



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 8 EPISODE 1 (JAN 2026)

UPSIDE DOWN GARDEN - JUUMADI

In conversation with curators Holly Williams and Glenn Barkley

Tim Stackpool: Barangaroo South, for people who haven't seen it yet or, or haven't gone online to take a look at the work, Glenn, first of all, how would you describe upside down Garden?

Glenn Barkley: Maybe surprising. Challenging in the way that good public art should be is like, maybe it's like, what am I actually looking at? So I think there may be some good terms to think about.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. And how about you, Holly?

Holly Williams: Look, it's quite kooky. To be honest, when you compare it or, or put it in the context of its surrounding architecture, which is, beautiful and very clean and contemporary, like, there's definitely a sense that this is something else, that this is a break from what's around it in a really positive way.

Tim Stackpool: I'm interested to ask you how both, as joint curators on this project, how long has it been that, that you were working with each other, you've known each other, and how did you come together for this project?

Holly Williams: We've been on this project for a very long time. As a bit of context, I was pregnant and now I have a child starting school next year.

So it's been, it's been a journey. Children have been born during this project, by other members of the team, so it's a real thing that's sort of marked a passage of time for us. Glenn and I have co-curated quite a number of different projects, mainly exhibitions, across Australia and we first started working together when we co-founded The Curators' Department, which was set up, I guess, to, to be a different kind of artist support agency, independent curatorial work.

Glenn Barkley: I think Holly and I, we could see there were opportunities opening up sort of curatorially with institutions.

But as time has gone on, I think curators working in the public realm has become something that has sort of developed as well in terms of the business. And I've sort of stepped away a bit from the curatorial part, but I know that Holly is working on a lot of public art projects. So it's an exciting time to be working in that field and Holly's doing great work.

Tim Stackpool: Looking back at Upside Down Garden was there a point where you thought that this work is becoming bigger than just what might be considered a single artwork?

Glenn Barkley: I think Jumaadi and I think we always had ambitions. Once it got into the sort of undercroft space that it's in now at Barangaroo.

So it's in this sort of, uh, space between two buildings, this undercroft, and it's quite substantial in terms of its scale. And once we sort of found that as the site, I think Jumaadi is a really ambitious artist and he wanted to do something sort of bigger than anything he's ever done before. It is his first public artwork.

And so he wanted something with real presence and. Of course as curators, that's what you wanna deliver as well.

Tim Stackpool: And Holly. this was Jumaadi's first public Artwork, as Glenn has said. Was, was anything that surprised you about how he approached working in the, in a public realm?

Holly Williams: It is really interesting. I've subsequently worked on a very small temporary public artwork with him for the rocks, and what I love is that despite this experience of upside down garden, which had so many different layers of, of engineering of, DAs and then DA modification submissions and a lot of very technical heavy constraints.

What was really pleasing to see is Jumaadi still approaches projects with the kind of openness and let's just see how far we can go. Which is, is really refreshing. I know artists can go through such a heavy, long project, such as big public artwork, and then kind of need to back off all of that side of the art world for a while.

But it hasn't tempered his enthusiasm for, for big, big ideas and big vision. And also I think one of the things that we didn't necessarily expect straight off. There are components within upside down garden that you can really see transferable to Jumaadi working with materials like concrete, with materials like anodized aluminium working at scale, that I feel really proud that we have supported him taking quite a leap in his practice that I think will bear fruit. You know, he can start to do large one-off commissions and, and projects from this very ambitious basis.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. I wonder, Glenn, I have no doubt are familiar with, with the work which was recently hanging in 2025, of his work in the Museum of Contemporary Art. Do you feel that there were moments where the work, where the artist had to unlearn was being installed because this wasn't a gallery situation.

Glenn Barkley: Uh, definitely. And any artist working in the public realm has to not unlearn, they have to learn. 'cause working in the public realm quite often you have a vision, but that vision is tempered by public health and safety and by engineering and by all of those things.

So it is a bit of a balance and it can be. I'm not just specifically speaking about Jumaadi, but it can be in a lot of instances, quite frustrating and confronting for an artist because there are those things that you need to think about. But I think that could have added to, yeah, the project has sort of taken this long time to make, but actually in a way we've been fortunate 'cause it means some of the changes that happen quite slowly rather than rapidly

Tim Stackpool: Looking a little bit more closely at the work. There's this Wayang Kulit influence, if I'm saying that right, that shadow puppetry and, and mythology and storytelling. How do you think about translating something so intimate and performative into a large scale public site? How well did that go?

Holly Williams: I think people who are familiar with Jumaadi's work, may, may go there expecting a kind of direct translation. You know, they may have seen one of his shadow puppet performances and expect, oh, it'll be that.

Or they may have seen his incredible buffalo hide cutouts, and they may expect that, or they may have seen his watercolours or his cutout metal and, at's none of those, it's a kind of different thing again, which is quite lovely. I mean, there are definitely elements and references. So he's deliberately kept this, the framework structure that hangs the work down from the undercroft visible.

And he's painted them in bold colours to make it really clear that it's an, an, an intent, an intentional aspect that is, he's not trying to hide it. And that does. I guess echo the way shadow puppets are sort of held with the bamboo or the wire on the back to hold them up, but it's not a really direct replication of that at scale, which is I think what makes it really exciting if you're familiar with this practice.

Glenn Barkley: Yeah, Tim, I, I think it's a matter of it is both. About that sort of shadow play, but it's also a new thing completely in that it's a different material. It's at a different scale. So it has a relationship, but it's not trying to be that because it obviously can't be,

Tim Stackpool: and in terms of the audience, is it an audience that experiences is this, or are other people walking past, like accidental participants, how do you see the audience relating to the work?

Glenn Barkley: The interesting thing about working in the public realm in most spaces is you have these multitude of audiences.

So you have people that... Barangaroo, you have people that work there all the time who are going to see it all the time and hopefully might encounter the sound elements and the light elements. And then you're gonna have people that are just gonna walk past it and not see it at all. And then you might have people and having spent some time there last week is there's quite a lot of people there I think who are living in apartments or hotels as well.

They're spending a short time there. They walked through it and they actually were really captivated by it. So I think you have, This diverse audience, and I think it's great to have a work that actually talks to all of them.

Holly Williams: Well, I think one of the things I really, that I really understood when I looked back at, at the early ideas of the work and what he was hoping to kind of achieve and, and evoke, and he's put this foot seat, this kind of bench, beautiful, very tactile, delicious kind of concrete foot there for the foot fetishists out there. I think it's gonna become like quite a popular spot. And it, it's sort of, when you look at the shadow puppet performances, you know, people sit on the ground. They gather together with their families. They watch this kind of magical story and images unfold, and I think by bringing a seat into it that's intended to be where people would sort of stop and look at the garden and maybe watch the sound or maybe listen to the soundscape and watch the lights playing over the work at different times of day.

He is, he is really, I think he is speaking back to that pace of attention and also because Barangaroo. is a very, clean, modern, it's got nice placemaking areas, you know, potted plants and decorative lighting features and things. But it's all very nice and I think having something that's unexpected in that realm as well, in terms of his artwork with the hand painting and the kind of some of the.

The challenging imagery where you don't really know what it's about or what you're looking at, that's a really lovely kind of strong thing that will speak back into the person inside, you know, the person in the suit or the tourist on a holiday. You know, it kind of cuts through to them as people, which I think is quite exciting.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah, so designed for people who, might pass through every day, as well as those who may just pass through once or twice if they're just travelling through Sydney. Right?

Glenn Barkley: That's correct.

Tim Stackpool: I think one of the striking things about it is how there's shifting forms in this, like there's density and then there's translucency as well.

Was there a conscious thought about a sense of discovery?

Glenn Barkley: Oh, I think the reference that is the obvious one, it's there in the title is the idea of a garden, because I think gardens work that way as well, is they have bulk, they have form, they have the minute they have the sort of maximus so that you can get the whole scope of the garden, you can be sort of drawn into it.

You can stand outside of it. You have this sort of play of colour against one another, texture and form. And I think that's. The way Jumaadi has thought about it as a garden. So there are quite small forms and quite small shapes and intricate shapes up against much more bigger, sort of loosely, almost painterly shapes.

Tim Stackpool: Mm. And we heard a little bit about the soundscape, the audio that's used in this as well. What sort of things will people hear Holly?

Holly Williams: So Jumaadi, worked with a frequent collaborator of his on a number of the bigger performances that he gives in Australia and internationally. Michael Toisuta and they worked together, I guess, to come up with the initial concept, which is soundscapes at set times of day.

So five times a day. They have been through a lot of different development processes with this. Obviously the work and the site talks about migration and labour, goods coming in. And then the maritime connections back to Indonesia as well. In the final version. There are beautiful sounds captured in nature.

So a lot of field recordings have been used, birds and insects, wind, ocean. Marine life and each different, program. So it's set to the astronomical clock. So it's sunrise, midday, sunset, and nighttime. And then there's one very late at night as well. They all have a different experience and different kinds of sounds that play across the space.

The speakers have been set up so that there's a real journey and the journey moves across the different elements as the light moves as well. So different, parts of the work come into life at different times, particularly in the later evening ones.

Tim Stackpool: And Glenn, do you think, adding a soundscape, it really does add an extra part of the experience.

Do you think that's kind of underestimated in terms of public art in general? Should we, separate to this installation, just generally your opinion, do you think audio and sound should be considered a lot more in public artworks?

Glenn Barkley: Yeah, maybe. I mean, it depends on the artist's work, of course. I mean, some artists like the sound of the city or they might like the sound where the work's installed, and that could be part of it too, which I suppose is a way of considering sound and light.

But I also just think with Jumaadi's work, I mean that's Jumaadi's work obviously. Again, it's sort of playing on this shadow play performance and sound, and music is such an important part of that, that he wanted to bring that in as well. And so it seems quite a natural fit. Yeah. To have the sound. And you've also had the virtue of that undercroft space.

You can contain the sound in there. I'm not sure how well sound might work in a larger public space, but in that space it works really well.

Tim Stackpool: Jumaadi talks quite a bit about, and reading his background and the media notes that I've received, he questions the hierarchy between humans and nature. Did that influence the decision to suspend the work, or was that always part of the brief, like literally flipping the garden upside down, if you like.

Glenn Barkley: I think he was thinking about the garden and I think he wanted to have that idea of things being a little bit disorientated within that space. Well, just sort of playing a little bit with what's up and what's down, say with the, that beautiful foot seat that Holly mentioned, the foot's not on the ground. You actually sit on the foot like it's cantilevered, so you can sit on the foot, but then there's a foot on the ceiling, so it's like, which is the top and which is the bottom? So I think he did want that sense of things being uprooted

Tim Stackpool: mm. Yeah. I was gonna ask whether there's a bit of unsettlement there for the viewer, so less, less comforting, but more unsettling and, and questioning if you like.

Glenn Barkley: I was gonna say, Holly, it's unusual how comfortable a concrete bench of a foot can be.

Holly Williams: It's amazing and, and definitely unexpected. I think also Jumaadi talks about, so when he started the project, it was in 2020, and so Barangaroo was still really in its early stage of being.

Populated, you know, inhabited by people. I don't know if all the apartments were finished, and certainly the pandemic happened quite rapidly after the start of the project. So those office buildings, those really large buildings were empty. But one of the things he did talk about was that those buildings are kind of growing up.

You know, there's this kind of upward thrusting. This idea of growth and development. He liked the idea that his garden is growing down slowly, that your sense of pace and time when you are with it changes. You know, it's not about rushing, it's not about using that undercroft or Mercantile Walk where it's located as a kind of thoroughfare to get from A to B.

It's about being more slow, and so it was a very deliberate. Strategy to kind of counter the upward thrust of the architecture surrounding it.

Tim Stackpool: Mm. Yeah. Barangaroo, it has many layers, if I can say that. There's industrial history, there's cultural narratives, environmental repair as well.

I've got here in my notes and I'm thinking the work kind of listens to the site in that respect, but as you say, has created a bit of a contrast. I wonder if you see Holly Upside Down Garden as something that will age well alongside the rest of the precinct, considering it's kind of like a conflicted response reaching up, but coming down, as you say,

Holly Williams: I think some of Sydney's most memorable public artworks do incorporate natural elements in them. So plants and, and things that we recognise or can kind of approach. So in that sense, I feel like people will start to form their own relationship with it, and it will stay current to them. I mean, that's, that's the hope.

Glenn Barkley: I hope so. I hope that it maintains its currency over time. I think it will because it's, like I said, there's such a, there is a permanent population there, but always this sort of transient population I like that idea of people meeting there, of people knowing where to go.

People talking, people waiting for the light show. I think that's all a really nice thing to think about, and I think over time people might come to real, specifically with the music and the performative parts, you don't see that straight away. So it might be that you only discover that even happens like after you've been there for five years, which I think that's quite nice.

Holly Williams: Hmm.

Especially I, I've just got, I've got, I've got two points, so one, just, just on the sound as well. Because it's set to the astronomical clock. You know, people that leave work at the same time every day, or get the same train and arrive at the same time every day. They may only see this, the light and sound or experience that at a particular day in the year.

But just that, that whole gesture of, of surprise is, is really part of the work. But just in regards to the, the currency of the work. I think this is the first, and don't quote me, I may be wrong, but I believe it's the first large permanent public artwork by an Indonesian Australian artist in Sydney.

And given, given the, the population of Indonesia and its proximity to Australia and the increasing relevance of the Asia Pacific to Australia in terms of trade and culture, I just feel that hopefully it's just the start and, and Sydney will have many more artworks by Indonesian Australian artists because it will represent a really healthy development of our tastes and our attitudes and the success that artists from parts of the Asia Pacific can have in Australia, which is very welcome.

Tim Stackpool: How did you feel about the competition from other public artworks in that Barangaroo precinct and many of which may have been installed while you were in the development of this piece.

Glenn Barkley: Oh, I think that's one of those questions where that has a lot to do with Lendlease and their sort of relationship to the site and the Barangaroo team's relationship to the site and them curating, even curating the right curators. ' cause sometimes you do want something to have a bit of a shout and other times you don't.

But that's sometimes about finding the people that give you those results. So I don't think either Holly or I and the sort of curators that would be competitive in that way. Of course, you do wanna have the best thing, but it's not about shouting. It's sort of, maybe it's about telling someone a story rather than shouting at them.

Tim Stackpool: And, and Holly, sometimes there's an expectation for public art to be instantly readable. This work, I think, is poetic. It's layered. It's a bit strange. Do you think a level of ambiguity was something that you guys tried to develop here with Jumaadi as well, or, or do you think it's actually quite literal in what it's trying to say?

Holly Williams: I think the first proposing Jumaadi out of a shortlist of artists was because we were hoping to land at the kind of work that's been installed. I think it's sort of doing all of the things we'd hoped. And in terms of curatorial interest, I'm always really interested in activating little used or sort of under explored areas in a, in a site or in a, in a theme or in a history.

So for me. It's an incredibly rich and very positive experience to be able to turn an area where most people would kind of avoid walking into somewhere that people would want to go and seek this artwork out. So I think from that sense, it's a, it's the best.

Tim Stackpool: Before we wrap up and talk about what you guys are working on next, Glenn, what do you, what do you think about public art in Australia at the moment?

Is it, heading in a good direction? Is there great opportunities do you think coming up?

Glenn Barkley: There's really great opportunities for people and it's, it's, especially in Sydney, I think Holly and I were talking about this. It seems as though Sydney is a little bit ahead of other major cities in the commissioning of artworks that's going on at the moment.

And I mean, look, within that mix there's going to be some things that you respond to more strongly than others. But I do think it's a really interesting time for public art. But I also think it's a really interesting time for sculptural practice in general. So yeah, it's great to be a part of it and involved in it.

Tim Stackpool: Mm. And Holly, before I let you go, and I really do appreciate the time you've spent with me, you're very busy. I know. What have you got coming up in 2026, Holly?

Holly Williams: Uh, a Tapestry, a six metre long tapestry by Izabela Pluta has been installed, in the very beautiful new building, CHROFI building in Macquarie Park at MPark. Glenn is also working on a very exciting public art commission that I'll be assisting with that. And I've got another couple of other projects that'll be at different stages. I think one of the things I've really learned working with public artists, you have to be very patient and, you know, work quite diligently to keep the artist you are assisting quite motivated, each step of the way.

So there'll be a bit of that going on as well.

Glenn Barkley: I have a show at Sullivan+Strumpf, and so that show happens I think in June. And then I have a show in Miami with Mindy Solomon Gallery.

Yeah, so lot's on, it's always busy.

Tim Stackpool: Congratulations on the work. It is actually, it's a lovely piece and always great to see new artworks being installed around Sydney and I, I thank you very much for your time.

Glenn Barkley: Thank you very much.

Thanks Tim. And Tim, just a big thank you to, to Jumaadi. 'cause it's, yeah, without Jumaadi these things don't happen. So just a really great work.

Holly Williams: And also just to acknowledge Caroline Camino, who he's worked with as an architect and designer through the whole project. So in a sense it was a, a quite a collaborative team of the four of us working across the project.