

Megan Cope, *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba (On-Country)*, 2022, documentation image; courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Meeanjin/Brisbane; photo: Cian Saunders





# COMMISSIONED BY COUNTRY

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For First Nations people, commissioning has power. Money and resources can make our ideas realities. Exposure and presence within major institutions can make our stories visible, and can give our cultures 'value' within a mainstream landscape that has historically disregarded us. As people still dealing with the economic, social, ideological, political, environmental and spiritual disempowerment of settler colonialism, we are unfortunately and disproportionately fixed in perpetual positions of need within the system – be it for land, money, justice, equity, access or merely someone to care or listen.<sup>1</sup> While it may seem ungracious to critique the very notion of commissions, the power structures they have emerged within and upheld over time require unpacking.<sup>2</sup> As we seek to achieve self-determination, a colonial arts funding model that has historically been used to demonstrate or enhance a patron's or institution's wealth, status or power is certainly worthy of critique. By imagining new commissioning models, we empower the inherent potential, value and purpose of our cultural processes, in spaces within and outside of our own cultural landscapes.

Quandamooka artist Megan Cope's *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba* (2022) is a work that was formed and developed outside of a commissioning model, albeit with help from a modest Create NSW grant and the Copyright Agency and Cultural Fund (Megan relates that this supported a more flexible and experimental approach to the work).<sup>3</sup> In a recent yarn we discussed some of the nuanced implications of commissioning that have permeated her arts career – including a newly commissioned continuation of her practice with oyster shells, *Whispers* (2023), for the

Sydney Opera House. Counter to the obvious benefits, commissioning can produce outcomes contrary to our cultural values. For example, most commissioning comes from institutions that have very few First Nations people within positions of power. Most often they will select only the most well-known artists, reproducing hierarchies that contradict – and sometimes disrupt – the lateral and cohesive dispersion of authority and benefit within our Communities. These commissions often have predetermined ideas and expectations surrounding the work that negate cultural safety, obligations and pedagogical practice, and that limit the space required for experimentation and/or deviation from expected cultural forms. This lack of cultural grounding can also necessitate timeframes and budgets that do not resource proper Community engagement, or accommodate the inevitable twists and turns of developing a project integrated with Community and Country. Without the resources, support and cultural grounding needed, commissions can create unsustainable stress and demands on the artist, to the detriment of their health and wellbeing, and Community relationships. Further, the colonial landscape in which commissions are conceptualised can stifle or deny the development of cultural and artistic processes. This can result in a flattened end product that limits reciprocal benefit for Communities (and the richness their meaningful participation brings), as well as allowing very little growth for the artist.

*Kinyingarra Guwinyanba* was born from Megan and her Community and Country's need to repair local oyster reef populations decimated by colonial extraction. The value and priority of the work was determined by neither

Megan Cope, *Whispers*, 2023. installation view, Sydney Opera House, Gadigal Nura/Sydney; courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Meeanjin/Brisbane; photo: Daniel Boud





Opposite top:  
Megan Cope, *Whispers*, 2023, installation detail, Sydney Opera House, Gadigal Nura/Sydney; courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Meeanjin/Brisbane; photo: Daniel Boud

Opposite bottom:  
Megan Cope, *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba (On-Country)*, 2022, documentation image; courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Meeanjin/Brisbane; photo: Cian Saunders

When visiting *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba* in late 2022 to help reattach fallen oysters, I could feel deeply the whole Community and Country processes so entrenched and integral to the work – in essence, the power, purpose, reason and immense cultural value of the work itself.

curators, funding bodies nor art markets, creating agency and self-determination at the very outset in terms of which (and whose) spaces were nurtured and grown. Situated on the tidal flats of Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island, the work keeps its own time in sync with the Quandamooka: the timing of the tides to replenish the oysters; the timing of the oysters to grow and develop; the timing of Community to coordinate ongoing maintenance and repair; and the timing of creative and cultural ideas, processes and intentions to formulate and regenerate. The contributing ‘artists’ were not selected because of their high-profile status within the arts world, but through their connections, relationships, cultural knowledges and rights to tell the story. In terms of access, there was and is a profound reorientation of the privilege and entitlement so prevalent within western paradigms, towards local protocols and respect for the custodial relationships holding the work. When visiting *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba* in late 2022 to help reattach fallen oysters, I could feel deeply the whole Community and Country processes so entrenched and integral to the work – in essence, the power, purpose, reason and immense cultural value of the work itself.

Having to put food on the table is real, and dreaming through alternatives to commissioning models is a privileged position to be sure. But being a part of the oldest continuing culture on Earth – with so much richness to share in terms of our processes and positionings – is also both a reality and a privilege, and a responsibility not to be overlooked or marginalised amid mainstream commissioning agendas, timelines and budgets. As a cultur-

ally and Community-grounded work – one that is no less and perhaps even more relationally ‘alive’, critical and impactful because of its non-commissioned appointment – *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba* speaks to the possibilities and shared value of funding models that can invest in, enable and hold our own aspirations, agency and self-determination. Rather than merely surviving (and having to inhabit survivalist mentalities within extractive and competitive systems), perhaps one day we can thrive, centring and celebrating our own cultural ethics – of equity, reciprocity, relationality, health, care and sustainability. Our real power, as it always has and will be, commissioned by Country.<sup>4</sup>

1. For further reading on the power dynamics of funding, see Ben Abbatangelo’s recent IndigenousX essay ‘Self-determination can’t be achieved through compromised finance’, 17 August 2023: [indigenoux.com.au/self-determination-cant-be-achieved-through-compromised-finance/](https://indigenoux.com.au/self-determination-cant-be-achieved-through-compromised-finance/), accessed 2 October 2023.
2. The complexities of colonial benevolence and power are conjured so poignantly in Badimaya artist Julie Dowling’s 1999 painting *The Ungrateful*.
3. *Kinyingarra Guwinyanba* means ‘place of oyster rocks’ in the Jandai and Gowar languages.
4. I would like to acknowledge and thank my extended Community for yarns, perspectives and feedback related to this essay. I would particularly like to acknowledge Zena Cumpston’s contributions, as well as her ongoing support and mentorship as part of our collaboration through *Art Monthly Australasia*’s ‘Indigenous Voices’ program.

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