

Esme Timbery and Marilyn Russell

"I've been doing shellwork from a very young age. And I learnt through my mother, just sitting down and sorting out shells. And it's been through the family for that many years and I'd like to see either my grandchildren or my daughters take it on and continue on with it. It's very important that it doesn't die out"

Esme Timbery, 2008

"It's supposed to be handed down from grandmothers, mothers, daughters, granddaughters. To me it's time consuming, which my mum's got a lot of patience. I know you have to have it for this sort of work. They're just so beautiful and ... I've lost sight of that. But I really, really would love to get back in and do it. I suppose when I get a little bit older"

Marilyn Russell, 2008

About the artist

Esme Timbery was born in 1931 at Port Kembla, Wollongong NSW and is a Bidjigal woman from La Perouse Aboriginal community which is south east of Sydney. Timbery is best known for her shell work which she practiced from a young age from her mother, grandmother and auntie's. The shell work is a cultural and creative practice that comes from a long line of generations. Timbery, and now her daughter Marilyn Russell, exhibit many of their works in nationally recognized galleries and institutions including National Museum of Australia, Campbelltown Arts Centre, NSW Parliament House and the Sydney Opera House.

Short Biography

Esme Timbery born in 1931 at Port Kembla, Wollongong NSW
Marilyn Russell born in 1952
Bidjigal women from La Perouse Aboriginal community, south east of Sydney.
2005 NSW Parliament Indigenous Art Prize

The practice of shell work in the Timbery's family had also been recognized from early recordings in the late 1800s where Timbery's great-grandmother 'Queen' Emma Timbery had her work exhibited in London in 1910. For generations, the Timbery family have continued the shell work that they used in the tourist souvenir markets around the La Perouse area. Timbery began exhibiting her work in the art galleries and museums with her first exhibition called *Djalarinji – Something that Belongs to Us* which was curated by Tess Allas at the Manly Regional Gallery and Museum in 1997.

Timbery's first exhibition was *Djalarinji – Something that Belongs to Us*, at Manly Regional Gallery and Museum in 1997. She worked with artist Judy Watson on a public art installation in the arrivals hall at Sydney International Airport in 2000. In 2002 Timbery was commissioned by the Sydney Opera House to create Sydney landmarks in shellwork for its annual Message Sticks program. She exhibited in *Messages from the Fringe*, Birrung Gallery, Sydney (2003) and *Terra Alterius: Land Of Another*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney (2004).

Timbery was the subject of an ABC TV 'Artists at work' documentary, *She Sells Sea Shells*, in 2007. Her works are held in numerous collections including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; National Museum of Australia, Canberra; Wollongong Art Gallery, Wollongong; and Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. <https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artist/timbery-esme/?flavour=c3west>

WATCH this short video from the Australian Museum featuring Timbery and Russell
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cuWs0XWEDw>

About the artwork: critical statement

Esme Timbery, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge*, 2017

Marilyn Russell, *The Sydney Opera House*, 2017

Timbery's *Sydney Harbour Bridge* (2017) and Russell's *Sydney Opera House* (2017) are works that demonstrate skill and traditional practices that speak of storylines of their family and community. The handcraft objects are from knowledge that has been sent down the generations and bring to life a modern practice that adapts shells from traditional lands on the coast to form objects of Sydney's iconic landmarks.

Through these artworks, Timbery demonstrates many skills she learned from a young age: to sort the shells in order by colours, shapes and sizes and to design patterns in the work. The traditional practice that forms objects of the contemporary Sydney landmarks also engage the viewers to think about the history of Sydney and Aboriginal custodianship of land and water, ideas that the Opera House and Harbour Bridge are based upon. The work that Esme Timbery, and now her daughter, Marilyn Russell produce, is a part of their upbringing and have strong connections to traditional lands, culture and community, representing a rich history of tradition.

The Sydney Harbour Bridge, 2017 and ***The Sydney Opera House, 2017*** are created from wood, glue, cardboard, fabric, glitter and shells gathered from the beaches of the New South Wales south coast. The glue is a special mix of PVA, flour and water. The shells are not always available. They are collected from specific beaches at specific times of the year. The artists are no longer permitted to collect shells from some of their traditional sources, such as Hyam's Beach and so source these over the internet from different locations.

World

La Perouse peninsula is a Sydney suburb on the northern headland of Botany Bay. 'Laper', as it is affectionately known, saw a thriving tourist and day-tripper trade with the local Indigenous community entertaining visitors with boomerang and axe-throwing, and handicrafts made of local shells. 'Queen Emma Timbery' was the first in a lengthy family line to utilise and craft the abundant supply of shells from the local sandhills. For almost eighty years, Esme Timbery has been part of this living history, from collecting and sorting shells at the age of five to making her own brooches, jewellery boxes and ornamental baby booties and 'shelling' architectural icons. Timbery recollects the popularity of these ornamental works when she tells how shell work first found its way to England in the 1930's and 'people were fighting over it'. Timbery's daughter, Marilyn Russell, also carries on the family tradition of shellwork with her own individual choices, styling and placement of shells on models of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and even model boomerangs, decorated with intricate and colourful patterns of tiny shells, attesting to the hours of skilled work in the making of these popular ornaments. There is a great deal of 'story' in these works for these women, recollecting their happy memories of collecting shells as children and sitting in a tranquil family group, whiling away the days at this gentle craft. http://hibiscusfilms.com.au/artandsoul/pdf/art+soul_study-guide.pdf

Timbery recollects, "We had nothing in La Perouse. You know, no-one was rich. But what we had we looked after. Everybody was everyone's friend. And everybody helped one another. My brother used to make artifacts. My father used to make boomerangs. My sister made shellwork. Well, I would've been very young when I first saw shell work done, but about five I'd sit down and pick shells out for my mother. Then I got a bit game and I made a brooch. Of course, it was only small. And then in later years I made a pair of booties and kept going from there. Every beach has different shells and they've got different names, you know, for the shells. I like to put them in different containers..." According to Timbery, the fingernails [which are used for edging] and buttons come from Hyam's Beach, the Stars come from Gerringong and the pennywinkles come from Cape Banks. The traditional knowledge of country, seasons and environmental events enables artists to harvest specific shells at various bays and beaches.

Maria Nugent, historian, has traced the shell art back to the 1870s and 1880s. How shell art was introduced to the community is unclear but Nugent believe it was encouraged by the missionaries and may have been much more than a "civilizing" project to aid assimilation. When a tramline "the Loop" was opened in 1902, a local tourist and leisure industry centered on the beaches and pleasure grounds developed. This was critical to the growth of the shellwork in the region.

Tess Allas, curator, placed Timbery's work in its first exhibition in 1997, taking it out of the tourist context and into a fine art context. *"I think it's important for the women, for a sense of place, a sense of ownership, a sense of survival of a cultural knowledge. That continuation of that knowledge is really important for any community"*. <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s2495615.htm>

Marilyn Russell believes that what Timbery has shown her family is the potential for unlimited innovation that shellwork provides. It is “a good portent for the future”.

As material object, decorative shellwork became a symbol of cultural continuity, female resourcefulness and economic survival. These messages were reinforced through weekend demonstrations of making shellwork given by Aboriginal women from the La Perouse community. The demonstrations might have been an echo from another time, but what they were intended to convey was very different. By demonstrating how to make shellwork, they were demonstrating their survival and identity as proud Aboriginal women.

http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/volume_7_number_2/papers/displaying_the_decorative

Audience - Miriam Corow on Message Stick ABC program “She Sells Seashells, 2008” <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s2495615.htm>

“Esme Timbery is this country’s finest shell artist and from within her small community of La Perouse just south of Sydney, she’s created a body of work spanning seven decades which adorns galleries and museums across Australia. This unique art form first emerged in the 19th century and typically served as souvenirs for visiting tourists.

“Esme Timbery really sort of interrogates what is and what isn’t Aboriginal art. You know, she really challenges those sort of stereotypes ... what’s contemporary, what’s traditional.... What is art, what is craft. And also I think they’re just so celebratory...” Hetti Perkins at NSW Parliamentary Prize ceremony

Daphne Nash, in her excellent article “From shell work to shell art: Koori women creating knowledge and value on the South Coast of NSW observes

“Framed in the post-colonial discourse of resistance, Esme’s (and other shell work women in her family) use of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and other Australian icons is interpreted by some, e.g. Boardman and Harris (2004) as a political statement. From this perspective the artwork indicates the artist’s rejection of the assumption that Aboriginal people around Sydney have disappeared or died out. Clearly Aboriginal people have survived and Indigenous people are aware of their political and social history as colonised peoples.” [Craft and Design; issue 2, 2010]

Other relevant works

Shellworked Slippers, 2008

by Esme Timbery

detail of an installation of 200 pairs of shellworked shoes made by Esme Timbery

cardboard, synthetic textiles, shells, glitter, pva glue, plain flour

Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased with funds provided by the Coe and Mordant families, 2008



The 200 shelled slippers form a memorial to the Stolen Generations – Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families and communities by government edict throughout the greater part of the twentieth century. Through their silence, emptiness and sense of expectancy, these shoes bear witness to the children’s absence.

The Timbery family have been famed for their shellwork since Timbery’s great-grandmother,

Emma Timbery, produced shellworked objects for an exhibition of Australian manufactures in England in 1910. Timbery and her sister Rose began selling their shellwork in La Perouse in the 1950s, using starries, buttonies, couries, conks and pennywinkles gathered from the coastal waters of the Timbery mob, from La Perouse to Jervis Bay in the south. The 200 slippers decorated with these shells are a statement of ownership, as well as a meditation on the dispossession of Aboriginal people – not just of the land but also of their way of life and, within real and living memory, of the Stolen Generations of children. The slippers are a reminder of the trauma of dispossession and disempowerment but they are also an affirmation of a community that has survived; of its strength, and of the warmth of the family and the community as a whole.

<https://www.mca.com.au/collection/work/2008.46/?flavour=c3west>

For an exhibition curated By Djon Mundine at the Campbelltown City Council in 2008, titled *Ngadhu, Ngulili, Ngeaninyagu – A Personal History of Aboriginal Art in the Premier State*, Mundine commissioned Esme Timbery and Marilyn Russell to make 200 pairs of shellwork baby shoes or slippers [only 120 were completed by the time of the exhibition]. These were displayed in an organized way, pinned to the wall, resembling a painting or a collector's display. The slippers were typical of the works sold by Timbery, but transformed, through repetition and assemblage, in this new context. Their miniature size and their feminine and domestic form derive from and hark back to shellwork's Victorian-era origins. "The impact of the piece derives from seeing so many small shellwork pieces together. Pinned to the wall, front facing forward, in neat rows that highlight variation in colour but regularity in form, they appear like a taxonomic display of butterflies or other insects, putting one in mind of histories of collection and display. More particularly, though, the pieces are arranged just as the women who made them would have themselves displayed them for sale, the only difference being that their displays were on the ground, not on the wall. They laid their wares out in rows on blankets spread out on the grass at the tram terminus at La Perouse on weekends, or by the side of the road at nearby beach suburbs, ready to sell to passers-by.

WATCH this video of Esme Timbery and Jonathan Jones talking about the adaptation of Timbery's traditional practice for a huge wall at Barangaroo. *Shell Wall* is a seven story collaboration between Jones and Timbery which transforms the usually intimate works of Timbery to a monumental scale.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tS30-oE5SkY&feature=youtu.be>



<http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p212111/html/ch05.html?referer=1186&page=7#footnote-13513-15-backlink>