

VIRTUAL WARRANE @ WYNYARD

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"We want everybody to realise that, before the bricks and mortar of our cities and regional towns, First Nations people called this place home and had called it home since time immemorial."

Brett Leavy

Virtual Warrane @ Wynyard is a portal to the significant cultural places about Sydney as they were prior to January 26, 1788. Described by the artist as a time machine, the work transports the viewer to the pre-contact Gadigal landscape and way of life, offering an insight and exploration into the communities, campsites, hunting grounds and significant places of the Traditional Owners. Using new technologies and gaming algorithms, *Virtual Warrane @ Wynyard* is a visual Acknowledgement of Country that respectfully reconstructs place from an Indigenous perspective and illustrates the Gadigal peoples' deep-seated connection to their land.

The work is an immersive journey through a virtual heritage landscape that depicts a day in the life of the Traditional Owners. It begins with an Elder watching sunrise over the harbour from atop the large flat rocks of Tar-ra (Dawes Point).

As morning dawns, Warrane (Sydney Harbour) emerges – home of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. This sacred body of water is celebrated as a place ritualised with meaning in the everyday lives of the Gadigal, including the landforms it created, the ecologies it sustained, and the traditional activities it supported, such as fishing, ceremony and song.

A ghost impression of the present-day city materialises onto the landscape – the Sydney Opera House, Circular Quay, the CBD skyline, and Sydney Harbour Bridge – and we recognise this place now called Sydney.

On a ridge between Warrane and Tumbalong (Darling Harbour) we discover a camp awakening as men prepare to leave at first light to hunt. This is Wynyard Park, and we realise the world we are watching on screen is the place under our own feet: we are actually standing on an Aboriginal campsite. We know this from archaeological excavations of the site in 2014 where several Aboriginal stone artefacts were found in natural soil underneath layers of European occupation.¹

The men on the hunt are depicted carrying *galara*, light yet durable multi-pronged spears mainly used for fishing.² These have been modelled from the Australian Museum collection and are typical of those used by the Eora. They are travelling along a track from Wynyard to Circular Quay on what we now call George Street. This is the oldest street in Australia and forms part of an Aboriginal track that led from Warrane at one end to a freshwater source close to what is now the Cenotaph in Hyde Park, at the other.

¹ Paul Irish and Tamika Goward, Wynyard Walk campsite, Barani, <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/wynyard-walk-campsite/>

² 'Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander collection timeline', Australian Museum, <https://australianmuseum.net.au/learn/cultures/atsi-collection/timeline/>

The men travel to the eastern side of Warrane, called Tubowgule (Bennelong Point / Sydney Opera House) which means "where the knowledge waters meet".³ On this tidal rock island, a place renowned for gathering, feasting on shellfish, singing and dancing, one of our hunters approaches a possum in the early morning light. It is a subtle reference to Pemulwuy, the Bidjigal hero and political leader, who early in his career hunted possum to trade with the meat-deprived colony.

While the men are hunting, the women and young girls forage in the botanical oasis of Gadigal Sydney. The Eora were saltwater people, coastal dwellers who lived mainly off the sea and land; but the women also gathered bush tucker – fruit, insects and edible roots – living and working in harmony with the seasons.⁴ The women are depicted carrying dilly bags to store and transport their goods, modelled from those in the Australian Museum collection.

Women played another important cultural role as fisherwomen and through this activity held an intimate connection with Warrane. The harbour was the women's domain. They fished it in their nowey (bark canoes) using lines and hooks, from morning till night and in all weathers. They lit fires on clay pads in their nowey for cooking their catch, and for warmth and light at night. The women sang together as they fished and kept time with their paddles, often while nursing babies and with small children in tow. The canoe featured in the work is based on the nowey in the Sydney Museum collection.

Men did not fish on the harbour but from the land, including the freshwater Tank Stream that flowed from the Hyde Park swamp lands into Warrane. As we travel north along Tank Stream over the small rocky waterfalls, we witness men gathering water and the abundance of native animals and the Gadigal totem, the goanna. Tank Stream, which runs approximately underneath present day Pitt Street Mall, provided essential drinking water to Aboriginal people and supported marine, estuarine, rock platform, creek, open forest, and wetland ecosystems.

While the men and women are working, the Elder and a young Gadigal meet at Tar-ra to tell stories and honour the lore of the Boora Birra Eel Dreaming. In this Dreamtime story, Warrane is the home of Parra Doowee, the Great Eel Dreaming Spirit.⁵

The Elder and the young Gadigal are seated above the Tar-ra rock art. This site no longer remains due to the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge but the engravings are believed to have included a whale, a figure of a man or ancestral being, and other figures. Sydney has more rock engraving sites than any other city in Australia and rock art is believed to have performed many significant cultural functions, including as places to teach children about the lore and the land.

As night falls, we find ourselves back at camp and sitting around the fire. The camp is brimming with the day's catch of roo, possum, goanna and fish. Some people rest, another

³ 'Tubowgule' <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/our-story/sydney-opera-house-history/tubowgule.html>

⁴ 'Bags, baskets and containers', Australian Museum, <https://australianmuseum.net.au/learn/cultures/atsi-collection/aboriginal-toys/bags-baskets-and-containers/>

⁵ The Boora Birra Eel Dreaming provided by Metro Local Aboriginal Land Council

sharpens a *mug* (a stone axe head) and women grind seeds on rocks to make flour – all are in community.

In the final scene, the Gadigal are painted in ochre patterns and are celebrating at Corroboree, a significant ceremony involving singing, story-telling and dancing. The scene is based on the European accounts of the first recorded Corroboree at the Royal Botanic Gardens.

Virtual Warrane @ Wynyard represents culture but also preserves culture. It has been meticulously researched using oral histories, Dreamtime stories, knowledge of Traditional Owners, colonial maps and illustrations, diary accounts, historical artefacts, and archaeology reports. The works celebrates Gadigal culture, lore, language and connection to Country, and shares that culture with us all so that those who live, work and visit here may gain a great understanding of long and significant history of the place we now call Sydney.