

# The Shell Seeker

*Long before the SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE was built in the 1950s, the site was a MEETING POINT for the GADIGAL of the EORA nation. Over thousands of years, their CEREMONIAL DEBRIS formed ANCESTRAL MIDDENS, which convicts destroyed. MEGAN COPE'S large-scale sculpture recognises the site's HISTORY*

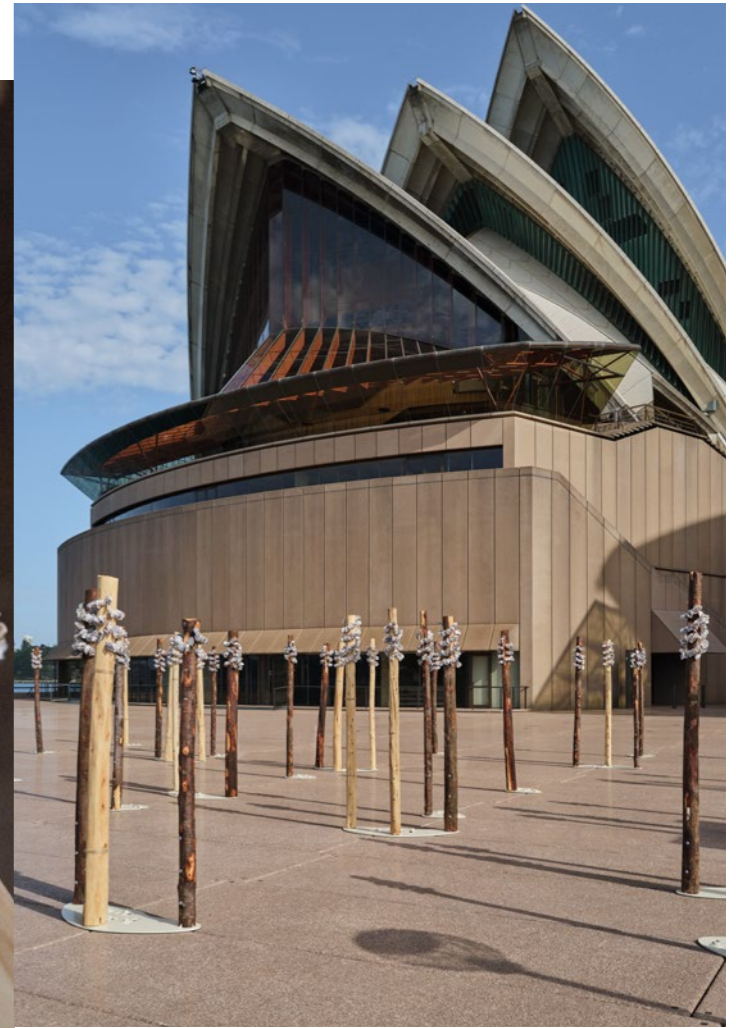
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Megan Cope in front of her installation, *Whispers*, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Sydney Opera House. She wears a Jil Sander coat, price on application; stylist's own shirt; Cartier earrings, \$21,200, necklace, \$35,400, bracelet, \$23,300, and ring, \$18,100.



Cope at a Sydney warehouse, surrounded by the oyster shells that will be used in *Whispers*. She wears SÜK Workwear overalls, \$190; her own top, shoes, and jewellery. *OPPOSITE PAGE* As well as the midden on the Opera house steps, Cope has installed a series of aquaculture poles along the forecourt.



For the past four months, Quandamooka artist Megan Cope has been ensconced in the Marrickville Addison Road Community Organisation in Sydney's inner west with a dedicated team collectively preparing for her new commission, *Whispers*, at the Sydney Opera House. Workers are sifting through 85,000 oyster shells collected from an array of hospitality outlets, hotels and restaurants. *Kinyingarra* — 'oyster' in Jandai language — shells are amassed in a vast warehouse where they are cleansed and perforated in order to be woven into a mammoth armature that will be seamlessly sited on and under the Sydney Opera House's monumental stairs. An undulating wave of shells, this is Cope's most ambitious work yet, involving more than 3000 hours of labour in what she refers to as "shell therapy — loving, cleaning, holding oysters and marvelling".

Cope is adept at working collaboratively and collectively with a philosophy of deep listening to nature with its cyclical rhythms. "All the work I do is an acknowledgement of Country in practice through sculpture, painting and a process of remembering," she says. Since April, she has held

Scrub Clubs to gather workers to assist her and also to galvanise a communal effort. Process and preparation are part of the artwork. Her shell tapestry is about the psycho-geography of place and recalls Cope's previous painting series *After the Flood* (2014) of elliptical shapes in iridescent blue that focus on river systems, topography, cartography and the cultural legacy of colonialism.

Concerned with the fragility of place and sustainability, Cope's earlier preoccupation with floods became prophetic when, in March 2022, she left her home in Lismore, in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, due to the seismic avalanche and relocated to Brisbane. Soon after, she presented a prescient installation *Untitled (Death Song)* in the exhibition *Reclaim the Earth* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Recalling the eerie cries of the yellow-eyed bush stone-curlew bird who wails to signal the death call of climate change, Cope's installation comprised suspended drums, recycled industrial equipment and rocks hovering over a bed of shells. She declares: "Can you hear the warnings?" Part haunting environmental *mise-en-scène* and part sonic sculpture, the installation has been

previously reconfigured for MONA FOMA in Hobart in 2022 and the 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Monster Theatres.

From a working-class family, Cope was raised by her Aboriginal father, and the pair lived in a panel van as he searched for work as a labourer. "The bush was my living room," she recalls. As a single parent in the '80s, her father instilled resilience and an unbound connection to the world while teaching his daughter to get "on the tools". He has ingrained in her the "courage and fearlessness to be a woman". Independent, self-reliant and eloquent, Cope is feminist and feminine. Notably, oysters are hermaphrodites, curved vessels that hold the foundations of the oceans together; oyster reefs form a shelter for mangroves and are a vital ecosystem for sea creatures and a nursery for fish and molluscs.

Cope has already been working with oysters as contoured and sculptural forms for eight years, and to mark the 50th anniversary of the Sydney Opera House, she is diligently staining the shells with linseed to enhance their natural patina. As part of this mammoth public art project, Cope met with Aboriginal aunties from La Perouse

to seek feedback and learn traditional weaving techniques with shells, thereby following protocols as a guest on Gadigal land. She also consulted with engineers and riggers to assemble her epic sculpture on the underside of the Opera House stairs as well as a mound on top.

Loss and reclamation are central tenets of Cope's practice: "My practice explores the relationship between environment, geography and identity," she says.

Challenging the parameters of sculpture, Cope's shell wave is accompanied by a series of majestic cypress pine poles, often used in aquaculture. The totems are arranged like a forest along Yallamundi Place, and Cope will eventually replant them back home so the oysters can proliferate.

With her unique version of conceptual and land art through a First Peoples' perspective, Cope first planted poles on Invasion Day (Australia

In 2017, Cope was the first female Aboriginal artist to travel to the Middle East as an Official War Artist, commissioned by the Australian War Memorial, and resulting in the series *Fight of Flight*. She is also a longstanding member of the Indigenous activist art collective proppaNOW, and won the prestigious Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice 2022-2024 in New York. Established in Brisbane in 2003, the collective was co-founded by Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee,

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*Whispers* is monumental in scale and explores memory, as middens existed before colonisation. For Cope, middens are a material that honours and remembers ancestors while integrating with Jørn Utzon's soaring Opera House with its shell-like structure. Oysters are a "sign of hope", she says. "We are oyster people. My great uncles and aunties were and still are oyster people."

Day) 2022 on Queensland's Stradbroke Island. By collaborating with nature to make a living sculpture, Cope harnesses the role of tides so that thousands of baby oysters are now growing: "Culture is alive and Country is alive," she says. Last year, a version of the poles was presented in the prestigious Busan Biennale in Korea, adding to her growing international reputation grounded in country, place and belonging.

Jennifer Herd, Gordon Hookey and Cope to give voice to urban-based Indigenous artists with art as a galvanising force of social justice. Cope is unwavering in her focus: "It's important for me to make work that reminds people that we are still here and continue to share our Country," she says.

*Whispers by Megan Cope, on display at the Sydney Opera House until October 31.*

Hair and makeup by Jasmine Abdallaoui. Derek Henderson is at M.A.P