

Chris Booth b. 1948

Wiyung tchellungnai-najil (Keeper of the light), 1997

Helidon sandstone, 900 x 600 x 800 cm (irregular)

ESSAY

With a career spanning over five decades, New Zealand sculptor Chris Booth is internationally renowned for his cohesive approach to environmental art; his oeuvre centres on observations of nature, human awareness of place and history, and material states of tension and compression. Booth is cognisant of the implications of colonial culture, and his process is sensitive to 'knowing' a place and its people in order to build rich narratives of, as well as a dialogue with, nature.

Booth's sculpture *Wiyung tchellungnai-najil (Keeper of the light)*, speaks to the Gold Coast's present and past. Defined by the Nerang River and rising from the promontory at the northern end of Evandale Lake, the sculpture was commissioned by Patrick Corrigan AM and the City of Gold Coast in 1997.

In creating the work, Booth consulted with the local Kombumerri people—in particular, Ysola Best (1940–2007), whose grandmother Jenny Graham was a custodial Elder. Jenny lived through an uneasy time of coexistence, as she witnessed her people defending life and culture in the colonisation of South East Queensland. Her husband, born of Irish parents, was the river pilot in the Southport Broadwater from 1890 to 1923. Following his death, Jenny maintained his role, assisted by her eleven children, using a rowboat to light kerosene navigational buoys to safeguard the waters between the Broadwater and the Nerang River.

Booth's geological research steered him to Helidon, near Toowoomba, where he acquired 80 tons of sandstone to complete three stone sentinels, the tallest at 9 metres. Seamlessly obscured within the environment, *Wiyung tchellungnai-najil (Keeper of the light)*, commands contemplation. The technical tension and magnitude of the sandstone blocks reflect the ancient origins of sand from which they ascend. They are the "frozen flames from inside the navigational buoys".¹

The work's title alludes metaphorically to maintaining rights to traditional land through an act of "keeping the fires burning" and makes a gesture of respect to Jenny and the navigation beacons she maintained.² "*Wiyung tchellungnai-najil*" is traditional Yugambeh language, which translated by the Kombumerri peoples is "Keeper of the Flame".

Booth intends for his work to "push stone to its limit".³ In this work, the materials also embody Jenny Graham's story of integrity and inner strength.

Ruth Della
Curator
HOTA Gallery

¹ Chris Booth, "Evandale Sculpture Walk," letter and proposal, 11 April 1997, held in HOTA archive.

² Chris Booth, *Woven Stone: The Sculpture of Chris Booth* (Auckland, New Zealand: Godwit, 2007).

³ Annette Booth, "To Scott, Exhibitions Coordinator / Press Release," 4 September 1997, facsimile held in HOTA archive.