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Indigenous artists snubbed for \$700,000 Powerhouse Parramatta 'welcome' sculpture



[Linda Morris](#)

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Indian artist Bharti Kher is creating a monumental, multi-headed bronze sculpture to serve as an official public “welcome” to the new \$1 billion Powerhouse Parramatta, as the museum makes its pitch to become a global tourism attraction.

Months ahead of the museum’s grand opening, details have been unveiled on Kher’s *Tree of Life*, one of four major international major artworks or installations destined for the taxpayer-funded museum, which when opened later this year will be Australia’s largest.



Bharti Kher with the foundation parts of Tree of Life. Eddie Jim

The seven-metre-tall bronze takes its inspiration from the sacred tree as a symbol of life and Indian mythology, and rises 1½ metres higher than its sister sculpture, *Ancestor*, temporarily installed in New York’s [Central Park in 2022](#).

The Australian work is now being cast in 30 parts of bronze in a Melbourne foundry. Once completed in August, it will be trucked to Sydney and installed on the museum’s entry plaza, greeting visitors approaching from the railway station.

The Kher work will stand in place for three years, its \$700,000 cost inclusive of an artist’s fee, construction and installation.

Powerhouse chief executive Lisa Havilah defended the decision to extend the commission to an international artist, rather than a local or First Nations practitioner, noting Kher’s status as one of India’s most significant contemporary voices, and the museum’s international reach.



An artist’s impression of Tree of Life in place at the Parramatta Powerhouse.

A First Nations “landscape” was under construction on the riverfront, she said.

“As western Sydney’s first cultural institution, we will program in a very local way; we will program across NSW, nationally and internationally,” Havilah said.

“This work and this artist signifies the international ambition of the project and the international connection of the project.”



The rising form of Kher's Tree of Life. Eddie Jim

The museum's leadership came in for strong criticism from the Public Service Union and other groups during a parliamentary inquiry hearing last December for drifting into the realm of arts, fashion, culture and performance, rather than the applied arts and sciences with focus on engineering and technology. Havilah disputes the museum is straying from its legislative mandate and says it is developing programs that balance science and the applied arts.

Kher's credits include the 59th Venice Biennale and a massive mural featuring three-metre bindis that is now wrapping the Hayward Gallery on London's South Bank. *Tree of Life* will stand even taller than *Ancestor*, Kher's 24-headed "universal mother" figure installed at the entrance of New York's Central Park in 2022 and now residing in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

The Parramatta artwork is positioned next to a Monterey cypress, a tree retained from the grounds of the former Italianate villa Willow Grove that was [controversially removed](#) to make way for the museum's construction.

This juxtaposition is intended to symbolise Parramatta's evolution from a "past steeped in colonial ideals" towards a future that embraces global diversity.

"It's a very, very strong building, and its quite perpendicular and massive," Kher said.



Bharti Kher's *The Skin Speaks a Language All its Own*, at Queensland's Gallery of Modern Art.

"I wanted to make a large tree like a totem. You can't compete with the building ... and you can't compete with nature either."

City of Parramatta had initially encouraged a mosaic for the location, but the museum opted for Kher's multidisciplinary approach, which famously weaves daily rituals and "magical realism" into monumental forms.

Tree of Life is Kher's first Australian commission and her largest public artwork to date. Kher says that her works play with "hybrid jinns, shamans, trickster, and they talk about the multiplicity of the self, that you can be so many things; that this life, in some way, is a dance between mind and body, between positive and negative, between earth and sky, nature and human". She said she hoped the installation would become a gathering place.

"I always think about the children when I make my work, how they'll respond to it. They'll touch it first," she said. "They'll look up into the eyes of the small girl, and they'll see themselves."

Construction giant Lendlease has completed the primary construction of Powerhouse Parramatta – the most significant cultural infrastructure project in NSW since the Sydney Opera House. Lendlease remains onsite to complete St George’s Terrace, public foyers and outdoor landscaping.

Once open, the institution will offer more than 18,000 square metres of public space across seven exhibition areas, including Australia’s largest-volume column-free space.

Apart from Kher’s work, the museum will feature Britain’s Es Devlin in Presentation Space Six and a connected work on its outdoor terrace. Thai artist Torlarp Larpjaroensook has created a large-scale reinterpretation of space voyage for Presentation Space One, which will also feature a walk-in installation by US artist James Turrell.

The museum said that further international and Australian works would be announced in coming months.

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