

Two monumental semi-circular black timber towers rise up from the sculpture garden behind the NGV. Despite the dramatic presence, it's the absence that strikes you. A giant fissure bisects the nine-metre towers.

For the NGV's fifth architecture commission, award-winning Edition Office (Kim Bridgland and Aaron Roberts) and Indigenous artist Yhonnie Scarce draw visitors into a yawning chasm.

The collaboration, *In Absence*, blurs the line between building and sculpture. It evokes an Aboriginal eel trap and the charred tree for smoking eels and fish, while the circular plan recalls ancient Aboriginal stone houses from Lake Condah in south-western Victoria that have recently been given World Heritage status.

On the inside walls hang 1600 of Scarce's blown-glass black yams. The objects transform in the eye of the beholder: at once yams, eels, tree sap, sperm, people, flames, rain or even stars.

Significantly, the project acts as a meeting place where, over the the four-month installation, programs on site and in the main gallery will explore reconciliation.

"It's important to look down the barrel of our shared history, as fraught and problematic as it is," says Roberts. "At end of day it's about generating dialogue."

For Bridgland, the vacant space implies a gap in knowledge.

"When I read **Bruce Pascoe's** *Dark Emu* I was shocked and quite angry at how much I was not told when I was growing up about the history of this country," he says. "Most non-Indigenous Australians believe Indigenous communities have always been nomadic hunter-gatherers. There's an inherent prejudice that comes with that perspective."

Appreciating that first Australians grew crops and built dwellings goes beyond a legal argument dispelling **terra nullius**. It strikes at the essence of architecture: establishing place. Around the structure grow native Australian grain, kangaroo and wallaby grass, along with three kinds of yams from the Western Plains. By time the pavilion comes down, they hope to have a crop.

If another major absence in Australia is the lack of registered Aboriginal architects (in Victoria there is only one), Scarce sees this collaboration as positive.

"I don't feel in order to tell this story it has to be an entirely Aboriginal [collaboration]," says the Woomera-born artist, who belongs to the Kokatha and Nukunu peoples. "It's a great thing that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can work together."

In a work that revels in positive and negative space, the towers open to the sky, creating another

absent form, a keyhole.

"This [commission] can't close the gap," says Roberts, "but it's a step to doing it."

In Absence, 2019 NGV Architecture Commission, Grollo Equiset Garden, NGV International St Kilda Road Melbourne, November 23, 2019 - April 2020. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au>

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