

**we.**

wiyelliko

## welcome.

We are proud to be launching Lake Macquarie City Council's redeveloped and rebranded art gallery as MAC: Museum of Art and Culture yapang, Lake Macquarie. The project has been in development since 2015 and made possible through the generous support of the NSW State Government's Regional Cultural Fund.

The three exhibitions on display show the direction MAC yapang will take to support Council's Arts Heritage and Cultural Plan by presenting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programming, curating contemporary art exhibitions, supporting the creation of new artwork and making the collection accessible to our community.

The last three years have been exceptional in Lake Macquarie for the development of arts and culture. Alongside MAC yapang – the first of the major infrastructure projects – we can look forward to more urban and public art, our new Multi-Arts Place opening in Speers Point, Rathmines Theatre, Windale Library and Community Centre, and Cameron Park Library Museum that will be delivered over the next five years.

I hope you enjoy the new space and I look forward to seeing the community make the most of our beautiful art museum by participating in its programs and joining in its many events for years to come.

**Clr Kay Fraser**

Mayor, Lake Macquarie City

## foreword.

Aboriginal art and culture and a consultative relationship with the Aboriginal community has been one of the fundamental program drivers of the gallery over the past two decades. Made possible through a relationship with the Aboriginal Reference Group together with Aboriginal curators, educators and artists, the program has featured projects tackling significant political, historical and social issues such as the Stolen Generations, mission life and frontier wars, as well as culture, nature, lore and knowledge. The program has always been about respect, truth telling, education and extending arts practice 'beyond the dot' through skills development.

The ongoing commitment to Aboriginal programming is now formally acknowledged by embracing 'yapang' (*yah-pung*: path, journey), 'art' and 'culture' in the rebranding as MAC: Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie.

*we. wiyelliko* (*we-yell-ick-oh*: to speak or to talk), as one of the opening trio of exhibitions, symbolises our commitment to consultation. It represents a group of Aboriginal contemporary artists' fundamental connection to, and conversation with, the elements that support life, culture, understanding and belonging. In its essence, the exhibition reflects the art museum's philosophy of supporting Aboriginal artists and curators to work together to tell their own stories, and in purchasing and commissioning new works.

Congratulations and sincere thanks to all involved: to Donna Biles-Fernando for her thoughtful selection of works, the artists who have contributed such meaningful and reflective works, and the Aboriginal Reference Group for their unflagging support of the program and art museum. To Tina Baum, Curator Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, National Gallery of Australia for her considered essay and Stephen Goddard for his elegant catalogue design. Also to staff and management of Artbank, and to the gallerists we contacted in developing the exhibition.

Council also acknowledges the grant from the Gordon Darling Foundation for this suite of catalogues, as well as Create NSW for ongoing program support. Without the support of all of these individuals and organisations, the exhibition would not have been possible.

The journey continues... ▲

**Debbie Abraham**

Director

MAC: Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie

we. wiyelliko

donna biles-fernando

**W**e. *wiyelliko*, the first Aboriginal exhibition in the newly rebranded MAC: Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang,

Lake Macquarie, is an amalgam of works by established and emerging contemporary Aboriginal artists. The nucleus of the exhibition is the elemental connection each artist has to their culture and unique praxes.

*Wiyelliko* is the Awabakal word to express communication – to speak, to talk – and is the language of the land on which the museum sits. *we. wiyelliko* explores the intimate personal response of Aboriginal artists to their natural and/or preferred environments.

#### Earth

*The land is my mother. Like a human mother, the land gives us protection, enjoyment and provides our needs – economic, social and religious. We have a human relationship with the land: Mother, daughter, son. When the land is taken from us or destroyed, we feel hurt because we belong to the land and we are part of it.*

REV DR DJINYINI GONDARRA OAM – YOLGNU (2011)<sup>1</sup>

Aboriginal people relate to earth as a physical manifestation, which is in conflict with Western

ideologies of partitions and title deeds. It is within the Dreaming, the comprehension of our natural world, and in understanding the elements that are integral to our identity.

Nicole Monks' *jibaly wilugaju jibala* (2019) is both an activation piece and sculpture including a three-metre circular emu feather shelter, gathered objects and vessel of water symbolising the stars and moon; a transfer of energy through ritual, sound and touch, enlivened with essential oils of native flora sourced within Lake Macquarie. Monks' audience activation is a shared experience between the artist and individual participant. As the participant sits in silence, the energised water is shared, via touch and scent with droplets being placed on sensory points such as the wrist and forehead, each unique interaction based on the dynamism between artist and participant.

#### Water

*We have this relationship, this invisible connection to water, with spirit, culture, songlines, our Dreaming.*

PHIL DUNCAN – GAMILARAAY (2011)<sup>2</sup>

Fundamental to human survival, this element relates directly to wellbeing. It alters the landscape and humans like none of the other elements – tranquillity and devastation take their forms from it.

Artists have been mimicking nature for centuries, as the late virtuoso Yorta Yorta man Lin Burrinja Onus demonstrated in his naturalistic water pieces

*Garkman* (1991) and *Dusk* (1996). In taking nature as his visual cue, Onus created his own inimitable style in bringing important Dreaming stories and customary lore to life.

The sacred importance water plays for Aboriginal people is recognised in two main forms: cultural water associated with ceremonies, and important sites that require access to water for men's, women's and community business. Cultural flow is the right to water for spiritual, economic and environmental purposes.

This idea of the right to water is exemplified in the community-activated artwork developed by artist Jasmine Miikika Craciun. In her work, *Empty Water Vessels* (2019), she intertwines her knowledge of her Barkindji and Malyangapa Country to tell a story of the Darling River and its role in the lives of her people and home town of Wilcannia. Colourful hand-dyed fibre and wire vessels, installed within the exhibition space and in hanging form in the trees of the sculpture park, represent both past and present states of the river through prosperity and decline.

#### Air

*We have wind, totem. Zei the cold breeze wind, Kuki the cyclone wind and Naigai is the calmness, where the water goes still. Sager is the south-east trade winds*

ELMA KRIS – WAIBEN (2011)<sup>3</sup>

Aboriginal people distinguish more than four

seasons. The Dharawal people have six seasons: 'hot and dry', 'wet becoming cooler', 'cold, frosty, short days', 'cold and windy', 'cool, getting warmer', and 'warm and wet'.

Arthur Koo'ekka Pambegan Jnr's *Walkain-aw (Flying-fox Story Place, 2004)* represents an initiation story of the minh mal (black flying fox) and minh wuk (red flying fox) and two brothers undergoing initiation. Without permission, they left camp and killed many bats; for their punishment, the flying foxes took them into the Milky Way. This story is told and danced by the Wik-Mungkan people as a reminder of what happens when you disobey the lore.

Air also represents the sky place, where creator spirits dwell. Being able to sense the change in temperature and direction of the air/wind, to smell the scents of flora and fauna on the breeze, meant the ability to adapt and thrive. Our Elders relate the mind, intellect and intuition to the element of air, as it takes all of the senses to interpret and understand.

#### Fire

*The trunks show that they know fire, they live and understand fire, they're trees that belong to the fire.*

DR TOMMY GEORGE (1928–2016) – KUKU THAYPAN ELDER<sup>4</sup>

Aboriginal connection to land is no better demonstrated than in the harvesting and control

of this element. Cultural burning (fire-stick farming) coupled with the knowledge of Country and the other elements has seen the management of ecological systems for millennia.

Nicole Chaffey in *Killing Song* (2018) references the journey of white man's interference on Country. The appropriation of land and violation of its spirit signifies the destruction of place and people. Charred earthen bark gulamans tell of the fragility of nature and man when corrupted. They are welcoming and protective, offering life: for cooking, for warmth, light, communion, and residual smoke and ash used for ceremonies and art.

Representing a covenant between Aboriginal people and Country, the exhibition showcases the artists' distinct and exquisite retort to their own elemental wiyelliko. The works signify the relationship between ancestral Dreaming and human memory, including the resonance of the elements themselves.

#### EARTH – WATER – AIR – FIRE ▲

#### Donna Biles-Fernando

Donna Biles-Fernando is a proud Muruwari / Ngemba woman, curator, writer and editor

1. Rev Dr Djinyini Gondarra OAM, 'The Assent law of the first people: Principles of an effective legal system in Aboriginal communities', Law and Justice within Indigenous Communities Conference, February 2011.
2. Data Hub of Australian Research on Marine and Aquatic Ecocultures, *Namoi: Oral History of Phil Duncan*, 2011.
3. Elma Kris, Bangarra Dance Theatre, 'Dancing the Torres Strait Islander Winds to Life: Kuki', 2011.
4. Dr Tommy George and Cape York Peninsula Community, *Fire: and the story of Burning Country*, 2013.

## on solid ground: connecting communities

tina baum

**F**or decades, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery has played a pivotal role nurturing and establishing relationships with local, regional and national Aboriginal artists. Now located on an ancestral meeting ground, a campsite which the local Awabakal people had been visiting since time immemorial, it still inspires visitors to meet, learn and share today. As a leader in Aboriginal engagement and representation, the gallery, as is culturally appropriate, firstly recognises the ongoing connection and cultural knowledge the traditional custodians have to the area and secondly, the contribution that Aboriginal artists nationwide bring to the north coast region.

Crucially with the establishment of the Aboriginal Reference Group (ARG) in 2000 the gallery has proven its ongoing commitment to respectful and meaningful partnerships and engagement. This in turn results in the broader community gaining invaluable insights and access to Aboriginal culture, knowledge, art and histories through its dedicated Aboriginal exhibitions and programming. The vital role the ARG has played in assessing and guiding the gallery's exhibitions, programs, protocols, collections and local engagement has provided cultural, political and social benefits. It places the Aboriginal voice and presence at the forefront of the gallery's vision. This collaborative cultural, educative and professional

partnership benefits young and old within the local and regional communities.

This year, 2019, is the International Year of Indigenous Languages. Oral histories, the visual and spoken traditional languages are a crucial part of Aboriginal identity. Cultural knowledge and practices, access to Country and the ongoing connection to Country all combine to enrich local Aboriginal communities. The loss of and subsequent revival of traditional languages has for some become an empowering exercise in reclamation and remembrance. Fittingly the dual naming of the newly refurbished and rebranded art museum to MAC: Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie shows a thoughtful recognition that the traditional language of the area still exists and has an important role to play today. By being inclusive and elevating the traditional custodians firstly, MAC ▲ yapang provides a culturally safe and inviting meeting place for them on their homelands, whilst also creating a vibrant, enlivened space for other Aboriginal people and visitors. In so doing it makes art and culture accessible to all.

By strategically and appropriately using art and culture as conduits in the dedicated Aboriginal art space, and since MAC yapang's first exhibition *Of this time: Contemporary Aboriginal artists working in this region*, 2000, the art museum has consistently developed and showcased a diverse array of engaging and significant exhibitions. With between 50 and

75% of all exhibitions including Aboriginal content annually, a notably high proportion for any regional gallery, it's this type of assurance that will continue to make MAC yapang stand out.

Although featuring diverse artists, communities and artworks, the exhibitions shown explore collective themes relating to identity, family, community, connections to Country, culture, language, contemporary and historical stories and knowledge, whilst showcasing the excellence, ingenuity, intellect and depth of Aboriginal artistic expression. Influential exhibitions like *Passage*, 2004; *Stories: Country, Knowledge, Spirit and Politics*, 2006; *yapang marruma: Making our way (stories of the Stolen)*, 2009; *A possum skin cloak by the lake*, 2011; *(in)visible: The first Peoples and War*, 2015; and *Lore and Order*, 2015, all reinforce MAC yapang's vision as one of the more innovative art galleries on the north coast of New South Wales.

With the ongoing vital development of a permanent yapang collection, MAC yapang also guarantees that a valuable reference and primary resource is accessible to visitors and researchers. The ongoing enhancement of this collection with local works and those from across the Country help expand its reflection of the region and nation.

Another important part of the art museum's role occurred in 2014–2015 in conjunction with Goulburn Regional Art Gallery, Lismore Regional Art Gallery and Western Plains Cultural Centre with the timely

creation of the NSW Regional Visual Arts Aboriginal Emerging Leadership Program. By empowering and supporting the development of four Aboriginal arts workers the art museum played a managing role in providing professional development opportunities and leadership pathways for them. This was another guiding initiative by MAC yapang and the ARG to increase Aboriginal engagement, resulting in opportunities to develop more exciting, dynamic and informative exhibitions across the state.

As one of the opening exhibitions for MAC yapang, *we. wiyelliko*, meaning speak, say, talk, converse, communicate, reflects artists' personal journeys, revealing individual artistic responses relating to different environments. It will remind visitors of the innate connection Aboriginal people have to natural elements like earth, air, water and fire through their cultural or contemporary connections. Along with the other two exhibitions – *us. universal stories* and *be. (your collection) be remembered – we. wiyelliko* supports the fundamental artistic and cultural footprint of the art museum, connecting people with arts and enriching the regional arts and cultural landscape.

Contemporary Aboriginal art is dynamic, evolving, exciting, informative, diverse and embedded with deep time connection expressed through traditional and contemporary outlets. With the reopening of MAC yapang these works will again bring people and art

together, meeting as the Awabakal Ancestors of the area once did and as their descendants continue to do today. By connecting with and inviting Aboriginal artists from across Australia to engage locally, the art museum creates a solid foundation and spaces where cultural connection, revival, regeneration and contemporary artistic expression is elevated.

MAC yapang will again present Aboriginal artistic and cultural expression at the highest of levels. ▲

**Tina Baum**, 2019

Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, National Gallery of Australia



we.

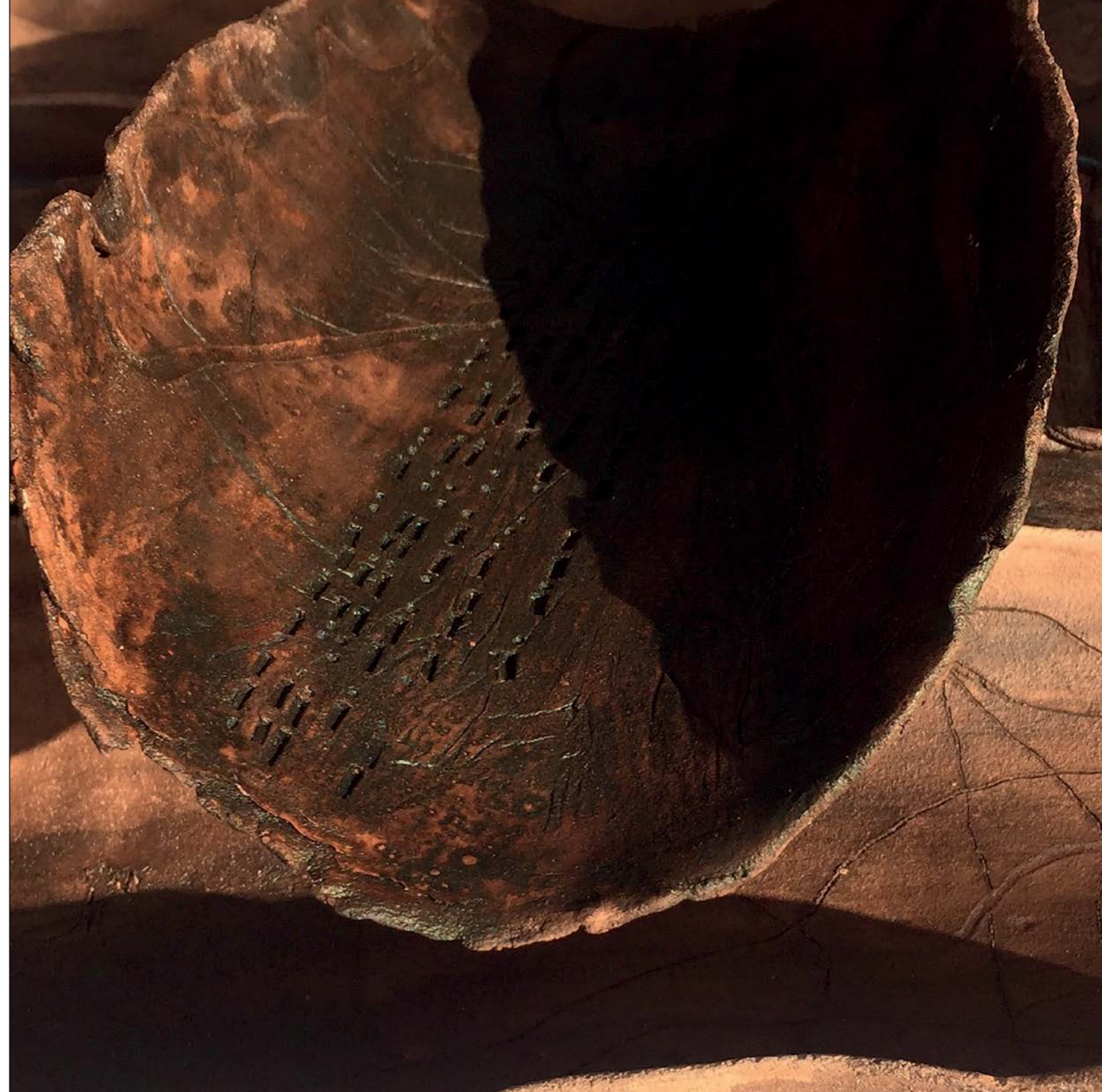
the artists

Nicole Chaffey  
Jasmine Miiikika Craciun  
Nicole Monks  
Lin Burringja Onus  
Arthur Koo'ekka Pambegan Jnr

**Nicole Chaffey**

born 1980 Butterworth, Malaysia  
arrived in Australia 1982  
Biripi  
based in Melbourne, Vic

- *The Killing Song* 2018  
raku-fired earthenware,  
oxides, ink, paper  
installation dimensions variable  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
Installation detail  
© Nicole Chaffey



**Jasmine Miikika Craciun**

born 1997 Newcastle, NSW  
Barkindji, Malyangapa  
based in Newcastle, NSW

(with community participants)

- ▶ *Empty Water Vessels* 2019
- wire, wool made of recycled plastic bottles and merino, hemp cord, recycled plastics, broken china
- two parts (indoor/outdoor)
- installation dimensions variable
- Commissioned by Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie 2019
- Courtesy of the artist
- Process images
- © Jasmine Miikika Craciun





**Lin Burrinja Onus**

born 1948 Melbourne, Vic  
Yorta Yorta  
died 1996, Melbourne, Vic

*Garkman* 1991  
(1 / 4) screenprint  
70 x 98cm

*Gumiring Garkman* 1994  
(1 / 4) screenprint  
70 x 100cm

*Dusk* 1996  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
91 x 122 x 4cm

*Gumbirri Gurginingi* 1996  
(1 / 4) screenprint  
53 x 78cm  
Collection Artbank

► *Pitoo Garkman* 1994  
(1 / 4) screenprint  
70 x 100cm  
Collection Artbank  
Image courtesy of Artbank  
© Lin Burrinja Onus estate/  
Copyright Agency, 2019



**Arthur Koo'ekka Pambegan Jnr**

born 1936 Aurukun, Qld  
Wik-Mungkan  
died 2010 Aurukun, Qld

- *Walkain-aw*  
*(Flying-fox Story Place)* 2004  
natural earth pigments,  
synthetic polymer binder  
on hardwood and milkwood,  
natural fibre  
167 x 205 x 35cm  
Collection Artbank  
Image courtesy of Artbank  
© Arthur Koo'ekka Pambegan Jnr estate



Nicole Monks

born 1981 Subiaco, WA  
Yamatji Wajarri  
based in Newcastle, NSW

► *jibaly wilugaju jibala* [wajarri  
language: sound of water/  
sea water/freshwater] 2019  
installation: emu feathers, wood,  
kangaroo skin, digital HD video  
Commissioned by Museum of Art  
and Culture ▲ yapang,  
Lake Macquarie 2019  
Courtesy of the artist  
Installation detail  
© Nicole Monks





**we. wiyelliko**

curated by Donna Biles-Fernando

in consultation with the Aboriginal Reference Group

Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie

23 November 2019 – 9 February 2020

This exhibition is one of the three projects:

*us. universal stories*

*we. wiyelliko*

*be. [your collection] be remembered*

curated to launch

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MΔC

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Lake Macquarie ▲ yapang