country?" They were also struck by what they see as the irony of an Elder holding "a plastic bottle in his hand when we're talking about water and Earth".

These modern objects troubled the students because they contradicted their association of Aboriginal people with ancient landscapes and traditional lifeways. During a Visual Matrix analysis session educational researcher Tiffani Apps saw these responses as signs the students are not yet equipped to fully engage with the contemporary realities of Indigenous ways of knowing. They hold a romantic perception that the power of Indigenous knowledge relies on its association with the ancient past. This limits their ability to accept Indigenous culture as dynamic, adaptive and continuous.

This struggle to accept Indigenous knowledge as part of contemporary experience echoes through the whole matrix. In its final moments the students return to the story of the Eagle cutting the land, this time, in moment of truth-telling, they acknowledge their own responsibility for the ongoing loss of Indigenous knowledge caused by colonisation:

> [The Elder] was telling the story about how the eagle came in and tore a hole in the waterfall and then made a river, and I was just wondering how old that story was. Because the Dreaming is so old, and that's probably been passed down through hundreds if not – we just don't know how many generations that is. And how many of those stories we don't hear, because we don't ask, and because of colonisation.

This image of the relationship between storytelling, deep history and the formation of the landscape led the students to a final image of Girraween Lagoon, a culturally significant site for the Larrakia and Wulna peoples that preserves 140,000 years of climate history, as a "portal" into the past:

> One of the water bodies, the lagoon, knowing that the water has been there for so many thousands of years, it was like this magical looking glass, knowing that the quartz and the sediments underneath that body of water can transport through time, can give us insights into thousands of years ago. It makes me see that almost like a magic portal for the landscape that is metamorphosising around that lagoon, as you transport through that trajectory of science, but also through Dreamtime.

In this image the students achieve the integration they have been seeking between scientific, cultural and spiritual insight. It is a hopeful end to a difficult journey captured by the Visual Matrix, from alienation and anxiety, to a deeper sense of future possibility.

Showing Where Lakes Once Had Water *on Country*

Tim Cohen reflected on the different response of the audience to the film when it was shown on Country in Elliot at the Nguku Festival in 2023. The festival organised by the Arid Lands Environment Care group and Barkly Arts Team was part of an ongoing community effort to protect their water from the threat of fracking. It featured musicians and activists Ray Dimakarri Dixon and his daughter Eleanor – Mudburra Traditional Owners who worked with Tim on the Lake Woods research, and feature in *Where Lakes Once Had Water*.

While the festival was an important return to Country for the film, Tim felt it lost much of its power in this context. Projected in the park on an inflatable screen with lots of surrounding light and sound, it was hard for the community to connect to the content. Tim recalled the audio-visual technicians setting up the festival describing the film as "whitefella art", designed for the controlled environment of galleries. Even though it depicted Northern Territory landscapes, to Tim the film seemed "out of place". This suggests that the impact of high-end audio-visual artworks like *Where Lakes Once Had Water* depends on the context and infrastructure of museums and galleries which are predominantly in urban centres. Tim felt that meaningfully showing the work on Country would have required a significantly bigger budget.

Despite these caveats Tim considered showing the artwork at the festival worthwhile because it honoured the relationship with Ray and Eleanor Dixon, and the community in Elliot were delighted to see Ray and Eleanor on screen. Ray himself had an ongoing relationship with the film having performed at its exhibition launch at University of Wollongong Art Gallery. Tim noted that as a water activist who uses music to advocate for Country, Ray appreciated the value of the film as a platform for raising awareness of a threatened landscape:

> [Ray's] a guy that lives in so many different worlds. His main thrust is how do I protect my Country? He's done a lot, seen a lot and he can see something of value in [the film].

Learning from Where Lakes Once Had Water

As the first commission of the Art Series, *Where Lakes Once Had Water* stimulated a lot of collective learning amongst the CABAH research community about how to support and manage art commissions. Both Cassie and Tim found it logistically challenging to integrate the artwork's production into their fieldwork. Cassie noted that much of this labour was unaccounted for and there were no explicit mechanisms to recognise or plan for the work researchers put into facilitating the commission.

While Tim and Cassie were impressed by the final artwork, their enthusiasm was not shared by all CABAH researchers. Both felt there were, in Tim's words, "some strong negative reactions amongst the researcher cohort", who were: "expecting something a bit easier to digest, something that was either easier to listen to or easier to watch, or was more linear in its narrative."

Reflecting on these negative reactions clarifies the challenges of integrating art into research. Art is unpredictable, and its results can be surprising or difficult to experience. There is unacknowledged, and therefore sometimes overlooked work in setting expectations for both artists and researchers, and in championing the speculative and challenging role that art can play. Subsequent commissions in the CABAH Art series were developed through expressions of interest from CABAH researchers rather than by an external commissioning partner. As a result, these commissions built on existing research relationships with artists and communities, resulting in more deeply collaborative production processes and artworks that created increasing two-way impact as the series developed.

How *Where Lakes Once Had Water* changed the conversation about Australia's deep history

VOICES:

Did this artwork bring new voices into the conversation?

Where Lakes Once Had Water gave voice to the more-than-human actors – the earth, water, insects, birds and technologies – that have shaped the deep history of Australia. The artwork also created a reflective opportunity and public platform for the scientists involved to speak about their work in a personal and imaginative voice not usually encouraged in scientific publications. Students in environment and sustainability felt the film gave equal voice to both Indigenous knowledge and Western science, affirming the importance of both in understanding the past and responding to contemporary environmental challenges.

CONTEXTS:

Did this artwork change the context of speaking and listening?

The film transported audiences to remote Australian landscapes and the specialised environment of laboratories, immersing them in the physical and emotional textures of research. Large-scale high-definition projection enabled visceral engagement with environments rarely accessible to the public. This impact was diminished when shown on Country in the Nguku Festival, as the film required the infrastructure and context of an art gallery to achieve its full effect. This emphasises that galleries and museums, like laboratories and fieldwork sites, are specialised contexts that support engagement with specific, often urban communities.

PERSPECTIVES:

Did this artwork shift perspectives on Australia's deep history?

The film triggered in viewers what CABAH researcher Tim Cohen called a "deep time epiphany" – a visceral experience of Earth's vast history and the forces that have shaped its landscapes. Students studying environment and sustainability used this experience to expand their perspective on contemporary rapid climate change through the lens of deep time. The film changed the students' perspective of earth sciences from extractive to inquisitive and collaborative. However, the impact evaluation also revealed perspectives that remain hard to shift. While the students recognised the importance and power of Indigenous knowledge in addressing environmental damage, they struggled to fully embrace its adaptive and dynamic continuity from the ancient past to the present.

ACTIONS:

Did these shifts in perspective create new possibilities for action in the present?

Students who viewed the film expressed a heightened sense of responsibility regarding the climate crisis. Recognising the strength of non-human forces that have shaped the landscape over millennia gave them fresh imaginative resources for conceptualising climate change. They saw the potential of combining Indigenous and Western approaches to address environmental challenges and tried to reconcile perceived divisions in knowledge. The film raised awareness of the complex challenges faced by the landscapes it features and presented collaboration as both possible and necessary to understand their deep past and protect their future.



Video still of *Where Lakes Once Had Water*, featuring Ray Dimakarri Dixon. Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth

FURTHER RESOURCES

Public discussions

Public discussions about art, science, and deep time accompanied the presentation of *Where Lakes Once Had Water* at events and cultural venues. In 2019, Kabi Kabi and Wiradjuri woman Dr Bianca Beetson, then Director of the Indigenous Research Unit at Griffith University, hosted a work-in-progress conversation at the World Science Festival Brisbane. Adjunct Professor Margo Neale, a Gumbaynggirr and Wiradjuri woman and Senior Indigenous Curator at the National Museum of Australia, chaired a public forum at the Drill Hall Gallery in 2022. That same year, Tim Cohen, Cassie Rowe, and physical geographer Michael-Shawn Fletcher (University of Melbourne) who appears in the film, joined the artists for a panel discussion at TarraWarra Museum of Art. A 2023 symposium at Charles Darwin University Art Gallery featured talks by the artists, CABAH researchers Cassie Rowe and paleoecologist Michael Brand (JCU), Larrakia ranger and artist Roque Lee (Gullawun) and Jennifer Deger, Professor of Digital Humanities (CDU).

Catalogue



A richly illustrated catalogue accompanied *Where Lakes Once Had Water*, offering audiences deeper insight into the collaborative processes behind the work. Published by Bundanon Trust with support from CABAH and the Gordon Darling Foundation, the catalogue was edited by curator Judith Blackall and features essays from artists Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, as well as contributions from Tim Flannery, Michael-Shawn Fletcher, Fiona Gruber, and Sophie Knezic, who reflect on the creative, scientific, and cultural dimensions of the project.



Podcast

Where Lakes Once Had Water was the focus of Episode 1 of CABAHCAST, a podcast about CABAH's Education and Engagement program by podcaster Fiona Gruber.

EXHIBITIONS

**University of Wollongong Gallery,
Woolyungah (Wollongong), NSW (2022)**

**Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery,
Ngambri and Ngunnawal Country (Canberra), ACT (2024)**

**ANU College of Asia & the Pacific,
Ngambri and Ngunnawal Country (Canberra), ACT
permanent display from 2026**

Unseeded on display at Drill Hall Gallery. Image credit: Lizzie Crouch

Unseeded

UK Frederick

Unseeded (2022) by UK (Ursula) Frederick is a sculptural installation comprising 35 hand-blown glass boab nuts, each varying in size, opacity, and tone. Developed in collaboration with CABAH researcher Sue O'Connor, and curated by Judith Blackall, the work emerged from a 2019 archaeological field survey in the Ningbing Range on the lands of the Miriuwung and Gajerrong people in Western Australia. Drawing on encounters with boab trees and their cultural histories, the installation translates the processes of working in the field into material form, allowing engagement and reflection on the complexities of knowledge generation.



Unseeded was the second work in the CABAH Art Series. It emerged from a proposal by CABAH researcher Sue O'Connor to build on her existing relationship with artist UK (Ursula) Frederick – a leading practitioner in art-archaeology, whose practice-based research explores themes of material culture and human engagement with the environment. Sue's proposal recognised the role of art and Ursula's expertise in generating effective forms of knowledge dissemination, fresh insights about archaeology, and



Detail of one of the glass boabs in *Unseeded*. Image credit: UK Frederick

different ways to record and reflect on research.[1] For this commission, Sue invited Ursula to join a field survey that brought together a multidisciplinary group of Miriuwung Gajerrong rangers from the Kimberley District of Western Australia Parks and Wildlife, Traditional Owners, archaeologists and volunteer ecologists. This formed part of the Ningbing Archaeological Project, a culmination of twenty years' work by Sue and archaeologists Jane Balme (UWA) and Peter Veth (UWA).

The Ningbing Archaeological Project had already produced rich evidence of human habitation and insights into land use stretching back 50,000 years in the Southern and North-eastern areas of the Kimberley. In 2019, the field survey, an expedition where researchers look for signs of past human activity to identify sites for future study, hoped to add to this work, seeking to find sites in the limestone caves and rock shelters with evidence of Pleistocene-era human occupation. Through this, the field survey team hoped to gain insights into the diversity of rock art and add to the larger picture of the regional and social networks and adaptations of the Northern Kimberley.

Rooted in decades of collaboration between Ursula and Sue that brought together their artistic and archaeological practices, the processes involved in conducting the field survey became the subject of *Unseeded.* During the month in the Ningbing Range, Ursula observed the oscillation between feelings of expectation and disappointment in the camp as the field survey failed to reveal the types of sites the team had hoped for. Drawing on the observation of boab tree nuts near the entrances to many of the rock shelters that did have evidence of human occupation, she encouraged the researchers at night around the campfire to carve boab nuts as they reflected on their day.

In creating the final glass boabs Ursula aimed to capture and share dimensions of the researchers' processes and experiences. She had documented the survey through her camera lens, and designed the sculptures as another lens. This encourages audiences to look closely at the ways archaeologists see the landscape during a field survey, and highlights the emotional dimensions of scientific exploration. In the final work, each glass boab represents a site visited during the field survey, with photographic images she captured while out in the field etched into eight of them; representing the sites where evidence of possible human occupation was identified.

Impact Evaluation Approach

Sue and Ursula's close working relationship was unique within the Art Series, and the Impact Evaluation team sought to explore it in depth. Ursula's long-standing engagement with archaeology was also distinctive, prompting the team to consider how her familiarity with the discipline shaped both the artistic process and the resulting work. The Impact Evaluation methods therefore focussed on the two practitioners, and their long-standing art-archaeology collaboration. A reflective interview with Sue and Ursula explored the history of



The multidisciplinary team during the field survey (left) and encapsulated on a glass boab (right). Images credit: UK Frederick



Ursula and Sue hold boabs up to the light, showing how the etched images create shadows on the wall. Image credit: CABAH / Jaqueline Wales

their relationship, the development of their project, and the nature of their collaboration.[2] To contextualise this interview, and further evidence impact, the IE Team drew on additional expert perspectives, including a reflective interview with curator Judith Blackall, who worked on *Unseeded*'s exhibitions and catalogue, as well as essays published in the catalogue, a CABAH podcast episode produced by Fiona Gruber, and from Sue and Ursula's collaborative and individual publications. This approach allowed not only the immediate impact of the work to be investigated, but to be considered as part of Ursula's sustained engagement with archaeological research over decades.

Impact Evaluation Findings

The Impact Evaluation revealed how *Unseeded* created an opportunity for deep engagement between artistic practice and archaeological investigation. Reflections done in the field, and then in the art studio, captured knowledge about archaeological processes in an aesthetic form. In doing so, it contributed to a current movement in archaeology that seeks to integrate artistic methods and outputs into research and dissemination.

A relationship for seeing the 'deep past in the present'

Sue and Ursula collaborated with no expectations for a specific outcome, trusting each other and the speculative process that would allow an artwork to emerge. Their relationship was based on years of appreciating a mutual way of seeing the landscape, beginning with a shared fieldwork experience in Western Australia in the early 1990s. Both are trained in aesthetic and archaeological practices, with the familiarity and value they see in different methodologies fuelling a long history of intellectual exchange around shared objects of study.

Art-science researcher Claudia Schnugg argues the effects of such interdisciplinary relationships on collaborators are "subtle, difficult to capture, and often



The multidisciplinary survey team carrying out work in the Ningbing Range. Image credit: UK Frederick

only reveal themselves over time".[3] Sue and Ursula's intellectual dialogue became visible to the outside world in a scholarly collaboration a decade after their first meeting. Co-authoring an article in 2009 exploring the re-purposing of Wandjina rock art imagery in contemporary graffiti in Perth, they combined their cultural and archaeological perspectives to offer new interpretations about the graffiti as artistic expression and engagement with traditional cultural symbols.[4]

Reflecting on this experience, Ursula said their collaborative scholarship "engaged with different forms of visual culture and material culture…



UK Frederick holds a real boab nut in the field. Image credit: UK Frederick



The team during the field survey, walking back to camp through boabs trees. Image credit: UK Frederick

incorporating an angle that isn't necessarily the norm for archaeology in Australia". She noted Australian archaeologists traditionally focussed on the past rather than seeking to connect the past to contemporary practices and experiences. Incorporating Ursula's perspective as a practicing artist to the analysis of the graffiti promoted a shift in Sue's archaeological research that influenced subsequent collaborative publications. She reflected that:

> Working with Ursula on that initial Wandjina graffiti paper brought home the idea of art as performance, and I increasingly took that into my writing about archaeology rock art.

Sue reflected how other artistic collaborations had not been as organic, but Ursula's background in archaeology enabled her to integrate seamlessly into the field survey:

> Because Ursula didn't ask questions like, why are you doing this? Or why are you doing that?, the field survey just proceeded as the field survey would proceed, and she was part of it, and just also observing it.

As an insider to the discipline of archaeology, Ursula can see what the researchers are seeing. And as a practicing artist, she can intentionally see these processes from an alternative perspective, uniquely positioning her to help researchers see their work and the landscape differently.

Integrating artistic practice into archaeological methods

Ursula embedded artistic practices that promoted shared reflection between Indigenous rangers, ecologists, archaeologists and volunteers. She used participatory methods for "getting people involved in different ways of experiencing Country, or the field work, which got them to reflect on their research in a new way". She encouraged the group to carve boab nuts, with guidance from the Indigenous rangers, reflecting that:

> I was really interested in using the boab nut carving experience as a way to see how people were responding to the ups and downs of fieldwork.

This carving activity enabled her to capture and consolidate emerging thoughts and ideas from the group's experiences, and make tacit knowledge tangible, informing the development of the final glass forms created in the studio on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country (Canberra).

Integrating artistic practice into archaeological methodology in this way shifts how the discipline is practiced, incorporating a diversity of voices and forms of knowledge. This practice-based work impacted what was noticed in the field, and therefore how meaning was made. What Ursula described as "looking at the looking" is a methodology she uses in many of her projects to focus attention on the specialised, embodied actions of archaeological discovery. In this 2019 field survey for the Ningbing Archaeological Project, it provided a reflective mode for capturing and considering the emotional dynamics at play when the hopes or expectations of archaeologists are frustrated by the reality of fieldwork.

Sue reflected that such frustrations are common in archaeology, and credited Ursula's influence to shift her focus from the "end goal" or stated research objectives, to its process:

> I always focussed previously just on the discovery - it was a good site, or it wasn't a good site… whereas working with [Ursula] has made me focus a lot more on the journey or the process of discovery, rather than the actual discovery.[6]

This shift of focus from outcome to process enables unexpected observations and outcomes to more readily emerge. Ursula reflected, the work did not fulfil the goal of the original research, but **"fulfilled a different type of potential… and in some ways that [boab] seed is meant to represent potential"**.

Ursula has worked for many decades to demonstrate the potential of integrating artistic practice into archaeology. She sees her work as part of a larger movement in the field that champions art as a research methodology, reflecting:

> Art is traditionally pitched as a form of communication or translation, rather than practice-led research in its own right. But I have noticed that there is a shift within Australian archaeology, even though it's on the margins.

Professor Doug Bailey, an advocate for the integration of artistic and archaeological practice stated that until recently, "the political economy of archaeology determines and limits how [archaeologists] move, act, produce and value our work and the products of our peers".[7] However, beyond the kinds of knowledge shared in traditional written research publications, there is other knowledge and stories that emerge during the work done during field surveys. While this knowledge is shared informally during reflective moments such as around the campfire at night, it is not explored further through traditional research



UK Frederick talking about *Unseeded* at UOW Gallery in 2022. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

methodologies, nor encapsulated within the usual suite of disciplinary outputs.

Unseeded is as an effective example of this broader shift to use arts-led techniques as primary methodologies in archaeology. The growing field of art-archaeology increasingly generates new knowledge about the 'past in the present' by blending material, emotional, cultural, and conceptual insights. The impact of *Unseeded* needs to be understood in the context of the influence of Ursula's overall career. Her body of work has steadily built an Australian agenda for art-archaeology with a combination of exemplary artistic practice, curatorial practices that platform an emerging community of practice, as well as traditional scholarly publications. While many artists internationally focus on archaeology as subject matter, Ursula's work is distinctive in bridging archaeology and art. This approach, Rodney Harrison, writes in the *Unseeded* catalogue, presents a "powerful provocation to archaeology as a contemporary socio-political field of practice".[8]

Aesthetic object as epistemic object

As archaeology expands to integrate artistic practice into its methodologies, it must also expand to include creative and aesthetic outputs within its modes of knowledge sharing. Sue and Ursula's collaboration continued beyond fieldwork into the production of the sculptures with expert glass blower Annette Blair at Canberra Glassworks. Sue was deeply involved in the decisions that shaped the final work in terms of colour, form and opacity.



The team look at the map while searching for sites on the field survey. Image credit: UK Frederick

Unseeded demonstrates how artworks can operate as forms of archaeological publication, expanding the conversation about Australian deep time by capturing and sharing knowledge that is not well conveyed in written forms. This knowledge includes researchers' tacit and embodied insights, speculative interpretations of observed phenomena, and the diverse perspectives of those involved in research. Sue reflected, *Unseeded* as an outcome, tells a uniquely "inclusive" story about the field survey:

> The artwork does actually tell that story of collaboration…with the Indigenous Rangers, with other people who were just members of the public because we had several people there who were retired, who were helping out as volunteers. So it tells a much more inclusive story about how field work is done, how things are found.

The form of *Unseeded* also represents an observation from the field, the meaning of which is not yet fixed. Ursula noted the presence of boab trees near the entrances of many rock shelter sites visited during the archaeological fieldwork. The trees and their nuts became markers in the landscape, indicators of where rock shelters might be found, possibly due to human presence. *Unseeded* as a public outcome allows this observation of possible past land-use, and its potential implications to be captured and shared in a speculative open-ended form, without fixing meaning or interpretation. Instead, it offers sensory resources for imagining possibilities. The attractive fullness of the organic forms of the glass boabs suggest the value of the nuts as a food source, and offers an embodied connection to their role in the deep history of Aboriginal lifeways.

By casting the nuts in glass, Ursula transformed them into objects that function as both aesthetic forms and conceptual lenses. Historians Lynette Russell and Jane Lydon noted in the *Unseeded* catalogue that Ursula honours, without reproducing the deep knowledge embedded in the Kimberley Aboriginal tradition of boab carving.[9] The glass boabs combine multiple layers of signification. Glass as a substance has many meanings in relation to the narratives of archaeology. Referencing camera lenses with their claims to truth and objectivity, curator Deborah Ely pointed out in her catalogue essay that the sand that archaeologists sift through or examine through optically stimulated luminescence, is used to measure the age of archaeological sites.[10] In his catalogue essay, Professor Rodney Harrison noted the significance of glass in colonial relations as



Unseeded on display at Drill Hall Gallery, ANU. Image credit: Lizzie Crouch

an introduced material adopted by Aboriginal people, and the narratives of Western cultural superiority that archaeologists wove around these practices and the resulting artefacts. In the sensory and symbolic registers of their materiality the boabs embody multiple perspectives on the landscape.[11] They contain both an awareness of the processes and experience of contemporary fieldwork, and a reflection on the historic role of archaeology in creating knowledge hierarchies and classifying cultural objects.

The boabs are tactile, even though they cannot be touched. They invite audiences to get close, to seek and to find, prompting experiential comparisons with the processes of discovery in archaeology. Ursula reflected:

> I think the work draws people in and allows them to explore, and to look and think. They are an opening for the conversation to go in different directions than it might otherwise.

The boabs are not static objects. They are activated by light and the movement of the audience. The etched photographs within are projected onto the walls, and the audience's position and perspective can reveal and distort the images. The boabs act as "epistemic objects" that sit between forms of knowledge, and stimulate interaction, investigation and reflection from their audiences. As historian of science H-J Rhineberger has argued, "epistemic objects" provoke new insights into the nature of knowledge "by virtue of their preliminarity, of what we do not yet know about them".[12] Originally theorised in relation to scientific investigation, art-science practitioners Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr and Chris Slater have pointed out how the products of art-science often fit this definition, operating as "question generating machines" that sit between the known and unknown.[13] Ursula reflected that **"the boabs are portals of engagement for other things. They can take people somewhere else"**. They open enquiry by disrupting assumptions, inviting reflexivity, and supporting a re-examination of disciplinary processes and boundaries.

Such processes can offer new insights into archaeology for both expert and general audiences. The university galleries where *Unseeded* was displayed enabled audiences including archaeologists, to engage experientially with complex ideas about history, material culture, and knowledge production. The work will continue to provide opportunities for archaeologists and importantly their students to reflect on research process and knowledge generation through its permanent display in the ANU College of Asia & the Pacific. The catalogue that accompanies the work also forms an important legacy, manifesting the deep intellectual exchange that underpins *Unseeded* and emphasising its contribution to the expansion and evolution of the field of archaeology.

Notes and references

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How *Unseeded* changed the conversation about Australia's deep history

VOICES:

Did this artwork bring new voices into the conversation?

Unseeded built on a long-standing relationship between archaeologist Sue O'Connor and artist UK (Ursula) Frederick. Bringing the voice of an artist into the conversation about deep time accentuated the creative, imaginative and collaborative aspects of work done on Country with Indigenous rangers and a multidisciplinary team. Ursula amplified knowledges that are under-recognised in archaeological research by creating reflective moments and introducing new ways to experience Country, while searching for evidence of human occupation and sitting around the campfire.

CONTEXTS:

Did this artwork change the context of speaking and listening?

Unseeded demonstrates how artistic practice can be integrated into the repertoire of archaeological methodologies to amplify the speculative and emotional aspects of research. The resulting glass boabs connected the behind-the-scenes processes of fieldwork to public gallery spaces, enabling diverse audiences to share in the curiosity, exploration and disappointment of research. The conversation has been broadened, to include the personal experiences that underly evidence-based discoveries about deep time.

PERSPECTIVES:

Did this artwork shift perspectives on Australia's deep history?

For both general and academic audiences *Unseeded* created sensory and imaginative ways to connect to the deep human history of the Kimberley. As a Non-Traditional Research Output the artwork brought attention to boab trees as signifiers of potential human occupation, without fixing their meaning or interpretation. The glass boab nuts function as lenses, offering multiple perspectives on the landscape, and contemporary and historical archaeological processes. The work offers new perspectives for both archaeologists to see new potentials in the landscapes they study, and for general publics to experience the "close looking" of the archaeological process.

ACTIONS:

Did these shifts in perspective create new possibilities for action in the present?

Unseeded models new possibilities for the field of deep time research. The best practice in art-archaeology collaboration between Sue and Ursula, is part of a broader shift to integrate artistic practice into archaeology, a practice that has influenced how the deep past is spoken about and contextualised in the present. Telling, as Sue described, a 'more inclusive story' about how fieldwork is done, positions *Unseeded* as a legitimate part of archaeological research, paving the way for more Non-Traditional Research Outputs to be included in future archaeological research. The artwork opens up whose expertise counts within archaeology, contributes to the broader democratisation of the discipline, and shapes how archaeology might be practiced in the future.

FURTHER RESOURCES



Public program at Drill Hall Gallery, featuring (L to R) Drill Hall Director Tony Oates, curator Judith Blackall, artist UK Frederick and archaeologist Sue O'Connor. Image credit: David Paterson

Public discussions

A panel discussion was held at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery to mark the opening of *Unseeded*. Bringing together artist UK Frederick, archaeologist Sue O'Connor, and curator Judith Blackall, the event was moderated by Director Tony Oates. Together, they discussed the creative and scientific processes behind the work, the collaborative research that shaped it, and the emotional and sensory dimensions of archaeological practice. The conversation highlighted how *Unseeded* uses art to reveal the complexities of fieldwork, knowledge-making, and deep time storytelling, opening new possibilities for public engagement with archaeology and Australian history.



Catalogue

A catalogue featuring reflections from leading historians, curators and scientists on the significance of the work was published in 2024. Supervised by Judith Blackall the catalogue is an important legacy, capturing the depth of intellectual exchange that underpins *Unseeded* and underscoring its contribution to the ongoing expansion and evolution of archaeological practice. The catalogue includes contributions by Paul Collis, Lynette Russell, Sue O'Connor, Jane Balme, Peter Veth, Deborah Ely, Jane Lydon and Rodney Harrison.

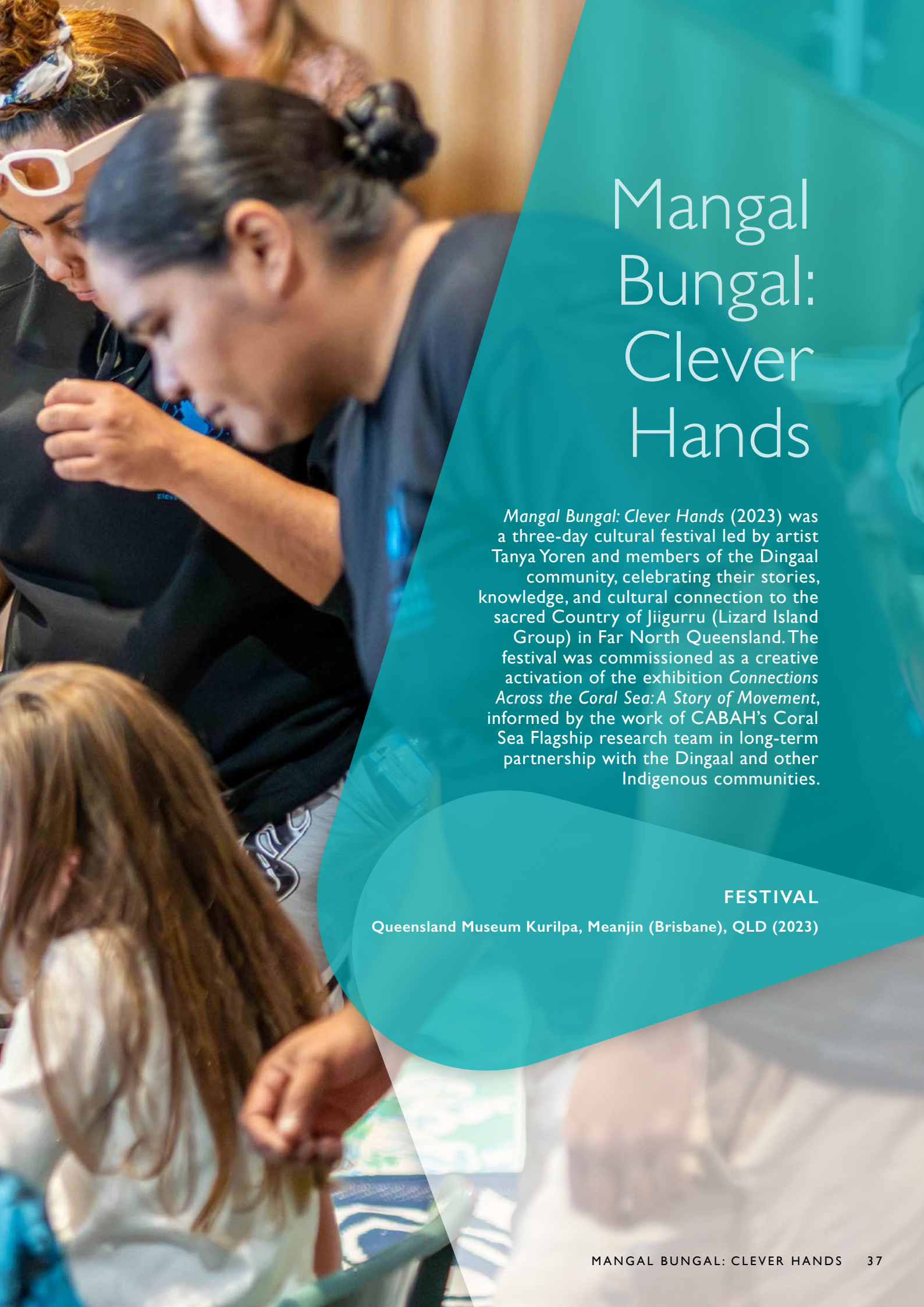
Podcast



In an episode of CABAHCAST, podcaster Fiona Gruber spoke to UK Frederick and Sue O'Connor about *Unseeded*. The podcast includes reflections from Margo Ngawa Neale, head of the National Museum of Australia's Indigenous Knowledges Curatorial Centre, about the boab nut as an Aboriginal cultural artefact with a long Indigenous history as a medium for artworks.



Dingaal women interact with visitors as they make finger puppets during a Discover Dingaal totems and language workshop. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales



Mangal Bungal: Clever Hands

Mangal Bungal: Clever Hands (2023) was a three-day cultural festival led by artist Tanya Yoren and members of the Dingaal community, celebrating their stories, knowledge, and cultural connection to the sacred Country of Jiigurru (Lizard Island Group) in Far North Queensland. The festival was commissioned as a creative activation of the exhibition *Connections Across the Coral Sea: A Story of Movement*, informed by the work of CABAH's Coral Sea Flagship research team in long-term partnership with the Dingaal and other Indigenous communities.

FESTIVAL

Queensland Museum Kurilpa, Meanjin (Brisbane), QLD (2023)

Meaning "clever with hands" in Guugu Yimithirr, *Mangal Bungal* was presented by 19 members of the Dingaal community, supported by many others through preparations and rehearsals. The festival featured dance performances, storytelling in language, jewellery-making and craft workshops for children. An inflatable dome in Queensland Museum's foyer screened *The Jiigurru Story*, an excerpt from CABAH's planetarium film, *The Earth Above*, that introduced audiences to the spiritual significance, deep time stories, and archaeological research of Jiigurru. Over 27,000 people visited the museum over the three day festival,[1] which was delivered during NAIDOC week 2023, the annual celebration of the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia.

The festival was envisaged as an activation of the exhibition *Connections Across the Coral Sea*, which shared evidence of millennia of travel and trade between people from mainland Australia, Torres Strait and Papua New Guinea. The exhibition included pottery fragments made from local materials recently found through excavation on Jiigurru, that provide the first evidence of an Australian pottery tradition over 1800 years old.

During the festival the Dingaal aimed to create an embodied and spiritual connection between Jiigurru and the museum by bringing the island's natural materials, including sand, shells, seedpods and driftwood for audiences to touch. Lead artist Tanya Yoren and Bryanne Darkan Yoren created mobile "sandscapes" from these natural materials that moved through the building with the community, ensuring Country was present wherever culture was shared.

The project was managed by Queensland Museum (QM), with Impact Evaluation Team members Lizzie Muller and Lizzie Crouch, and CABAH researcher Sean Ulm collaborating closely with QM staff and the Dingaal community. Development took place through a series of community consultations and was coordinated through the Walmbaar Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC, a representative body for the Dingaal clan.

Impact Evaluation Approach

As the 2023 NAIDOC theme was "For Our Elders", the Walmbaar Directors were interested to know how seniors from other cultures responded to *Mangal Bungal*, as well as the program's impact on other Aboriginal people. The Impact Evaluation Team[2] therefore worked with QM to recruit two public groups to take part in the evaluation: non-Indigenous seniors over the age of 65, and Indigenous students from Griffith University's Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (CAIA) program. Both groups were invited to attend at least three *Mangal Bungal* events



Dingaal men perform traditional dance during the opening ceremony of *Mangal Bungal.* Image credit: Queensland Museum

and view the exhibition *Conections Across the Coral Sea*. The seniors then took part in a Visual Matrix and the CAIA students took part in a Yarning Circle.

Unlike the other Art Series commissions, the Impact Evaluation Team was involved in supporting *Mangal Bungal* from the outset. Having participated in team meetings and community consultations the IE Team witnessed first hand the impact the project had on CABAH researchers, the Dingaal Community and Queensland Museum. Alongside the public focussed evaluation, this led to a more extensive practitioner-focussed evaluation for *Mangal Bungal* than for other artworks in the series, based on reflective interviews conducted with:

- **Dingaal community members**

  Stanton Thompson - Senior community member

  Tanya Yoren - Lead artist

  Uncle Vernon Yoren - Elder and Storyman

- **Queensland Museum staff**

  Dr Bianca Beetson - a Kabi Kabi, Wiradjuri and Ngemba woman; then Director, First Nations

  Mikayla-Haze Adams - a Quandamooka woman; Visitor Experience Officer

  Jodie Muraca - Learning Officer

  Bridget Wall - Engagement Manager

- **CABAH researchers**

  Chief Investigators and Coral Sea Flagship program co-leaders Professor Ian McNiven (Monash) and Distinguished Professor Sean Ulm (JCU)

Impact Evaluation Findings

For the Dingaal community *Mangal Bungal* provided a platform to strengthen culture, advocate for Country and rebuild historic connections to the wider world by telling their stories directly to an international audience.

Mangal Bungal provided an opportunity to mentor young researchers in ethical community engagement, and build the personal relationships that underpin two-way learning. The festival also increased Queensland Museum's ability to support Indigenous-led programs by working closely with CABAH researchers. This partnership had lasting effects on museum staff, practices and policies.

Young Indigenous art students valued the respectful combination of Indigenous knowledge and Western research they experienced in the museum, which they felt was rare in affirming Indigenous ways of knowing and being. A group of non-Indigenous seniors over 65 were deeply inspired by their experience, actively confronting gaps in their understanding of Australia's history in order to become advocates for Indigenous people, culture and history within their own communities.



Uncle Vernon Yoren tells Dingaal creation stories in Guugu Yimithirr language as part of *Mangal Bungal*. Image credit: Queensland Museum

Impact on the Dingaal community

Expanding the circle of responsibility

Tanya Yoren, Stanton Thompson and Uncle Vernon Yoren all described sharing their sacred stories with the world through *Mangal Bungal* as a duty to their Ancestors. Tanya called this "expanding the circle of responsibility" for their Country. The opportunity to do this on stage in the museum was a unique and emotional experience for Uncle Vernon:

> It was something so different sitting today amongst the audience. We've never done that in our lifetime. It was touching, heartbreaking. I felt emotion speaking about Country.

He felt that connecting with people from Australia and overseas had "opened the pathway" for the Dingaal to rekindle their historic connection to their international neighbours which had been lost. Both he and Stanton believed that CABAH's archaeological research was helping them reclaim this connection by displaying evidence of its history in *Connections Across the Coral Sea*. Stanton saw this as an opportunity for the Dingaal to build upon:



Uncle Vernon Yoren (centre) tells Dingaal creation stories in Guugu Yimithirr language during *Mangal Bungal*. Stanton Thompson (left) translated and Walmbaar Director Kenneth McLean (right) introduced the session on behalf of the Dingaal community. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

> It's the museum and the research, all the archaeology, all this scientific stuff they find. They'll open up the door for us. That's when we just carry it from there, then give it to the other people.

The success of *Mangal Bungal* in restoring the Dingaal's international connections was affirmed for Stanton when a Fijian family approached him after a storytelling session to share their own traditional stories which they felt resonated with the Dingaal's. Reflecting on this encounter Stanton was optimisitic about renewed cultural connection to "tribes in the South Sea" saying, "we'll find that connection, that relationship again with them."

Tanya described telling Dingaal stories as a liberatory act that addressed previous suppression:

> We have a right to share our side of the story because sometimes we've been controlled too much under power, and controlled under authority and government organisations and a lot of things. But as I look now [at what we've done in the museum], it made a clear picture for me that no government system can take you away from your culture and your land.

For Stanton telling their story in language was critical to this political reclamation. Guugu Yimithirr he explained, scaffolds the meaning in the stories, ensuring they are told in the right way, and showing that "culture's still living through our tongue".

Bringing Jiigurru Country to the museum

Tanya felt she had achieved her vision to make the museum a safe and appropriate space to tell Dingaal stories by bringing their Country with them through the natural materials from Jiigurru:

> I feel like I was home. It felt like we are on Lizard Island, so Lizard Island was here and otherwise we wouldn't have gone through with this program.

This "home-away-from home" relationship between Jiigurru and the museum was established through ceremonial protocols. The Dingaal were welcomed to Country by Yuggera, Nunukul and Yugambeh descendent Shannon Ruska. Uncle Vernon in turn "warmed up" the sandscapes of Dingaal Country for the Indigneous members of the Queensland Museum staff. The presence of Ancestors in the museum collection was also important, and motivated Uncle Vernon:

> I kept on thinking about the Old Fellas in here laying down [in the museum collection] and what they took away from our Country. They made me talk today. I said, I got to talk for them. I got to go talk on behalf of them.

An important sign for the Dingaal performers that they were properly honouring Country came through the appearance of a rainbow refracted onto a *Mangal Bungal* poster on the second morning of the festival. The Dingaal artists recognised this as the Rainbow Serpent Creator Spirit, who Uncle Vernon felt hesitant to include in his stories on the first day of the festival. Stanton explained that by showing himself the Serpent was giving them permission and confidence to tell his story, which connects Dingaal to other communities



Tanya Yoren creates one of the displays of natural materials from Jiigurru at Queensland Museum Kurilpa. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales



Dingaal artists and performers receiving smoke during the opening ceremony for *Mangal Bungal*. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

around Australia and beyond. Uncle Vernon sensed the Spirit moving through the audience:

> The rainbow went through everyone. He was here, with us. The Serpent. The audience, I could see it on them. There were sparkles coming out of them. Happy inside. Glad to hear our story.

Cultural strengthening through art

The appearance of the Rainbow Serpent was an important moment in a journey of increasing confidence for the Dingaal over the course of the festival. Sean Ulm who knows the community well, observed how they used the museum as a space to strengthen their cultural knowledge through mentoring and practicing. Sean noted that the challenge of engaging the public inspired the Dingaal to develop new ways of telling their stories iteratively over the three days.

The cultural strengthening that took place within the museum during *Mangal Bungal* was the most visible part of a large, inclusive community effort. A critical part of the preparation for *Mangal Bungal* was a community trip to Jiigurru to gather natural materials, a journey that has become difficult since the regular boat that previously connected the island to the mainland ceased operating. The *Mangal Bungal* commission included resources for two chartered planes to bring a large group, including children and Elders, to the island.

For some this was a welcome return, for others it was their first visit to their traditional Country. Sean noted the participants used this time on Country to tell stories multiple times, identifying where they had left things out. Tanya recalled how at the end of the trip a sudden rain shower appeared, drenching everyone and washing their sweat into the ground. For her this was a sign they were doing the right thing by Country.

As well as strengthening their culture internally, the Dingaal used *Mangal Bungal* as a platform to advocate for their community with influential figures such a politicians and mining executives. Sean pointed out that as part of their responsibility to care for Country, Dingaal must leverage opportunities like *Mangal Bungal* to influence policy, and establish a fair deal for the corporate use of their natural resources. Connecting the museum to remote Jiigurru enabled them to use the museum as a kind of embassy, harnessing its privileged cultural position to demonstrate the value and importance of Dingaal culture within a national and international context.



Walmbaar Director Kenneth McLean (right) advising during a dance practice behind the scenes at Queensland Museum. Image credit: Sean Ulm

Impact on Queensland Museum

Indigenising the museum

Bianca Beetson described how *Mangal Bungal* transformed the museum from a colonial space into an Indigenised space through what she described as a "Cultural Reclamation":

> Dingaal presence could be felt throughout the museum. It was wonderful to see mob's culture, knowledge and stories taking centre stage. It shifted the usual narrative by putting First Peoples first and bringing Traditional knowledge, culture, perspectives and history to the forefront.

This Cultural Reclamation was partly due to the scale of the festival and the large numbers of performers, events and spaces it used. It was also due to the project's underlying vision to make the museum a home-away-from-home, where the Dingaal were in charge of the program and felt ownership of the spaces.



Uncle Vernon Yoren with Jiigurru Country in front of the inflatable dome screening *The Jiigurru Story* from the CABAH planetarium film *The Earth Above* as part of *Mangal Bungal*. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

Indigenous Art Students who took part in the impact evaluation commented that the visible presence and agency of the Dingaal in the museum made them feel "invited by those Countrymen and Countrywomen to look at their stuff", changing their relationship to the belongings on display. The sense that the Dingaal themselves felt at home in the museum underscored the difference between what the students called the "immersive culture" of *Mangal Bungal*, compared to the "performative culture" or "the model of us being a show", which they felt usually characterised NAIDOC week events.

The Cultural Reclamation was significant for the Museum's Indigenous staff. Mikayla-Haze Adams – a Quandamooka woman and Visitor Experience Officer said *Mangal Bungal* changed the museum from a place where she felt required to assimilate, to one where she could express her own cultural knowledge and identity.

Mangal Bungal's three-day transformation of Queensland Museum was part of a larger institutional journey of First Nations-led transformation of the museum. Bianca reflected that Indigenous people do not tend to feel welcome in museums because "our objects have a place, but our people do not always feel they do". *Mangal Bungal* shifted that institutional bias, prioritising Indigenous people and their continuous living culture over historical artefact-based narratives. *Mangal Bungal* modelled a way of working with Indigenous communities that Bianca believed would shape Queensland Museum's future:

> This is it. This is how we're moving forward. We're here, we're not going anywhere. This is the gift that bringing Indigenous cultures properly into the museum brings. It's about showing that we're a living culture. We're not just the objects and those Ancestors in the collection. We're alive, we're breathing, and we've got so much we can bring to the table.



Indigenous Visitor Experience Officer Mikayla-Haze Adams touching Jiigurru Country after it was warmed up for her by Uncle Vernon Yoren. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

The commission was a forerunner of institutional changes that have followed, including the launch of the Queensland Museum Reconciliation Action Plan (Dec 2023), a First Nations Strategy (Jan 2024), an intensified repatriation program, an Indigenous recruitment strategy, and the launch of an Indigenous research fellowship scheme.

Becoming "story-ready" – Building museum staff capacity to support Indigenous cultural leadership

Underlying this institutional transformation was significant professional development for the museum's non-Indigenous staff. *Mangal Bungal* was stewarded by several Indigenous staff including Leitha Assan, Avril Quail and Imelda Miller, but most staff working on the project were not Indigenous. Bianca observed *Mangal Bungal* was a huge learning opportunity for them in terms of cultural growth and understanding:

> It's been really valuable for the non-Indigenous staff that have worked on it. The cultural growth, the relationships. And in some ways, you walk away with a higher cultural understanding and a different sense of self and spirituality.

While formal training is important, *Mangal Bungal* demonstrated a way of building cultural competence "on-the-job". Bridget Wall, Engagement Manager and *Mangal Bungal* QM project lead, said learning through involvement in a meaningful project is effective because staff directly experience the significance and benefit of this way of working:

> It changed people. I have people still coming up to me that worked over that weekend and say "that's the best thing I've ever done, it's changed my life". The legacy here is quite significant.

Learning Officer Jodie Muraca played a key role in the success of the festival, as it was she who spotted the rainbow refracted on the *Mangal Bungal* poster and shared the photo with the Dingaal performers. She reflected that to support the Dingaal's vision for the festival she had become attuned to the community's ways of being through deep listening. She recalled how she learned the significance of the Rainbow Serpent for the Dingaal by spending time informally with an Elder on a previous community visit when he had spotted a rainbow and talked with her about it.

Jodie's experience could be described as becoming "story-ready",[3] developing the ability through respectful listening to receive cultural knowledge, which affirmed her belief that museums must earn trust through listening:

> There's a lot of talk from [museum] leaders about institutional change. Well in my mind that requires radical change and recognition that we as an institution don't have the respect that we think we do. We have to earn respect from First Nations communities through our actions, through our listening.

The Indigenous Art Students who took part in the impact evaluation noted the welcoming attitude of the museum staff, and their respectful relationship with the Dingaal. The students reflected on the challenge of creating "deep listening time" within the crowded museum environment and wanted other museums to know the importance of this way of working. They felt this respectful treatment indicated a deeper attitudinal shift in Queensland Museum that created space for gentleness, which they found unusual:

> Everyone's been so respectful in the crew too… they've been very soft and gentle. And making sure that everyone's okay… it's just a bit weird for me … it's weird that they're all nice.



Learning Officer Jodie Muraca assists with the delivery of the Discover Dingaal totems and language workshops during *Mangal Bungal*. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

The idea that it would be "weird" for museum staff to be nice reflects the past experiences these students had of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in museums. Their experience of *Mangal Bungal* by contrast, made them enthusiastic and excited about the future. They noted it was important to see Indigenous staff like Bianca and Mikayla-Haze working within the museum, and felt their presence was driving an authentic, humanising transformation of the institution:

> Being here. And being behind the scenes too. You can feel it. You can feel the movement and the change. It might be incremental but it's big and it's with heart.

Transforming the museum through research partnerships

Bridget and Bianca saw the partnership with both the CABAH deep time researchers and the Impact Evaluation Team as crucial to achieving the museum transformations necessary for the success of *Mangal Bungal*. Bridget felt the partnership supported her own professional growth, enabling her to lead a project that was ambitious and innovative for the museum:

> It's made me feel more adventurous, or more open to working in weird, scary ways! That's what the Centre of Excellence is so good for, it joins all these people together to do these big collaborations. It's completely changed how I see my career.

For Bianca the Impact Evaluation was significant in providing evidence needed to support the museum's development. She pointed out that the museum rarely studies the impact that results from innovations in practice. For her part of the value of the partnership lay in providing insights into the audience's experience of Indigenous-led creative projects.

Impact on CABAH researchers

Building relationships between Indigenous communities, museums and universities

Reflective interviews with CABAH researchers Sean Ulm and Ian McNiven, who have long-standing relationships with both the Dingaal community and Queensland Museum, highlighted how *Mangal Bungal* marked a shift in the relationship between Indigenous communities, museums, and the discipline of archaeology, bringing creative practice and ceremonial engagement to the heart of research.

Ian described *Mangal Bungal* as a culturally appropriate ceremonial ending to the *Connections Across the Coral Sea* exhibition, formally recognising the spiritual dimension of sharing culture, and the right and responsibility of the Dingaal to lead this process. For Sean this ceremonial and public moment honoured his long relationship with the community and was a chance to model ethical practice for emerging researchers.

Sean observed that the museum, transformed by the presence of Dingaal culture and people, became a training ground for students, and a space to build closer relationships that might not have been possible on Jiigurru itself. He noted that doing fieldwork in remote places can be difficult for young researchers, often affording only limited community contact with



Bridget Wall (right) with lead artist Tanya Yoren (centre) and Bryanne Darkan Yoren (left) preparing the displays of natural resources from Jiigurru. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

specific Elders or advisors. For him, a significant impact of the project was offering young researchers a safe environment to spend meaningful time with a diverse group of community members; "It reminded me what a transformative experience it is engaging with community. It can change people's entire worldview".

As part of the delivery of the festival a "cultural mediation team" was formed including CABAH researchers and museum staff to support Dingaal artists, and help audiences connect with the program. For Sean this was a valuable opportunity for researchers to build relationships with museum staff, particularly with Indigenous staff who sometimes have a negative view of research. Bianca Beetson agreed this collaborative approach built relationships that challenge structural divisions between museums and universities:

> What I was quite stunned by over the weekend was having all the university staff and the QM staff, all on the ground working together as a team. We were there for one purpose and that was to make sure that the Dingaal could shine and they could do their best.

Integrating art into research

Both Sean and Ian felt *Mangal Bungal* and *Connections Across the Coral Sea* signalled a change in how impact is conceptualised in archaeology. Sean noted that creative practitioners were integrated into the research underlying *Mangal Bungal* from the beginning:

> On the very first day of CABAH's existence, we started fieldwork with Dingaal on Jiigurru, but we also had film-maker Martin Potter in the field with us. We had curators from the museum with us, and author Billy Griffiths as well. They were integrated into the research and involved on Country from the beginning.

This long-term creative engagement resulted in multiple public outcomes including *Mangal Bungal* and *Connections Across the Coral Sea*, as well as the television series *The First Inventors*, and the planetarium film *The Earth Above*. Sean understood all these outcomes to be deeply connected:

> I don't see the academic paper, or the exhibition or *Mangal Bungal* as separate things… I personally see them as all part of the same thread – they all bring us back to Country.

In an unusual move for archaeological research, *Connections Across the Coral Sea* was the first place where the team publicly shared findings about pottery



CABAH researcher Ariana Lambrides working as part of the cultural mediation team during the jewellery-making workshop. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

fragments discovered on Jiigurru. Though the decision initially drew criticism in some scholarly circles, Sean felt that presenting the research through an exhibition prior to peer-reviewed publication, ultimately strengthened community collaboration in shaping the narrative and deepened public engagement with its significance.

Amplifying Indigenous agency in archaeological research

Mangal Bungal brought a human scale and contemporary relevance to the exhibition's core research concept – the Coral Sea Cultural Interaction Sphere – which refers to millenia of movement and



Dingaal community members in a 3D printed reconstruction of an excavated midden on Jiigurru in *Connections across the Coral Sea*. Image credit: Sean Ulm

exchange across the Coral Sea. While the exhibition explored this regional connectivity across hundreds of communities, *Mangal Bungal* grounded the idea in the lived experience of the Dingaal. Ian noted that "personalising" a broad archaeological concept in this way made it more accessible and meaningful for audiences.

Crucially, centering Dingaal experience also amplified the agency of Indigenous people within the concept of the Coral Sea Cultural Interaction Sphere. Previous archaeological theories about the spread of ideas in the region emphasised their movement from north to south, casting Australian Aboriginal people as passive recipients of innovation from their northern neighbours. The exhibition aimed to counter this narrative by showing objects that evidenced the selective two-way movement of ideas and the active role of Aboriginal communities in a regional network.

The Dingaal's creative leadership of *Mangal Bungal* made two important contributions to this argument.



A Dingaal community member during the Discover Dingaal totems and language workshop. Image credit: Queensland Museum

First, it shifted the emphasis from an object-based narrative to one driven by people and culture. Second, it connected the deep-time story of Coral Sea connections to the contemporary lives of the Dingaal, and their continuous and ongoing role in cultural innovation.

Bringing this deep time story to life through the presence of the Dingaal underscored its relevance to contemporary political issues. For Ian, the project helped reposition Aboriginal culture as central to Australia's future relationships in the Southwest Pacific, offering what he called an "ancestral genealogy" that affirms Indigenous Australia's place in regional and global narratives.



Yarning Circle with students from Griffith University Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art. Image credit: Lizzie Crouch

Impact on young urban Indigenous artists

Twelve students from the Griffith University Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art visited *Connections Across the Coral Sea* and *Mangal Bungal*. Afterwards they participated in a Yarning Circle facilitated by Impact Evaluation Team member Stephanie Beaupark, an Indigenous curator, artist and scientist.

Blending Indigenous knowledge and Western research

The students valued the respectful integration of Indigenous knowledge and Western science in both *Mangal Bungal* and *Connections Across the Coral Sea*. They praised the exhibition and festival for treating both ways of knowing as equally important, with one student noting:

> There's an archaeology/art/science blend that's happened where it's nice to see Indigenous knowledges treated as just as important as the Western ways of looking at things.

The students discussed the history of archaeological researchers exploiting Aboriginal communities and concluded that here by contrast, they saw "mutual respect in transcultural space" both in the curatorial framing and the research underlying the exhibition. This mutual respect resulted in unusually accurate and insightful representations of Indigenous culture as "highly intelligent" and interconnected, rather than as "primitive and nomadic". This led the students to consider the benefits of research for changing public perceptions about the dynamism of Australian Aboriginal history, with one student saying, "We know it, but has it been documented like that before, so clearly?"

Inclusive storytelling

Mangal Bungal's focus on "clever hands" reflected the students understanding that embodiment is central to sharing Indigenous knowledge. Working with their own hands in the jewellery workshop strongly influenced their experience of the belongings on display in the exhibition, cultivating a deeper sensitivity to the skill and craftsmanship of their makers:

> You could feel it and kind of almost see the hand playing out making the work… that feeling of the hands workings came across with every little element in there.

The students noted the value of this embodied approach for those with diverse abilities, with several agreeing the hands-on activities in the program induced a quieter mind for neurodivergent people. The students felt the multi-modal design of the exhibition which offered audio, visual and tactile ways of engaging with the content, supported different learning styles and resonated with Indigenous ways of knowing. This experience of inclusivity was amplified by the Dingaal artists' approach to facilitation that explicitly welcomed people to be themselves:

> When one of the Auntie's was talking - she was inviting us and explaining how it was going to be - and said "just be yourself, be who you are". I had a moment with that, I was like "Woah, yep, okay." You're allowed to be your completely imperfect wonky self in this space.

The combination of inclusive design and welcoming facilitation made students feel safe in the museum – which they found unusual – and this sense of safety helped them to engage more deeply with the exhibition content.

Saltwater connection

Many of the students identified as Saltwater people and felt personally linked to the stories shared by the Dingaal:

> As soon as I start yarning then with those women, and we're talking about Saltwater Country, there was an instant connection there with her about Dugong. There's just that Saltwater connection.

These moments of personal exchange evoked what students described as "felt connection" – an intuitive,



Participants in a jewellery-making workshop. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

emotional resonance with Jiigurru and its people, and with the exhibition's wider theme of movement across the Coral Sea.

However, this sense of connection also revealed a deeper longing. Several students voiced frustration that they were "rushed off" after workshops, and wished for more time to talk with Dingaal community members. They felt the structure of the museum program, which they called **"linear museum time"**, limited the depth of cultural exchange. They recommended that future programs build in unstructured time for conversation, storytelling, and relational connection. This request was addressed when the students were invited to return to Queensland Museum for the impact evaluation of the final CABAH Art Series commission *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* in 2023. This time the Impact Evaluation Team worked with the museum to provide opportunities for the students to spend time with the senior artists from Mornington Island Art Centre.

Impact on a group of senior non-Indigenous audiences

Six non-Indigenous seniors over the age of 65 took part in a Visual Matrix after visiting *Connections Across the Coral Sea* and *Mangal Bungal* events. Participants in a Visual Matrix are invited to share the mental images and feelings that emerge for them in response to an artwork or exhibition, which can enable them to express reactions that are unexpected and even confronting. The following analysis of the Visual Matrix data began with a reflective discussion of its themes by the participating seniors directly following the matrix. It was then developed by the Impact Evaluation Team in a series of three analytical panels that included artist Tanya Yoren, filmmaker Martin Potter, the creator of *Jiigurru Story* shown in the planetarium dome, and finally one of the matrix participants. The aim of the analysis was to identify the symbolic and emotional resonance of the images, and connect these to the wider societal context.

Challenging the fiction of superior Western cultural maturity

The seniors' response to *Mangal Bungal* centres on their dawning recognition that Indigenous culture is older – and possibly more resilient – than their own Western settler cultures. The implications of this are challenging to the seniors' own sense of identity.

An early sign of this realisation came near the beginning of the matrix when one of the seniors remembered the wonder expressed by a group of children waching *the Jiigurru Story* film in the planetarium dome. The kids were lying on the floor, he said, but **"I took the privilege of age and sat in a chair"**. Another of the seniors caused general laughter among the matrix participants by responding kindly, but ironically, **"I've got an image of you now sitting in the chair, the Elder, with everyone on the ground"**.

Why was it funny to the seniors to imagine a person over the age of 65 as an Elder, and what does their laughter tell us about the emotional resonance of this image? "Elderhood" seemed to them an inappropriate or even transgressive position to occupy, and as the matrix progressed a deep source for this discomfort emerged. Having recalled a video in the exhibiton of an excavated midden, the seniors generated a sequence of images that questioned not only their own legitimacy as Elders, but the maturity and resilience of Western culture itself:

> The shells made me think about archaeologists 20,000 years from now digging through our rubbish dumps.
>
> Won't be finding too many shells.
>
> Lots of computer pieces.
>
> They'll have to wear hazard suits.
>
> My wife puts the cat litter inside a plastic bag, so it could last for 20,000 years.
>
> It made me think that we could get forgotten and rediscovered again in a rubbish tip.
>
> Bits of us.
>
> I mean, we seem so "now" – now. But we may not be "now" in 20,000 years time.
>
> The message stick sticks in my mind. I keep looking at that little boy.

There is humour in these images, but also sadness in the seniors' voices as they speak them. Reflecting on this sequence in the post-matrix discussion they expressed shame about what people in the future may make of their culture. They described fearing the loss of the knowledge stored in the many **"computer pieces"** that will be found in their waste, wondering **"who will be the caretaker of the different knowledges?"**

The final image in this sequence combined a message stick, an Indigenous tool for transmitting knowledge, with the image of a boy. This boy is a Dingaal dancer who features as a major figure throughout the matrix.



Audiences in *Connections Across the Coral Sea* during the *Mangal Bungal* festival. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

The seniors ruminated through numerous images on the ambiguity of his age and status, wondering repeatedly, is he a child or an adult? Their confusion about the boy points towards a deeper concern that was hard for them to explicitly express, but became increasingly present in their imagery as the matrix continued. Not only were they questioning whether they could be considered Elders, they were also wondering whether, in comparison to the age of Dingaal culture, their own culture could be considered as properly "grown-up". In the discussion following the matrix, the seniors reflected on this dawning sense of the relative immaturity of settler cultural, with one saying:

> I felt that there's the word little. I'm not a faith-based person, and so my life's very much start to finish and a couple of generations before. So when I listen to stories going back thousands of years, I just struggle to grasp that, because I don't feel that in my own experience. I'm not denying that or anything, I'm just saying that I don't understand it very easily. People who've got this really long connected history. I feel like I've got a really short little history.

This feeling of "littleness", combined with the seniors' concern about the ambiguous age of the Dingaal dancer, and their shame about what future generations may make of their culture, suggests that *Mangal Bungal* has destabilised a key settler-colonial fiction: that white Western culture is more mature than Indigenous cultures.

This fiction, shaped in part by past archaeological practices, portrays Indigenous people as both archaic and childlike. It casts Indgenous cultures as early stages in an evolutionary path that culminates in Western civilisation as the mature form of social development. In colonial regimes this fiction justifies harmful racist policies under the guise of protection. It also affords the settler imagination an aggrandised view of itself.

While none of the seniors who participated in the matrix would consciously align themselves with this schema, the imagery they produced suggests it nevertheless informs their sense of identity and position in the world. The shame and anxiety they revealed offers insight into what the loss of the fiction of superior Western cultural maturity *feels like* for these seniors. As Dingaal artist Tanya Yoren put it compassionately during analysis of the matrix, they are humbled, and that is painful, but it is also an awakening.

"Hard to swallow" evidence

The seniors' resistance to this painful awakening is reflected in their ambivalent reaction to the evidence about Indigenous histories presented in *Connections Across the Coral Sea*. While they are impressed and inspired by this evidence, they also produce images that discredit it, suggesting they are unable to fully accept its implications. For example, having described an image of an archaeologist excavating a midden which they remember from the exhibition, the seniors expressed doubt about the viability of the ancient food sources the excavation reveals. They tried to imagine eating sea snails, which they say would be unappetising, or even poisonous no matter how you prepared them. "I don't know", one says "seasnails are pretty toxic, and if you eat one then you will probably die". Their aversion suggests the seniors find the evidence about historic Aboriginal lifeways "hard to swallow".



Mangal Bungal audiences handle the natural resources from Jiigurru. Image credit: CABAH / Jacqueline Wales

They are also sceptical about evidence of the large distances travelled by ocean-going craft that enabled trade and travel across the Coral Sea. They envisage the fragility of the boats that feature in the exhibition, and the likelihood that many would be lost to the ocean:

> I had a vivid image present to me when I was going through the coastal exhibition – imagine, if one of those [boats] was in a storm. They're so small, they're so fragile, they've travelled thousands of miles. What if they're hit by a big storm, how many of those maybe never made it? I don't know.
>
> Yeah, they're fragile.
>
> I just couldn't imagine them crossing seas.

The viability of the boats is a persistent concern throughout the matrix. The seniors described them as too narrow to kneel or stand in, and later they imagined the canoes disintegrating in rough seas, tipping over and leaving their crew in the water. These images expressed scepticism about the research narrative of historical long ocean voyages, but also a deeper consideration of how objects and stories are lost from history, and how difficult it is to know about the past.

Countering "the great Australian silence"

The seniors' struggle to accept evidence of Australia's deep and sophisticated Aboriginal history shows them grappling with what anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner described as the "great Australian silence"; the exclusion of Aboriginal experience from settler consciousness that amounts to "a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale".[4] The senior's awareness of the ignorance that has resulted from this silence was established in the opening statement of the matrix, which was spoken with a mixture of awe and dismay: "When I was looking at the display the thing that struck me was - I didn't know any of that stuff!"

In the post matrix discussion the seniors reflected on the paucity of their education in Aborignal history which they described as "a couple of paragraphs"

portraying Aboriginees as nomadic hunters. Some questioned whether this gap in the historical record was due to Indigenous oral traditions, but others acknowledged, with regret, **"we didn't ask either"**. Their reflections reveal a painful truth, that ignorance was not just systemic, but internalised, and now being actively unlearned.

The seniors were also concerned that they were ill equipped to understand Indigenous knowledge when it was shared with them. They expressed frustration that they did not understand stories told in Guugu Yimithirr language, that they could not see the animal shapes in the stone arrangements featured in the planetarium film, and that they didn't know if the Dingaal dances evoked birds or storm clouds. One speaker expressed a sense of failure saying **"you feel like you should have seen it"**. Their frustration reflects a growing awareness that information alone will not address the "great Australian silence". The real challenge is the limits of the seniors' habitual ways of seeing.

Despite feelings of frustration, there were signs that experiencing *Mangal Bungal* helped the seniors to begin to address this challenge, by actively seeking new perspectives. One of the matrix participants joined an analysis session several months after the festival and recalled the collective effort of the group to understand **"stuff we hadn't really seen or known"**. He said that he had expected to feel silly for not knowing things, but instead found safety in the shared vulnerability of the seniors' group who were **"all in the same boat"**. He noted all the participants in the matrix were moved by the reactions of children, whose wonder and openness gave them a way forward. By imagining how it would be to experience the exhibition through children's eyes the seniors could overcome the limits of their own education, accept "not-knowing", and associate learning with curiosity rather than defensiveness.

The struggles faced by these seniors has significant implications for broader cultural change. As engaged and reflective citizens they seek to act as progressive advocates for Indigenous people, culture, and history. During the matrix one of the participants described feeling empowered by the exhibition to better take on this role:

> **The archaeological dig meant a lot to me, because they actually found some pottery, and then I went and saw the bits of the pottery. Where we live some people are not very receptive to Indigenous history, and to see some science where people are establishing it in a good scientific way was quite empowering for me. I'm just pleased I learnt that. I didn't know that. Here's the thing, I didn't know that.**

In this emotionally charged statement, the speaker showed how encountering the fragements of pottery in person and reckoning with their own incomplete knowledge, has equipped them to challenge the deeper racism and resistance of others in their community.

Mangal Bungal happened three months before the referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament – a time of heightened national debate that revealed persistent prejudice. *Mangal Bungal* and *Connections Across the Coral Sea* helped these seniors address the narratives and silences that have shaped the world view of many Australians of their generation, enabling them to have more informed conversations with others. The impact evaluation provided a rare and intimate glimpse into the emotional undercurrents of cultural change, and the necessary work of unlearning and reimagining history and identity in Australia.

Notes and references

1. Number of individuals entering the museum provided by Queensland Museum monitoring system. As *Mangal Bungal* events took place throughout the museum, including the entrance lobby, all visitors entering the museum encountered elements of the festival.

2. The Impact Evaluation of *Mangal Bungal* was led by Lizzie Muller, in collaboration with the Impact Evaluation Team. The Yarning Circle with the CAIA Indigenous art students was facilitated by IE Team member Ngugi artist, scientist, and curator Stephanie Beaupark.

3. Archibald, J. (2008) *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit*. University of British Columbia Press.

4. Stanner, W.E.H (1969) The Great Australian Silence in *After the Dreaming: The 1968 Boyer Lectures*, 18-29. ABC Enterprises.

How *Mangal Bungal* changed the conversation about Australia's deep history

VOICES:

Did this artwork bring new voices into the conversation?

Mangal Bungal celebrated the long-standing relationship between CABAH researchers and the Dingaal clan bringing more voices, especially women and children into the dialogue. It enabled the Dingaal community to speak directly to national and international audiences, expanding the "circle of responsibility" for caring for Jiigurru Country. These direct connections were deeply emotional and transformative for all involved.

CONTEXTS:

Did this artwork change the context of speaking and listening?

By bringing Jiigurru's natural materials, language, and ceremony into the Queensland Museum, *Mangal Bungal* shifted the museum from a colonial institution into a space of cultural safety and two-way learning. The Dingaal artists created a home-away-from home where they were able to speak confidently to audiences in their language. The festival emerged from years of integrating creative practice into research that produced new ways of sharing discoveries and ancient knowledges through an iterative dialogue with the public.

PERSPECTIVES:

Did this artwork shift perspectives on Australia's deep history?

Mangal Bungal caused a significant shift in perspective for a group of senior non-Indigenous audiences who experienced a "painful awakening" about the limits of settler culture and the historical depth and sophistication of Aboriginal culture. By contrast, for a group of young Indigenous artists *Mangal Bungal* and *Connections Across the Coral Sea* validated their existing perspectives on Aboriginal history. This positive experience shifted their view of museums and researchers, seeing them as potential allies in the pursuit of truth-telling and authentic cultural representation.

ACTIONS:

Did these shifts in perspective create new possibilities for action in the present?

Mangal Bungal linked evidence of ancient cultural practices with contemporary Aboriginal life and political realities, strengthening the Dingaal's international connections, and capacity to advocate for their Country. It equipped senior non-Indigenous audiences with the insights and knowledge necessary to counter prejudice in the wider community. The festival deepened Queensland Museum's capacity for supporting Indigenous-led programming, helping the museum become a safer place for Indigenous people and laying the foundations for ambitious institutional change.



Audiences watching *The Earth Above* Image credit: Deakin Library

FURTHER RESOURCES

The Earth Above

The Earth Above: A Deep Time View of Australia's Epic History is a feature-length full-dome planetarium film from CABAH produced by the Deakin MotionLab in collaboration with First Nations communities and UOW Science Space. The film explores Australia's past 140,000 years, incorporating traditional and scientific knowledge to tell Australia's epic story and transport viewers to four locations: Girraween Lagoon on Larrakia and Wulna Country outside Darwin in the NT; Cloggs Cave on GunaiKurnai Country in Victoria's East Gippsland region; Lake Mungo in NSW on the land of the Barkandji/Paakantyi, Ngiyampaa and Mutthi Mutthi people; and Jiigurru (Lizard Island) on the Great Barrier Reef, which is sacred to many, including the Dingaal community.



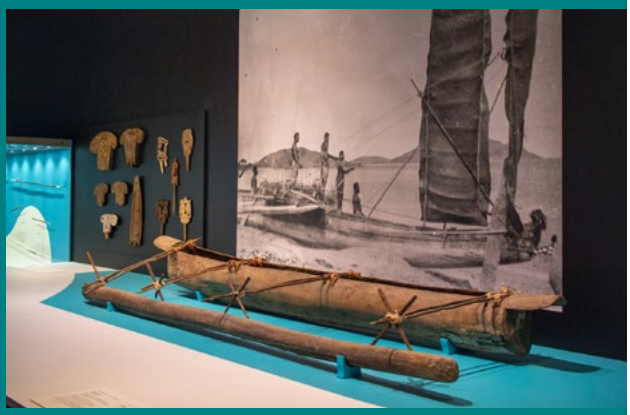
Inflatable planetarium dome showing *The Earth Above* as part of *Mangal Bungal.* Image credit: Queensland Museum

The First Inventors

The First Inventors is a landmark four-part documentary series that profiles Indigenous knowledges and histories, spanning over 65,000 years. The series, for which CABAH is the principal research partner, prioritises community-led storytelling and brings those stories to audiences via a first-of-its-kind broadcasting partnership between Network10 and NITV.

Virtual exhibition

Connections Across the Coral Sea continues to be available as a virtual exhibition on the Queensland Museum website. The immersive digital experience invites users to navigate the exhibition space online, uncovering stories, objects, videos, and archaeological insights that reveal the deep history of trade and cultural exchange across Papua New Guinea, Torres Strait, and the northeast coast of Queensland



Connections Across the Coral Sea at Queensland Museum Image credit: Queensland Museum

CABAHCAST

An episode of the CABAH podcast on *Mangal Bungal* featured interviews with Dingaal community members, CABAH researchers and museum staff, and included live recordings of festival events and audience reactions.

Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin:
Stone Fish Traps of the Wellesley Islands

Artists:
Rayarriwarrtharrbayingat Amy Loogatha (Kaiadilt),
Thunduyingathui Bangaa Dolly Loogatha (Kaiadilt),
Dibirdibi Elsie Gabori (Kaiadilt),
Dibirdibi Agnes Kohler (Kaiadilt),
Dibirdibi Dorothy Gabori (Kaiadilt),
Dibirdibi Amanda Gabori (Kaiadilt),
Juda Juda Rukuthingathi Bereline Loogatha (Kaiadilt),
Gloria Gavenor (Gangalidda/Lardil),
Kuthakin Coralie Thompson (Guthagun/Lardil),
Madar Joelene Roughsey (Lardil).



Installation view of *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* at NorthSite Contemporary Arts Gallery, 2024. Image credit: Cristina Bevilacqua



Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin: Stone Fish Traps of the Wellesley Islands (2024) is a 20-metre panoramic painting created by ten artists with support from Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation Mornington Island Art Centre (MIArt). The painting celebrates the cultural importance of the stone fish traps of the Wellesley Islands region to the Kaiadilt, Lardil, Yangkaal, and Gangalidda peoples, reflecting identity, knowledge, and connection to Country. Ngurruwarra/Dernernyin is dedicated to Kaiadilt Elder and artist Dibirdibi Elsie Gabori, who passed away after the work was completed.

EXHIBITIONS

NorthSite Contemporary Arts, Gimuy (Cairns), QLD (2024)

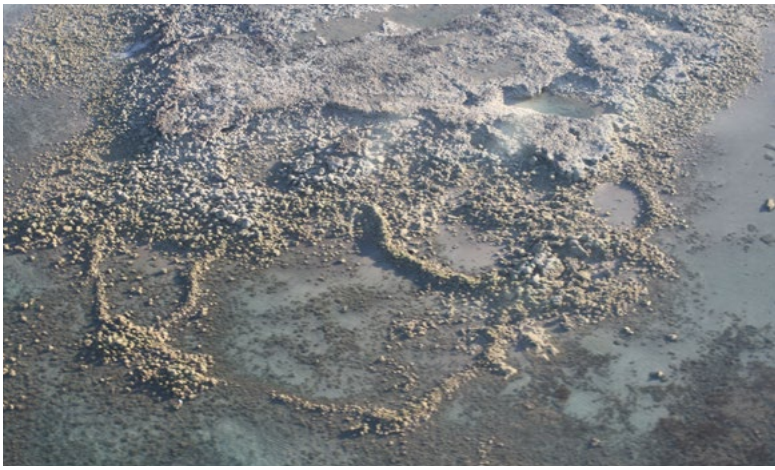
Queensland Museum Kurilpa, Meanjin (Brisbane), QLD (2024)

Australian Museum, Gadigal Country (Sydney), NSW (2026)

Proposed as an intergenerational knowledge sharing project,[1] the concept for *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* emerged from a long-standing relationship between CABAH researcher anthropological archaeologist Sean Ulm (JCU) and Kaiadilt, Lardil, Gangalidda and Yangkaal communities, who have collaborated for over two decades to research the significant stone-walled aquaculture systems in the Wellesley Islands region. The title combines the Kaiadilt word *Ngurruwarra* and the Lardil word *Derndernyin*, both meaning 'fish trap', highlighting the shared cultural significance of the stone fish traps across the Wellesley Islands communities.

Over 500 stone fish traps are known on this Country, the highest density of such structures in Australia. They take the form of enclosed or semi-enclosed pens where marine animals are temporarily captured at low tides, allowing communities to take what they need. As the tide rises again, the remaining animals are freed. Ongoing collaborative research aims to better understand how to conserve the fish traps – which are deeply intertwined with identity and culture – for future generations.

This large painting honours the scale of the fish trap landscape and was collaboratively created by ten women artists who work at the Mornington Island Art Centre (MIArt artists). Well-known for their use of bold, vibrant colours to depict their Country, the artists belong to a globally renowned artistic tradition established by the late Kaiadilt artist Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori. Their practice is highly significant to cultural continuity and connection with language and Country for the people of the Wellesley Islands, which was severely disrupted by forced removals in the late 1940s. The MIArt artists address this in their



Aerial views of the fish traps in the Wellesley Islands. Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl



MIArt artists at NorthSite Contemporary Arts. Back, left to right: Dibirdibi Amanda Gabori, Kuthakin Coralie Thompson, Juda Juda Rukuthingathi Bereline Loogatha and Dibirdibi Dorothy Gabori. Front, left to right: Thunduyingathui Bangaa Dolly Loogatha, Gloria Gavenor, and Dibirdibi Agnes Kohler. Image credit: Cristina Bevilacqua

work by embracing their joy and love of Country alongside grief and loss of shared histories.

At Queensland Museum Kurilpa where the work was evaluated, the painting was displayed in a crescent shape within a dimly lit room, creating an experience for the audience of being inside a stone fish trap. Accompanying screens showed footage of the artists creating the work, linking details in the painting with footage of Country filmed by CABAH researcher and film maker Martin Potter (Deakin University). The audio track by Potter was mixed by artist and academic Patty Preece (Central Queensland University) combining sounds from Country with a remastered recording by linguist Nicholas Evans (ANU) of senior Kaiadilt man Dugal Goongarra in 1982 sharing cultural teachings about the stone fish traps in language through the story of Crane, Seagull and Rock Cod.[2]

Impact Evaluation Approach

The Impact Evaluation Team investigated the impact of making the artwork on the practitioners involved. This included reflective interviews with MIArt General Manager John Armstrong and Gallery Manager and Kaiadilt artist Bereline Loogatha to understand the experience of the MIArtists, and with CABAH researcher Sean Ulm.

Through consultation with John and Bereline, the MIArt artists expressed their desire to know about young Indigenous people's experience of *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*. In terms of public impact therefore, the evaluation focused on the experience of students from Griffith University's Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art program (CAIA students).[3]



The CAIA students meeting senior MIArt artists at Queensland Museum Kurilpa. Image credit: Lizzie Muller



The CAIA students yarning and weaving together at Queensland Museum Kurilpa. Image credit: Lizzie Muller

The relationship between the CAIA students and the Impact Evaluation Team was first formed in 2023 during the *Mangal Bungal* evaluation. In their feedback on that experience the CAIA students expressed a desire for more opportunities to spend time with senior Indigenous artists. In response, the IE Team designed an experience of *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* that enabled the students to connect with the MIArt artists and learn about their work. Before viewing the artwork, the students attended a public panel discussion featuring MIArt artists Bereline Loogatha and Kuthakin Coralie Thompson, language activist and artist Coreen Reading, Coreen's daughter Olivia, CABAH researcher Sean Ulm and linguist Nicholas Evans. The panellists discussed their longstanding research relationships, their shared goals of protecting Country, and how this artwork celebrates hope despite the history of adversity and loss. The three artists spoke about the impact of being displaced from Bentinck Island and emphasised the importance of finding joy in their love for community and Country. They described how they worked through the grief of the past with hope for the future of cultural continuity by creating this artwork together. This discussion was followed by an informal meeting between the CAIA students and the MIArt artists in the gallery with the artwork, as well as lunch in the museum staff room. The impact of this rich engagement is evident in the students' accounts of their experience of the artwork.

To research the experience of the CAIA students the IE team developed a hybrid method – the Yarning Matrix – detailed in the report methodology. The method combines principles from the Indigenous research method of Yarning and the psychosocial method the Visual Matrix. It produces data that is both symbolic and relational, and is quoted extensively in the text that follows.



A close-up section of *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*.
Image credit: Michael Marzik

Impact Evaluation Findings

The impact evaluation revealed that *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* created space for sharing stories from different Countries across Australia, highlighting connections and similarities. The yarning matrix showed how the artwork helped the students connect with and better understand how to care for Country. These teachings through the language of art empowered the students to use their own art to celebrate and advocate for Country. *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* was created through a process of compromise and collaboration between the MIArt artists. Their leadership demonstrated how respectful research and relationships between Indigenous communities and researchers can be navigated.

Finding lost connection through the language of art

The CAIA students at the beginning of the Yarning Matrix, described imagery that focused on the themes of trauma and healing expressed through the artwork, the panel discussion, and their conversations with the MIArt artists. The CAIA students felt the complexities of trauma and resilience resonated through the painting in a multisensory way, and particularly through colour:

> To me you could feel the vibration of the hurt. It's very multisensory. You could feel and almost hear the echoes and the depth of the hurt, but it was just done so poetically with the brightness and the richness of colour showing that resilience in that reverberation of that colour.

As the Yarning Matrix continued, the CAIA students connected these themes to their personal experiences of disconnection from Country, intergenerational trauma and their artmaking. Speaking of the shared experiences of loss of Country, one student expressed mixed emotions of longing for a home that you never really knew:

> ...for me [there] is longing for a place that may no longer exist. There was very much that sense for me. Tapping into things that maybe I wish I had a deeper connection to... The image took me home to a place that I spent so little time. It just made me feel overwhelmed with a feeling of home. And particularly the blue water.

The weight of emotions and memories here were activated by the specific shade of blue depicting the water. Physically being with and yarning about the artwork created space for the CAIA students to address their longing to know more about this Country and their own Countries. The CAIA students felt the language of painting enabled people to step into a space where other languages and knowledges have been lost or are sleeping:

> I love the possibility that artwork can re-awaken knowledges that may be dormant or sleeping. There's something really strong about that, that you might not even need to be from there. More to come in and look at that artwork and have a memory all of a sudden about your [own]



A close-up of one artist painting *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*.
Image credit: Martin Potter



Artists collaboratively working on Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin at MIArt. Image credit: MIArt

> community and be able to work out a connection or something that you had no idea was actually inside you.

This quote demonstrated the shared and parallel experiences of connection and loss across the continent and a longing for Country as home. The CAIA students experienced embodied knowing and connection with culture and Country inspired by the painting's communication beyond words.

The Yarning Matrix revealed that shared stories of loss are also shared stories of love of Country, with connections between cultural knowledges across the continent. As they spent time together with the painting, the MIArt artists and CAIA students explored their shared knowledges through stories about eel migration patterns. They joyfully discussed the ways many diverse cultures across the continent are interconnected through Country and the different types of fish traps each community make. The image of the eel connecting Country across the continent was a reminder that the loss experienced by any Country or community affects all others:

> That really resonated with me that even though this artwork is a particular place with a particular story, it's also everybody's story because we all speak about loss, and we all know we have this story. Maybe it's a different context, but it's everybody's story. Everybody here has the same story of loss.

The CAIA students recognised the feeling of dispossession in the painting, even though it is very different from their own experience. They found connection in this shared longing for home. They saw a path towards collective healing through art by simultaneously expressing the beauty and love of Country while also acknowledging loss.

Caring for Country through art

Recognising this shared connection and dispossession led the CAIA students to speak of artmaking as a way of continuing to care for Country from which you are separated or displaced. As emerging artists, the CAIA students were sensitive to the techniques used by the MIArt artists, noting how the painting brings the fish traps to life in a vivid tangible way:

> I can see the aerial viewpoint on most of the elements and the marks... like a bird's eye view. It feels like if you look at the things that you think might be a rock, you could literally pick it up because they painted it as a tangible thing within the painting. You just want to pick up this rock.



Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin exhibited at Queensland Museum Kurilpa. Image credit: Queensland Museum

The CAIA students identified how the MIArt artists' brought the viewer into their Country through the painting. The birds eye view of the fish traps, the realistic depiction of animals and the vivid use of colours gave the artwork a lively feel. The CAIA students described how these techniques produced "vibration", are "chunky" and "dynamic but with quiet pauses, bits that drew you in and made you soften and quiet and lean into it and listen more".

The CAIA students felt they had been transported to the MIArt artists' Country by the painting, which not only represents the fish traps but fully embodies them and the MIArt artists' deep cultural connectedness to their Sea Country. That is, the painting also embodies community, the stone, the dugong, the turtles, and all interconnected aspects of Country entwined in the ongoing life of the fish traps. In the absence of being able to physically use, conserve and renew the traps, the act of painting them becomes the best possible action for tending to Country and cultural continuity.



A close up section of *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*.
Image credit: Michael Marzik

Coreen Reading emphasised in the panel discussion the importance of art as a public platform for Kaidilt people to communicate with the world. The CAIA students responded to this idea of the painting as way for artists to advocate for what is important to them in addressing the cultural, ecological and land management issues affecting Country. For example, the students felt the painting's depiction of the brush-tailed rabbit rats (*Conilurus penicillatus*), a critically endangered species no longer found on Bentinck Island, communicated the community's interest in reestablishing the species population on their Country:

> It creates conversation, raising that awareness of things the people might not know... It helps to put story on canvas, it helps to share, but it's also their own research project and going, 'hey, we need funding for this'.

The CAIA students said art can start important conversations, give a voice to remote communities, and be a focal point to bring in monetary and scientific support for community led research. Their feedback revealed the success of this artwork as a platform for representing Indigenous experiences and issues in colonised spaces.

A "warm hug": Art empowering audiences through belonging

One of the strongest images to emerge in response to the painting was that of a "warm hug". This image was used several times by the CAIA students in the Yarning Matrix, the MIArt artists, the CABAH researchers and by members of the public recorded in a podcast made by CABAH about the artwork.

For the CAIA students this hug was strongly associated with feeling welcomed as family when they were experiencing the artwork with the MIArt artists.

> You walked in, I don't know if anyone else felt it, but it didn't feel like a stranger walking into that, and then when they came into their artwork, we all just naturally sat down like little kids... it was such a familial feeling. There was this big warm hug feeling and the sunset feeling. It felt like they were my teachers. They wanted to share the feeling... how we can learn from each other, not just them teaching us – because it's all interconnected.

The CAIA students continually returned to the image of themselves as children at the feet of Elders, learning from them as part of their family. The hug symbolised the feeling of being taken care of, connected, and "held" by culture and community, and conveyed the value of reciprocity that is beyond words. The "sunset feeling" reflected the MIArt artists' warmth and appreciation for what the CAIA students bring to this two-way learning relationship.

In a session analysing the data from the Yarning Matrix with Bereline and John, they reflected on this image of the hug. They noted the CAIA students alluded to the range of reasons you can hug people, from a simple greeting, to expressing joy, and to comforting each other through grief. Bereline suggested the feeling of the hug comes from the spiritual connection to Country that the artists have put into the painting:

> Sitting on the canvas here, the memories that [the artists] had at home would have been still running through their head. Spirituality from that time on Country, it comes to the canvas… [The students] feel like they're walking in and getting a great hug, they feel that spirituality from our ladies and myself. They walk in. You could sense it. Somehow, they left their spirit in the painting as well. Everything we hold is sacred.

The act of painting is spiritual; it embodies the sacred space of the fish traps and the stories the MIArt artists share. The CAIA students were able to tune into the spirituality expressed in the painting and feel 'held' in the embrace of that sacred space. Feeling held and in touch with culture is essential when dealing with the difficult realities of being Indigenous Australians navigating colonial spaces and systems.

The experience of being held by the artwork and learning from the MIArt artists enabled the Indigenous CAIA students to talk about hardship in an alternative way, and to cultivate new and more nuanced perspectives as artists. In the informal meeting with the CAIA students, the MIArt artists



The CAIA students with Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin and MIArtists. Image credit: Lizzie Muller

reflected that while some urban Indigenous artists show anger in their work, it's "healthier for the spirit" to work through those feelings by making art together and connecting with the love and beauty of Country. This perspective had a substantial impact on the CAIA students. During the group yarn there was a shift where the CAIA students collectively realised the possibility to address trauma and loss through love and beauty, as well as through anger. One student articulated this by saying:

> You can make angry things, but there are other ways to heal that is not really taught in Western ways of art or just lifestyle in general.



Artists working collaboratively on *Ngurruwarra/Derndеryin* at MIArt. Image credit: Martin Potter

The CAIA students expressed the pressure they feel to produce "perfect" art, and related the physicality and visibility of the brushstrokes on the painting to their own experiences of artmaking:

> In my brain. I'd be going, 'no, I have to have it perfect and smooth to be a proper artist'... but we don't have to fit these perfect little boxes.

The brushstrokes sparked the realisation that unpolished art can be equally if not more impactful than "perfect" art. The imperfections and textures can add to the story the artwork is telling, connect to the experience of making the artwork on Country and demonstrate the uniqueness of each artist. The CAIA students wanted to carry this realisation into their future practice, with one saying:

> I am just going to picture the dirt that was embedded on every bit of that canvas, the dog hair, the bristles, the brushes, and I'm not going to strive for perfection that's been so ingrained. I am just going to be me. You just feel the essence of the story and what they're feeling pouring out through the paint. I wish I could be more like that and let go.

The feeling of being "held" by this vibrant, loving, joyfully "imperfect" artwork opened new, creative possibilities for the CAIA students as emerging artists. Carmen Perez, Indigenous Engagement Officer at Griffith University, reflected on the CAIA students' experience several months after their visit to *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*, noting the students' final art work assignments were influenced by the painting and the Yarning Matrix. Many spoke about the impact of their experience in their end of term critiques.

Building agency and confidence for advocacy

The MIArt artists created the work as an immersive space where audiences can see the landscape of the fish traps, helping them connect more deeply with Country. The artwork offers accessible glimpses of on-Country experiences and a feeling of home and belonging. The painting demonstrates how artworks can teach others about specific communities—their relationships, struggles, love, and joy in knowing their Country. Being physically surrounded by the artwork provided a sense of being invited in, creating a feeling of belonging and responsibility to care for this Country. The artwork, through both the curved shape of the installation and the imagery and colours, became a portal into the artist's Country, inviting audiences to share in the care of the fish traps, and by extension, the care of Country and culture.

Seeing the MIArt artists use art so expertly to advocate for their Country, the CAIA students felt a sense of responsibility to use their own platform as artists to advocate for the future conservation of the fish traps, and other issues important to their own communities:

> It makes me think what capacity will I have to actually also be a voice for their story and continue it?

Experiencing *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* and meeting the MIArt artists helped the CAIA students feel safe, supported and connected to share their experiences of longing for connection to their own culture and Country. They expressed feeling empowered, with a stronger sense of their ability to act now and to find their voices as emerging artists:

> Even if we may not have the knowledge of how to fix all these things, we might be able to influence people to want to fix them.

The impact evaluation shows how art creates space for connection and embodied knowing, which can lead to action. Art communicating in a language beyond words expands what audiences take away from the artwork, encouraging a shared responsibility to care for people and Country. This responsibility includes the language of



Images from on-Country archaeological work done in partnership with the Traditional Owners. Images credit: Sean Ulm (above), Daniel Rosendahl (below)



respect for their new understanding of this Country, and the language of reciprocity in relationships with people and Country.

Collaborative research in action mirroring cultural teachings

The artwork embodies teachings of compromise and collaboration. Bereline described the creation of the work as a dance where the MIArt artists' relationships were reflected in the way every individual painted in the collective work and negotiated the borders where they met on the canvas. Working together through reflexive compromise and negotiation reflected the same relational process as physically building the stone fish traps. CABAH researcher Sean Ulm highlighted that the way the MIArt artists worked together across their contributions, mirrors and activates cultural continuity and knowledge of how the fish traps have always been built:

> It reinforced to me the centrality of fish trap knowledge and knowledge of Country to Kaiadilt identity. This is an enactment, an activation of that knowledge. It's a formulation of that knowledge in a different medium, providing an opportunity for explicit discussions between those senior knowledge holders. So, I think creating those spaces are important intra-community and extra-community as well, and it coincides with the time when many groups are re-asserting their culture.

This idea of compromise was a recurrent theme with the CAIA students. They discussed how the process of navigating the "liminal" spaces in-between each MIArt artists' part of the canvas generated creative potential. They described moments of pause, negotiation, and connection between the MIArt artists, shown through their shared use of colours, shapes and subjects, even with different styles and imagery, for example:



Panaroma of *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*. Image credit: Michael Marzik

> Even though they were separate artworks, they were still all connected anyway, the colour palette was amazing and nothing was separated distinctly. They all were still connected in a beautiful way and obviously because it's about place and it's about a specific place as well, that connection's just going to be there naturally. It's just formed naturally.

The CAIA students valued how this collaboration, compromise, and open dialogue deepened the story and built a strong sense of community. They also noted this kind of community collaboration is important in Indigenous knowledge systems and is often missing in many spaces, but that they experienced it strongly in their CAIA classes at Griffith University.

This practice of collaboration and compromise also reflected the CABAH research relationships honoured by the painting. Finding connective spaces "in between" is essential for creating meaningful research with Indigenous communities and Country. Sean and other CABAH researchers who work alongside Kaiadilt people and other Traditional Owners, acknowledged that art and language is not separated from research, and research is not separated from community, it is all part of building meaningful relationships. Sean explained:

> Art is so indivisible from Kaiadilt culture, it's just omnipresent. So, I don't create boundaries between these things. To me, doing the community-based work that I do, it's embracing all of that richness of culture.

In the reflective interview with Sean, he explored how historically in the discipline of archaeology, artmaking has been used as an object of research more than as a method. Through this Art Series Commission, CABAH researchers embraced artmaking as a part of the process of meaningful research, to respect how intertwined art is with cultural knowledge. This holism makes deep time research culturally safe and moves beyond extractive practices of the past. The CAIA students, having experienced the panel discussion between community members and academics, reflected it was refreshing to see the respectful, longstanding relationships between community members and CABAH researchers who have become part of the community:

> It felt like, even just coming down to the pronunciation, they never stumbled on a name or a word. It was like they were part of that community as well. It just felt really different. It was good, relational, it was just really nice and the artists got to be the experts rather than the fancy white academics ... You can just really feel the love of the community within them all chatting. It just felt very respectful the whole way ... I'd like to see more of that in people that are going into community to help, where they actually do take the time to get involved and to connect deeper. Like same people for 20 years. Not just fly in fly out, but I'm here, real deal.

The production of this artwork, and the process of evaluating the impact on the CAIA students are examples of the work being done to decolonise and Indigenise research. The students' response emphasises the importance of research being authentically intertwined with the researcher as a person. In his reflective interview, Sean emphasised the importance of genuine benefit flowing to the community, pointing out that research programs like this help make it possible for communities to return to Country by providing essential support and resources, especially in locations that are remote and costly to visit.

Supporting relationships and reciprocity in museums

Hearing what the students said in the Yarning Matrix was significant to the MIArt artists. Bereline and John claimed the MIArt artists previously felt separate from the audiences who experience their art, as they do not hear directly about how it made them feel.



John said learning about the students' experiences of this artwork had closed the "creative circle" that links artists and Country with audiences. Bereline said she and the other MIArt artists were happy to see their work impacting the CAIA students as the next generation of emerging Indigenous artists and how they approach the many complexities of being an Indigenous person in Australia today:

> For me, reading [the student Yarning Matrix] was very emotional because I thought, 'here is Australia's future'. If through us loving them, and through us sharing a story... It's just exciting for me to see that we were able to touch the hearts and the minds of these young people. I'm just so glad we were able to give them guidance.

The impact evaluation created a relationship that was valuable to both the MIArt artists and the CAIA students. The enriched experience for CAIA students in the museum made their experience of the painting unique and special. The Yarning Matrix data demonstrated the powerful impact of creating opportunities for such direct encounters with senior and emerging artists, particularly for groups like Indigenous Australians who feel excluded or unsafe in museums. Meeting the MIArt artists enabled the CAIA students to more deeply engage with the physical artwork, weaving together presence, process, and story.

This level of impact required ongoing collaboration between the IE Team, CABAH researchers, Griffith University and Queensland Museum staff, MIArt artists, and CAIA students. Together, we built direct relationships and bespoke programming that supported shared learning and showed the importance of bringing people and Country to the heart of curatorial practice. At the end of the student yarn, one student claimed this experience had empowered them to feel comfortable in museums, and consider research as a possible pathway for their own future:

> It's making the museum feel like a safe space. It's made me go, 'I wonder if I could do research?'

Curatorial decisions play a key role in ensuring the impact of artworks. As well as working with the CAIA students the IE Team spent time with the artwork watching the general public's response. Audiences appeared to connect more and spend longer with the painting when they spent time with the accompanying videos that gave insight into the MIArt artists' process. Art needs people, story, and thoughtful curation to fully come alive. The use of the videos, as well as photographs and biographies of the MIArt artists, helped audiences feel the artists' presence in the space. However, there is no real substitute for the deep value generated through public programs supporting reciprocal relationships made in person. While there are logistical challenges in bringing Elders from remote communities into galleries, the Yarning Matrix and reflective interviews with John and Bereline show how vital it is to create such opportunities within institutional frameworks, to enable meaningful feedback loops and genuine mutual benefit.

Notes and references

1. CABAH (2018). 2018 Annual Report. https://epicaustralia.org.au/annual-report/annual-report-2018/

2. Goongarra, D., Moodoonuthi, D., & Evans, N. (1995). "Crane, Seagull and Rock Cod". In Evans, N. *A Grammar of Kayardild*. Mouton de Gruyter: 610-626.

3. The impact evaluation of Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin was led by IE Team member Stephanie Beaupark, in collaboration with the IE Team. An Aboriginal woman of Quandamooka Country, Stephanie brought her expertise in integrating Indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies to develop a culturally grounded approach to the evaluation and the authorship of this chapter.

How *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* changed the conversation about Australia's deep history

VOICES:

Did this artwork bring new voices into the conversation?

Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin was a platform for uniting voices of Kaiadilt, Lardil, Yangkaal and Gangalidda people who collaboratively shared knowledge and stories of their stone fish traps, as a celebration of their cultural identities, hope for the future and love of Country. Both the process of making and the artwork itself created space for discussions between senior knowledge holders and became a way to strengthen knowledge and cultural connection. The language of painting gave the artists from Mornington Island Arts Centre (MIArt artists) a platform to give voice to their Country, bringing attention to the need for safeguarding cultural continuity through conservation of the fish traps.

CONTEXTS:

Did this artwork change the context of speaking and listening?

Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin created a sacred space that transported audiences to Country. Described as a "warm hug", the artwork embodied the stone fish traps, helping the students from Griffith University's Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art program (CAIA students) to feel held by culture and community. It opened space for the MIArt artists and CAIA students to share their parallel stories of love and loss of Country. Hearing how the CAIA students were affected by the painting was impactful for the MIArt artists, completing what they described as the "creative circle". The painting was an enactment of cultural practice that supported discussions within and beyond the community. The MIArt artists navigated boundaries of each other's stories, imagery and artmaking styles through compromise and their strong community relationships, reflecting the process of building the fish traps. Embracing creative practice as part of the research process enriched the long, ongoing conversation between researchers and Wellesley Island communities, honouring the importance of artmaking in strengthening and sharing cultural knowledge.

PERSPECTIVES:

Did this artwork shift perspectives on Australia's deep history?

The MIArt artists used aerial views and textured imagery to show their perspectives of their Country, sharing stories held within Country, cultural practices and community. Their use of vibrant colour and focus on healing through love of Country inspired the CAIA students to shift their perspective on artmaking. They learned they can simultaneously create joyful, imperfect art that honours difficult realities, culture and Country while also acknowledging the grief, anger and injustices that have come from loss. The CAIA students also began to see museums and research in a new way, noticing a shift from colonialism and tokenism, toward safe spaces and collaborative processes that support Indigenous leadership and truth-telling.

ACTIONS:

Did these shifts in perspective create new possibilities for action in the present?

Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin was painted as an act of care for the fish traps in the absence of being able to physically access many parts of Country on a regular basis. Sharing stories and cultural knowledge through the artwork keeps culture alive and serves as a public platform for communities to communicate environmental, conservation, and governance issues. It enables the community to promote the shared responsibility for caring for Country and increases public awareness of the importance of and threats to the fish traps. The CAIA students realised art is a powerful tool to advocate for Country and felt empowered to use their own art to inspire care for Country in audiences. The process of making and displaying the artwork showed the strength of culturally affirming ways of storytelling and working together across knowledge systems, creating a decolonised approach to museum practice and research.



Artists working collaboratively on *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* at MIArt. Image credit: MIArt

FURTHER RESOURCES

Panel discussion

A panel discussion held at the Queensland Museum brought together MIArt artists Juda Juda Rukuthingathi Bereline Loogatha and Kuthakin Coralie Thompson, language activist and artist Coreen Reading (daughter of artist Dibirdibi Elsie Gabori), and Coreen's daughter Olivia, alongside CABAH researcher Sean Ulm and linguist Nicholas Evans. The panellists reflected on their enduring research relationships, shared goals of protecting Country, and the role of the artwork in expressing hope amid histories of adversity and displacement.

Catalogue

A catalogue was produced to accompany the artwork. Developed in close collaboration with the MIArt artists and Mirndiyan Gununa Aboriginal Corporation, the catalogue documents the significance of the stone fish traps and the creative process behind the painting. It includes images of the artwork and the Country it represents, alongside artist biographies and reflections from community members and researchers. The publication extends the reach of the artwork beyond the gallery, offering audiences a deeper understanding of the cultural knowledge embedded in the painting and the relationships that shaped its creation.



Panels introducing the MIArt artists at the exhibition at Queensland Museum Kurilpa. Image credit: Queensland Museum

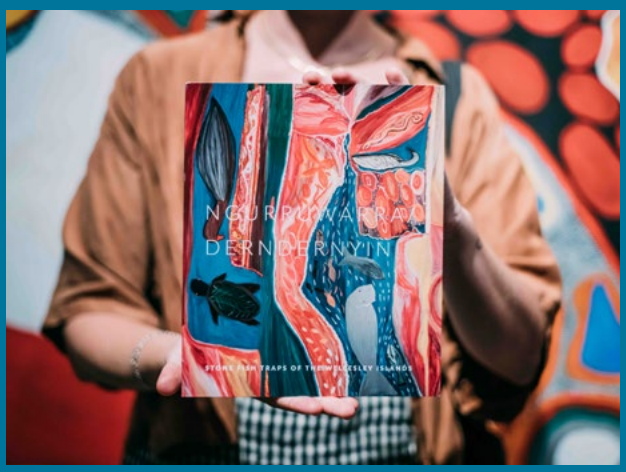


Image credit: Cristina Bevilacqua

Podcast

A CABAHCAST episode about *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* delved into the history of the Wellesley Islands, the traditional Indigenous technique of constructing stone-walled intertidal fish traps, and how the artists paid homage to this ancient practice in the artwork. Through interviews with the practitioners involved it told the story of how the artwork came into being, including the long-standing relationships with CABAH researchers that underpinned the commission.



Aerial view of the fish traps in the Wellesley Islands.
Image credit: Daniel Rosendahl

How the CABAH Art Series Changed the Conversation about Australia's Deep History

The previous four chapters told the unique impact stories of each artwork in the CABAH Art Series. This chapter presents a synthesis of these insights using the Changing the Conversation Framework. It shows how the Art Series successfully shifted public discourse about Australia's deep history by radically expanding participation – voices, creating meaningful space for connection – context, and changing hearts and minds – perspectives, creating new possibilities for action. These actions will effect change across a range of contemporary issues and challenges, including Indigenous leadership, political advocacy and allyship, solutions for climate change, environmental stewardship, and decolonising research and cultural institutions.

VOICES

It matters whose voices are heard in the conversation about Australia's deep history and how they express themselves. For example, deep time researchers increasingly partner with Indigenous communities, but traditional research publications often fail to authentically represent community voices. Dominant research methods and accepted modes of publication often exclude personal and affective forms of expression that could bring different and significant forms of knowledge to the deep time conversation.

The CABAH Art Series introduced new voices to the conversation about Australia's deep history, transformed the dynamics of who was speaking to who, and created possibilities for participants to speak in different ways.

Each artwork amplified underrepresented voices – *Mangal Bungal*, for example, provided a platform for the Dingaal community to share their stories in their own language directly with an international public. The artworks gave voice to non-humans – a crucial step in developing a Country-centred, ecologically just public conversation. *Where Lakes Once Had Water* for example showed the active role of water, plants, animals, and technologies in the deep time transformations of the continent. The vivid portrayals of the marine animals in *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* allowed Country to speak in a language-beyond-words.

Unseeded and *Where Lakes Once Had Water* amplified the imaginative and emotional dimensions of fieldwork, empowering scientists to speak in personal and creative ways that are often muted in scientific narratives. Audience responses revealed by the Impact Evaluation show that by amplifying diverse voices and emotional ways of speaking, the artworks provided the public with meaningful points of connection to the deep time conversation, which led them to care more about its outcomes and significance.

The lens of voices shows how the CABAH Art Series not only increased the types and numbers of voices involved but radically changed the nature of participation in the conversation about Australia's deep history, enabling communities, researchers, publics, animals, plants and landscapes to express themselves in ways that are authentically connected to their experience.

CONTEXTS

The lens of contexts moves the focus from who is involved, to *where and how* the conversation about Australia's deep history occurs. Traditionally this conversation has taken place in the inaccessible sites of fieldwork, and in the specialised spaces of academic enquiry and publication, such as laboratories, journals and conferences.

The CABAH Art Series expanded the physical, institutional, and political settings in which knowledge about deep time is created and shared, giving wider access to remote, scientific and culturally significant places, and relating new knowledge about Australia's past to contemporary issues.

Each artwork acted as a portal that connected audiences to the sites of deep time research. *Unseeded* and *Where Lakes Once Had Water* brought the lived experience of archaeological fieldwork into urban galleries, helping audiences to imagine ancient landscapes and the methods researchers use to investigate them.

Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin created a spiritual space that embodied the structure of the threatened Wellesley Islands fish traps and supported knowledge sharing about Sea Country within and beyond the community. *Mangal Bungal* brought the sacred Country of Jiigurru to Queensland Museum through natural materials, language and Dingaal community presence. These artworks transformed the institutional context of a colonial museum into a site of Indigenous authority, connecting Australia's deep past to contemporary Aboriginal lifeways.

The Art Series moved the conversation about Australia's deep history into public space by activating cultural institutions – museums and galleries – as sites for polyvocal knowledge sharing. The impact evaluation revealed how these public experiences sparked new conversations, connecting deep time research to the broader social and political concerns of the audiences, such as climate change in *Where Lakes Once Had Water*, custodianship of cultural heritage sites in *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin*, and the Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum in *Mangal Bungal*.

PERSPECTIVES

Shifts in perspective are at the heart of changing a conversation. Change requires people to see things in new ways, or from someone else's point of view, and sometimes to confront or question old ways of seeing.

The CABAH Art Series changed people's perspectives on Australia's history by generating emotional responses to the concept of deep time, including feeling difficult feelings and accepting unwelcome truths.

All the artworks created emotional and sensory engagement with the phenomenon of deep time, which created positive shifts in perspective. For example, sustainability students viewing *Where Lakes Once Had Water*, experienced a visceral sense of Earth's vast history that helped them confront their anxiety about contemporary climate change.

Mangal Bungal and *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* changed Indigenous art students' view of deep time research as an extractive, colonial process, helping them to see its potential as a respectful, collaborative practice that can propagate more accurate accounts of Indigenous people and histories. Through their experience of the way these artworks were exhibited and supported through Indigenous-led public programs, these students also began to think of Queensland Museum as a culturally safe space for sharing deep time stories from an Indigenous perspective.

The artworks helped non-Indigenous audiences understand the depth, dynamism and continuity of Australian Indigenous culture. However, this realisation prompted painful shifts in perspective that challenged underlying prejudices. For example, seniors who experienced *Mangal Bungal* contemplated the relative immaturity of their own culture and how future generations may judge them. Non-Indigenous audiences – both old and young – were struck by gaps in their own knowledge and their role in perpetuating ignorance through not asking Indigenous people about their experience or culture.

The lens of perspectives reveals that changing the conversation about deep history requires more than new facts; it demands new ways of seeing, feeling, and relating across cultures, disciplines, and generations.

ACTIONS

Considering the Art Series through the final lens of actions focuses attention on the consequences and significance of changing the public conversation, asking: What new forms of agency have been generated because of these changes? What can people now do differently?

The Art Series catalysed new approaches to contemporary challenges by reframing people's relationship to the past. This included undertaking or envisioning possible actions related to care for Country, political advocacy, environmental management, and institutional change.

Indigenous artists used the Art Series as a practical and symbolic means to care for Country. Through *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* senior artists from the Wellesley Islands used painting to express love for their Country and communicate their conservation concerns, inspiring young Indigenous art students to use their own art-practices to celebrate and defend Country and culture. The Dingaal community used the public platform of *Mangal Bungal* to establish their ancient connection to Country as a critical part of current environmental and economic negotiations.

Where Lakes Once Had Water helped environment and sustainability students move from a paralysing fear of climate change to imagining new solutions that integrate Indigenous and Western knowledge. *Mangal Bungal* gave senior non-Indigenous Australians the combination of factual and emotional insight they needed to act as advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the run up to the referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The Art Series led to systemic changes in cultural institutions and in deep time research itself. *Mangal Bungal* for example, increased the capacity of Queensland Museum staff to support Indigenous-led projects, and catalysed institutional change that has led to new museum policies and initiatives. *Ngurrruwarra/Derndernyin* and *Mangal Bungal* both showed that integrating art practice into deep time research strengthens partnerships and creates the conditions for two-way learning between researchers and Indigenous communities. *Unseeded* showed the benefits of incorporating personal and emotional forms of knowledge in research methodologies, modelling how archaeology might be practiced in the future.



Participants in the Discover Dingaal totems and language workshop. Image credit: Queensland Museum

The Role of Art in Engaged Research: Four Lessons from the CABAH Art Series

This concluding section reflects on the success of the Art Series to identify four lessons about the value of art in research engagement. These lessons extend beyond the specific context of Australia's deep history, identifying the distinctive imaginative, emotional, structural and ethical work that high-quality art contributes to participatory knowledge making. Together with the Changing the Conversation Framework, these concluding lessons provide a blueprint for how to use and evaluate arts-led research engagement to change other public conversations.

1. Art can help people know more by feeling differently

Understanding the enormity of deep time is a challenge of the imagination. The Impact Evaluation of the Art Series revealed art's capacity to create what CABAH researcher Tim Cohen described as a "deep time epiphany": a felt experience of the scale of deep time and its defining impact on the contemporary environment.

This report provides evidence for how this embodied, emotional experience helped people connect deeply with the idea of deep time. This emotional connection made the audience groups studied in the Impact Evaluation more receptive to the information they were presented with, and better able to contribute new knowledge and insights of their own. As a result, these audiences knew more and, importantly, felt differently about Australia's deep history. This success shows how art facilitates the essential imaginative work that makes information meaningful and leads to attitudinal change.

2. Art can build partnerships to connect researchers, communities and public spaces

The Art Series connected the specialised and remote locations where deep time research is traditionally conducted, such as laboratories and fieldwork sites, with public places such as museums and galleries. In doing so the artworks drew together the diverse forms of knowledge associated with these different places – including embodied and affective knowledges grounded in Country, and the lived experiences and interests of the public.

By providing a focus for collaboration across contexts, the artworks nurtured the relationships necessary for these varied forms of knowledge to flow between researchers, communities and general audiences. This mix of spatial and inter-personal connection created the conditions for multi-directional learning.

This insight from the CABAH Art Series emphasises the critical role of cultural spaces such as galleries and museums in engaged research, and how artworks can stimulate and strengthen partnerships between academia, cultural institutions and communities.

3. Art can support Indigenous leadership

Indigenising research is a priority for engaged research in Australia and settler-colonial contexts globally. The CABAH Art Series shows how artworks, when underpinned by the necessary work to make academic and cultural institutions safe spaces for First Nations people, can provide a means for Indigenous communities to lead public conversations.

The Impact Evaluation of *Mangal Bungal* and *Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin* underscored that art is central to knowledge sharing for the Aboriginal communities who led these commissions, and operates beyond the disciplinary boundaries of traditional Western research. Integrating artmaking as a core activity within these research projects therefore helped centre Indigenous knowledge.

The Impact Evaluation also showed how the Dingaal and Wellesley Islands Aboriginal communities used the artworks to increase their capacity and opportunity for public knowledge leadership. In both commissions, the artists used the expressive power of art, and the public platform of the exhibition to raise awareness of the environmental and political issues they face as custodians of Country.

These insights show that integrating art helps Indigenise engaged research both by producing more authentic and relevant knowledge, and by more equitably sharing the cultural capital that is gained through knowledge work.

4. Art can enable difficult public conversations

One of the most striking findings from the Impact Evaluation was how the artworks prompted non-Indigenous audiences to begin to recognise their own racist narratives about Indigenous people and Australian history. Students who experienced *Where Lakes Once Had Water* found their romanticised image of traditional Indigenous lifeways prevented them from embracing the dynamism of Indigenous knowledge. Senior non-Indigenous audiences who experienced *Mangal Bungal* found their own sense of identity threatened by encountering the depth and sophistication of Indigenous culture.

Historically, Western research has played a significant part in establishing these racist narratives. Contemporary researchers must find ways to decolonise research practices not only by partnering with Indigenous communities, but also by addressing the long-lasting impact of past research practices on the public imagination.

Truth-telling is central to this challenge, and the Art Series showed how art can help people reckon with their prejudices in a productive way, providing space for audiences to feel and express things they may be embarrassed or even unable to feel and express in other contexts. Difficult public conversations require careful ethical consideration, and the Impact Evaluation shows the importance of robust support mechanisms, such as the cultural mediation team for *Mangal Bungal*, which helped audiences engage with the program while maintaining a safe space for the Dingaal artists.

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Video still from *Where Lakes Once Had Water*.
Image credit: Sonia Leber and David Chesworth



Ngurruwarra/Derndernyin at NorthSite Contemporary Arts.
Image credit: Cristina Bevilacqua

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