

NATURE SHRINES
ATHENA COSTOPOULOS
EDUCATION RESOURCE

NATURE SHRINES

This exhibition is a tribute to the landscape as sacred space. Through symbolic use of colour, texture, and familiar objects, the works explore the deep, symbiotic relationship we have with the environment, particularly in moments of quiet reflection. They imagine a future where nature, once again venerated, reclaims its place among the remnants of modern life.

The series transforms natural and recycled materials into shrine-like sculptures and layered gel prints. Inspired by everyday encounters with the natural world, including the landscapes of Gurambilbarra / Townsville, the works investigate how personal encounters become entangled with memory and collective understanding.

Through carving, constructing and mould-making processes, discarded packaging and paper clay have become preserved relics, evoking mausoleums and memorial structures. The monochromatic white surfaces further suggest traditional grave decorations, communicating themes of loss, preservation and reflection. Observed leaves, flowers and birds are embedded within these artificial landscapes, integrated alongside familiar domestic objects such as keys and pegs which reference family life, routine and responsibility.

The accompanying gel prints explore memory through layers of colour, texture and imagery. Like memory itself, the prints are built through collection and reconstruction, creating visual records of lived experience and place. Mark-making is applied to obscure or reveal, conveying the way our senses conjure and alter memories. While the smell of eucalyptus, the crunch of leaves underfoot or the sounds of bird calls can take us back to specific times and places, *Nature Shrines* serves as a visual touchstone, inviting sincere reverence for the natural world.

~ Athena Costopoulos, July 2026

Athena Costopoulos is a multidisciplinary visual artist based in Gurambilbarra / Townsville. She works across painting, ceramics, printmaking and sculpture. Her practice challenges conventional approaches to materials and surfaces. Through mixed-media works, Costopoulos explores themes of home and belonging. She investigates the interconnected relationship between people and the places they inhabit. At the heart of her practice is a deep reverence for the sacredness of place. Drawing inspiration from the North Queensland natural environment, she interprets place through the lens of memory, creating works that blur the boundaries between lived experience and reconstructed reality.



LEARNING INTENTIONS

Through engagement with the exhibition *Nature Shrines*, students investigate how a contemporary artist uses materials, symbolism and visual language to communicate personal and environmental narratives. They develop an understanding of how artworks operate within personal, formal, cultural and contemporary contexts and how art functions as a complex visual code capable of communicating ideas about memory, place and our relationship with the natural world.

UNIT ONE: ART AS LENS

Students investigate how the artist views nature as sacred space and how personal experiences influence artistic practice.

Contexts

- Personal
- Contemporary

Key Concepts

- Personal experiences as artistic inspiration
- Nature as subject and metaphor
- Relationships between humans and the environment
- Memory and place

Inquiry Questions

- How do artists communicate personal experiences through visual language?
- How can ordinary objects become symbols within artworks?
- How does memory influence the representation of place?



UNIT TWO: ART AS CODE

Students explore how symbols, materials and visual conventions communicate complex meanings.

Contexts

- Formal
- Cultural

Key Concepts

- Symbolism and metaphor
- Cultural codes and signs
- Material meaning
- Visual language

Inquiry Questions

- What meanings do viewers bring to symbols such as birds, flowers, keys and memorial structures?
- How does colour communicate the concept of memory?
- How do artists use materials as symbolic devices?



MAKING ACTIVITY ONE: *PERSONAL SHRINE*

Applicable unit/s: Art as Lens / Art as Code

Contexts: Personal, Contemporary

Learning Intentions

- Students will create a small shrine that commemorates something personally significant using symbolic objects and recycled materials.

Materials

- Small cartons and recycled packaging
- Cardboard
- PVA glue
- Scissors
- Pencil
- Ruler
- Masking tape
- Found objects
- Acrylic paint or spray paint

Process

1. Research how different cultures use structures as memorials.
2. Brainstorm your theme and make preliminary sketches of the shrine.
3. Incorporate found and recycled materials.
4. Include symbolic objects.
5. Consider how colour, texture and form can convey meaning.
6. Write a 150-word artist statement.



MAKING ACTIVITY TWO: *MEMORY MAPPING GEL PRINTS*

Applicable unit/s: Art as Lens

Contexts: Personal, Contemporary

Learning Intentions

- Students create a series of monoprints based on memories of a significant place

Materials

- Visual diary
- Pencil
- Fine liner
- Scissors
- Glue stick
- Smooth 180-200 gsm paper
- Masking tape
- Found objects such as feathers, seed pods, plants, human made objects

Process

1. Visit a local environment.
2. Make observational drawings.
3. Collect photographs and objects.
4. Incorporate symbolic imagery.
5. Simplify into motifs and make paper stencils.
6. Plan the composition and colour scheme.
7. Develop layered gel prints.
8. Create collages or layer with mixed media.
9. Reflect on how memory alters perception.



MAKING ACTIVITY THREE: *BOTANICAL STAMPS*

Applicable unit/s: Art as Lens / Art as Code

Contexts: Personal, Contemporary, Formal

Learning Intentions

- Students research the symbolic meaning of plants. They create a botanical stamp.

Materials

- Visual diary
- Pencil
- Lino carving tools
- Lino
- Scissors
- Glue stick
- Cartridge paper
- Masking tape
- Various plants, photos of plants

Process

1. Research the symbolism of plants.
2. Create observational drawings of selected plants.
3. Simplify to a motif.
4. Draw on lino. Consider how the stamp could form a repeat pattern.
5. Carve lino stamp.
6. Experiment repetition, layering, colour and collage.
7. Present samples in a visual diary.

Extension Activities

- Make a collaborative artwork.
- Make a functional artwork such as a bag, pencil case, cushion cover, sticker or phone case that conveys a message of sustainability or environmental concern.



UNIT THREE: ART AS KNOWLEDGE

Students investigate environmental concerns, sustainability and cultural understandings of landscape.

Contexts

- Contemporary
- Cultural
- Formal
- Personal

Key Concepts

- Environmental awareness
- Sustainability
- Place-based knowledge
- Human impact on nature
- Cultural connections to place

Inquiry Questions

- How can art encourage reflection on environmental issues?
- How do artists transform discarded materials into meaningful artworks?
- What knowledge about place is communicated through artistic practice?
- How can artists imagine alternate futures?
- What might a future landscape without human intervention look like?
- How can visual art challenge current understandings of environmental responsibility?



RESPONDING ACTIVITIES

Discussion Questions

- How does the exhibition position nature as sacred?
- How might different audiences interpret these shrines?
- In what ways do the materials contribute to meaning?
- How do symbols communicate ideas without words?
- Are symbols understood differently across cultures?

Artwork Analysis

Students analyse one artwork using the following framework:

- Describe the artwork.
- Analyse the Elements and Principles.
- Explain how materials contribute to meaning.
- Analyse relationships between natural and human-made forms.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the artwork.

Comparative Study

Compare an artwork from the exhibition with artworks by:

- Andy Goldsworthy
- Fiona Hall
- Judy Watson
- Emily Kame Kngwarreye
- El Anatsui

Students investigate:

- Material choices
- Environmental themes
- Cultural perspectives
- Symbolic communication

FOCUS AREA: FORMAL CONTEXT

Students analyse how visual language communicates meaning through visual conventions:

Colour

- Predominantly white surfaces
- References memorials and remembrance
- Creates a sense of stillness and fragility

Texture

- Detailed impressions of leaves and flowers
- Contrasts between organic and manufactured surfaces
- Manufactured nature
- Fingerprint impressions in the shrine surfaces

Form

- Shrine-like architectural structures
- Relief surfaces created through lino carved moulds

Space

- Positive and negative space
- Voids and shadows

Pattern

- Repetition of botanical motifs
- Rhythms found in natural growth

FOCUS AREA: CULTURAL CONTEXT

Nature has been represented as sacred, symbolic and spiritual across many cultures. Students may investigate:

First Nations Perspectives

- The significance of Country as a living entity.
- Relationships between people, place and memory.
- Cultural practices of storytelling and environmental stewardship.

Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

- Shinto (Japan's native belief system), kami are divine forces that inhabit natural phenomena like mountains, rivers, rocks, and trees.
- Daily offerings are presented by Balinese Hindus to bridge the 'seen and unseen worlds' at palinggih or pura (shrine).

Historical

- Memorial architecture and shrines.
- Botanical illustration and scientific observation.
- Victorian mourning traditions and floral symbolism.

Discussion Questions

- How does the exhibition position nature as sacred?
- What cultural understandings of landscape are evident in the work?
- How might different audiences interpret these shrines?
- In what ways do the materials contribute to meaning?

IMAGES:

Page 1: Athena Costopoulos, *Castle Hill*, 2025, Gel plate print, acrylic and ink on paper, 42 x 30cm.

Page 2: Athena Costopoulos, *Nature Shrines i* (detail), 2026, Recycled cardboard and paperclay, 76 x 62 x 37cm.

Page 3: Athena Costopoulos, *Beginnings*, 2024, Gel plate print and ink on paper, 53 x 34cm.

Page 4: Athena Costopoulos, *Nature Shrines ii*, 2026, Recycled cardboard and paperclay, 24 x 22.5 x 8cm.

Page 5: Athena Costopoulos, *Birdsong*, 2024, Gel plate print, acrylic and ink on paper, 53 x 34cm.

Page 6: Athena Costopoulos' carved and cut lino samples for *Nature Shrines*, 2026.

Page 7: Athena Costopoulos, *Cutheringa*, 2025, Gel plate print, acrylic and ink on paper, 56 x 76cm.

All photographs: Amanda Galea.

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Courtesy Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts, in conjunction with:

NATURE SHRINES – ATHENA COSTOPOULOS

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UMBRELLA STUDIO CONTEMPORARY ARTS

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www.umbrella.org.au | 07 4772 7109 | Tues-Fri 9am-5pm | Sat-Sun 9am-1pm | Closed Mondays, install weeks + public holidays

Umbrella respectfully acknowledges the Wulgurukaba of Gurambilbarra and Yunbenun and the surrounding groups of our region - Bindal, Gugu Badhun, Nywaigi, Warrgamay, Bandjin and Gudjal - as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather, share and celebrate local creative practice. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia. They have never ceded sovereignty and remain strong in their enduring connection to land and Culture. *Umbrella is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland, part of the Department of Education, and the Visual Art, Craft and Design Framework, an initiative of the Australian, state and territory governments. | Umbrella is supported by the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation and receives funding from Creative Australia through the Australian Cultural Fund. | Townsville City Council is a funding partner of Umbrella's program. | Umbrella celebrates 40 years, in creative partnership with Vetta Creative.*



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