



This everything water

SASA
GALLERY

2008 Adelaide Bank
Festival of Arts

This everything water

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Cover image:
Kay Lawrence, *Folded* 2003
wooden desk, blankets, mother-of-pearl buttons,
cotton thread, cotton voile
Photograph, Michal Klivanek



Church of the Sacred Heart, Beagle Bay | Photograph, Diana Wood Conroy

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Introduction

*This everything water*¹ is an exhibition of work by Kay Lawrence, Bardi artist Aubrey Tigan from Djaridjin, and Nyigina Law Man, Butcher Joe Nangan. The exhibition, which is part of the 2008 Adelaide Bank Festival of Arts, explores the iridescent and material qualities of pearl shell, and the symbolic meanings attributed to it by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. *This everything water* is underpinned by research undertaken by Lawrence into shell harvested in the early 20th Century around the Dampier Peninsula, a remote area north of Broome.

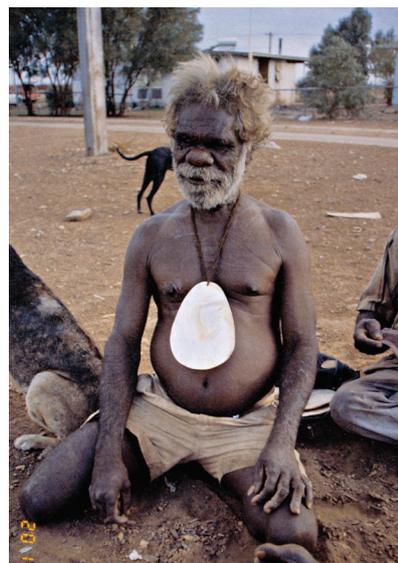
This everything water is one of a series of research based exhibitions that engage external scholars to participate in the SASA Gallery's exhibition and publication programs. The external scholars for this exhibition are John Kean and Dr Diana Wood Conroy. John Kean, Creative Producer, Victoria Museum, has written extensively on Indigenous art and the representation of the Indigenous and natural subjects in Australian museums. Dr Diana Wood Conroy is Professor of Visual Arts, Faculty Research Chair, School of Art and Design, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong. Her research and art practice spans archaeology, anthropology and textiles. As well as writing the catalogue essays, Kean and Wood Conroy will travel to Adelaide to participate in events associated with the exhibition.

The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences, the Division Research Performance Fund and Five Year Research Infrastructure Fund, the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space publishing and exhibiting high-quality research

based work, and as an active site for teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, writers and curators associated with the South Australian School of Art and the Louis Laybourne Smith School of Architecture and Design in a national and international context.

The SASA Gallery has received immense support towards the development and implementation of the exhibition and publishing programs. The catalogues have been designed by students working in the visual communications consultancy as part of their Honours and postgraduate study, and are printed at Cruickshank Printers. The excellent wine served at the exhibition openings is supplied by Perrini Estate.

Mary Knights
Director, SASA Gallery



¹ 'This is for everybody - man and woman. This is rain
This everything water'
Mumbadadi, Christmas Creek, Western Australia, 1990
Photograph, Peter Bidon, courtesy, Kim Akerman



Kay Lawrence, *Bitter as Birne*, 2008, cream woollen blanket, mother-of-pearl buttons, cotton, detail | Photograph, Michal Klivanek

This everything water

Kay Lawrence

This exhibition began with a collection of buttons and a story. During its development I travelled to the Dampier Peninsular, met many people and heard many stories, each adding a layer of complexity to the developing narrative; rather like the way pearl shell is built up from nacreous layers to create a shimmering, shifting surface. How these objects made from pearl shell, my own and those made by Aubrey Tigan and Butcher Joe Nangan might be understood, is not meant to be fixed but like the surface of a pearly shell, may shift and change according to the perspective of the viewer.

I have been collecting mother-of-pearl shell buttons for many years, not in terms of finding rare or highly crafted examples but more with an interest in the infinite variety of their simple functional forms, luminosity and iridescent colour. A disc drilled from shell with two or four holes. Some are thick cut, some wafer thin, the holes precisely centred or hand-drilled and off centre. Many are deeply lustrous while others are white like bone. They can be heavy and cold in your hand or light, like flakes of shimmering light. Many retain bits of cloth and thread, while others are still stitched in rows on card just as they were sold decades ago.

Listening to the radio one day I heard the writer John Bailey talking about the development of the pearling industry in Western Australia. I subsequently read his book *The White Divers of Broome*, a story about the introduction of white labour into the pearling industry in Broome in the early 20th Century that in Bailey's words, 'exposed in a stark way issues relating to the Australian identity and racial attitudes towards Asia.'¹ A reference in his book to the skulls of Aboriginal people killed by a pearler² made me think about an image I'd long kept, of an 11th century mosaic of *The Last*

Judgment in the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta at Torcello in Italy. Human skulls and the burning bodies of the damned were laid down in marble tesserae on the back wall of the church, a reminder as you left, of death, of the dissolution of the body before resurrection in Christ.

Buttons are like tessera and shell was once living skeletal structure like bone.

I stitched images of skulls with mother-of-pearl buttons onto old cream blankets. Folded and stacked, they now lie under a desk, out of sight (and out of mind) while on the desk lies a book called *White: a glossary of terms*. In this work, the book and skulls are a reminder of white complicity in the death of Aboriginal people in the early days of the pearling industry.

Prior to the second world war 80% of the world's pearl shell came from 400 luggers working out of Broome. Much of this shell was exported to Great Britain to be made into buttons for the textile industry in centres like Birmingham. The Kimberley pearl shell industry, dating from 1860, was first built on the labour of local Indigenous people, and later on the labour of Chinese, Japanese, Koepanger, Malay and Manilamen. In the wake of the White Australia Policy in the early 20th Century, an experiment to introduce white labour into the industry failed, giving credence to the popular belief that diving for pearl shell 'was no work for a white man.'³

The work entailed great risks, and during the early years hundreds of men died; from beri-beri, from diver's paralysis and from drowning. The pearl shell buttons used to adorn the clothes of ordinary people were the product of an economically volatile industry characterised by difficult and dangerous working conditions.



Aboriginal Elder, identified as John, Master of Ceremonies of the Corroboree, famed hunter and dancer, early 19th Century, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy, Norman archive

To stay warm in their cumbersome diving suits as they collected shell in the deep waters off Broome, divers wore under-trousers sometimes made from old blankets. A pair of trousers, covered with pearl buttons shimmers like the sea. Its weight would drag a man down to his death rather than keeping him warm. Now it hangs on the back of a chair, near a white cotton-drill suit like those worn by men in the pearling industry. The suits of indentured crewmen were fastened with mother-of-pearl buttons while the pearling masters wore buttons made of pearl.⁴ These suits, cool and white, starched and crisp, were often changed twice a day as they became soiled with sweat and red pindan dust. It could take an hour for a 'girl' (often a young Aboriginal woman) to iron the jacket and trousers with a Mrs Potts iron heated on a fuel stove in the kitchen before the searing heat of the day.⁵

* * * * *

But pearl shell was not only valued and traded by the colonists. The Kimberley pearl shell industry had in fact been stimulated by shell traded by Aboriginal people to an exploration party near Nichol Bay in 1861.⁶ Long before white contact, pearl shell had been harvested by Aboriginal people, dry-shelling along the reefs of the north-west coast of Western Australia. These groups included the Bardi, Djawi and Ongkarango people of the Buccaneer Archipelago who also collected shell from off-shore reefs using mangrove rafts to negotiate the strong tides and dangerous waters.⁷

Shell was valued for its brilliance, collected, shaped and used in ceremony or for personal adornment, and used in trade. Since white contact pearl shell has been traded extensively through traditional socio-economic exchange systems across northwest and central Australia. Pearling Master HD Norman photographed an Aboriginal elder that he identified as 'John, Master of Ceremonies of the Corrobooree' in the early 20th Century, wearing a pearl shell engraved with a bilaterally symmetrical design on a hair string belt. He also wears a pinjapinja, a pearlshell blade, over his forehead.⁸

The South Australian Museum has a number of pearl shell ornaments in its collection dating from the late 19th and early 20th Century from the Kimberley region. In the early 1890s two shells were

collected by Captain Hilliard at Cygnet Bay on the Dampier Peninsular. One, a pearl shell engraved with a haphazard meander constructed from three sets of parallel zigzag lines, also includes arrowhead marks indicating bird tracks, and inverted 'v' marks indicating macropod tracks.⁹ The other plain pearl shell blade pendant (pinjapinja) is hung from string threaded with dentalium (bargayi /bargai), a marine mollusc found near the tip of the Dampier Peninsula at Lombadina.



Two other shells entered the museum collection in the early 20th Century. A plain pearl shell blade (pinjapinja l/c) attached to a thick skein of hair string (possibly a magic object)¹⁰ from Brunswick Bay north of the Buccaneer Archipelago, and a large, un-engraved shell of the type known as kuoan/kuwan by the Dampierland people that had been traded inland, south to Flora Vale (now Flora Valley) near Halls Creek.¹¹ Undecorated shells were first to enter the exchange systems, however shells engraved with non-figurative or figurative designs, the incised lines filled with a mixture of red ochre or powdered charcoal and fat, have been traded since the mid 19th Century.¹² Plain shells were sometimes traded as 'blanks' to be engraved in communities a long way from their source.

Engraved pearl shell, Cygnet Bay Western Australia, c.1890
Courtesy, South Australian Museum
Photograph, Michal Kluvanek

As pearl shell ornaments were traded between Aboriginal groups from the coast to the desert, the meaning and significance of the shell could change according to the region, and the gender, age and status of the user of the shell. Shell was used for many purposes; in rain making rituals and initiation ceremonies and for purposes associated with tribal law, medicine and love magic. In all these uses the shining surface of pearl shell reflects the associations with physical



and spiritual well being flowing from the Ancestral Creation period.¹³ This ensures that pearl shells are perceived by Aboriginal people as particularly potent objects.

The reflective surface of pearl shell changes and shimmers under the play of light. For Aboriginal people of the Kimberley this luminous fluidity is associated with water, the flash of a shell like the lightning that presages summer rain. Kim Akerman notes in his 1994 monograph on Kimberley pearl shell, that irrespective of use, for Aboriginal people pearl shell is 'water', an emblem of the very basis of life.¹⁴ This belief was eloquently expressed by Walmajarri elder, Mumbadadi at Christmas Creek, south of Fitzroy Crossing in 1990:

Pearl shell engraved with angular maze,
Kimberley, Western Australia, early 20th Century
Courtesy, South Australian Museum
Photograph, Michal Kluvanek

'This is for everybody - man and woman - This is rain. This everything water.'¹⁵

A number of shells in the collection of the South Australian Museum are engraved with multiple zigzag patterns that symbolise water. Some are haphazard as in the shell collected by Captain Hilliard, while others, like the horizontal angular maze pattern on an undated shell from the Kimberley, originally in the collection of C P Mountford, are more regular. Akerman notes that



Aboriginal people have described multiple regular zigzags inscribed on shells as representing ripples left by the tide on the shoreline, or the ripples on flood water caused by wind.¹⁶

A mazelike pattern known as 'interlocking key,' that Akerman calls the 'bilaterally symmetrical' style, developed from the zigzag design. This design, depicted on a shell hung from a hair string belt from Moola Bulla station and now in a private collection, originated in the northern Dampier peninsula. It is believed to have been derived from an anthropomorphic figure, and for some contemporary Bardi and Nyul Nyul people, symbolises the 'tree of life.'¹⁷ These designs represent just one strand of the rich cultural traditions involving Aboriginal

Pearl shell blade (Pinjapinja) on string threaded with dentalium (bargayi / bargai) Cygnet Bay, Western Australia c.1890
Courtesy, South Australian Museum
Photograph, Michal Kljuvenek

use of pearl shell, where for over a century new approaches, including a rich strand of figurative design, have been developed.

Shells engraved in a naturalistic style by Nyigina Law Man, Butcher Joe Nangan in the mid 20th Century, often combine historical information with stories of the ancestral beings that animate his country. Nangan was born in Yawuru country just south of Broome and largely identified with the country of his mother's people, the Nyigina of the southwest



Kimberley. He spent most of his life in this area and on the Dampier peninsula. Two shells engraved by Nangan in the collection of the Broome Historical Society Museum make reference to the pearling industry, while also depicting important ancestral figures associated with sites near Roebuck Bay. Each shell depicts an Aboriginal man standing high on a rocky point looking out to pearling luggers at sea. On one shell a shark circles a woman, on the other, a macropod, probably a nail-tailed wallaby (karapulu) indicated by the raised left forepaw, grazes quietly in the foreground. The man is probably Marala (identified by his emu-like feet) who raped the Kumanba-Sea women who are now rocks on the beach near the boat club at the New Jetty at Broome. The Kumanba, who also became the star

Pearl shell blade (Pinjapinja) on a thick skein of hair string, Brunswick Bay, Western Australia early 20th Century
Courtesy, South Australian Museum
Photograph, Michal Kljuvenek

constellation the Pleiades, were sisters and sea spirits and swim unceasingly escorted by sharks.¹⁸

There are important sites for Karapulu in the Roebuck/Dampier Downs area. A story associated with one of these sites is depicted on a shell engraved by Nangan from a private collection. The shell depicts a left-handed Karapulu (a nail-tailed wallaby man of the Karimpa section), fighting a right-handed rival over a girl at Maningkap waterhole near Hamilton Well on Roebuck station. The Karapulu wins and gives the name to the waterhole.¹⁹ Access to water is essential to the maintenance of life in this arid environment and this access was generally shared by tribal groups at the borders of their country, although not in 'core' areas.²⁰ During his long life, Butcher Joe Nangan 'recorded and transmitted a vast body of cultural knowledge'²¹ through traditional ceremony and the production of several thousand objects in a range of media that included engraved pearl shell.

Contemporary Aboriginal artists on the Dampier Peninsula continue to maintain cultural traditions by engraving shell with traditional or figurative designs. Aubrey Tigan was born on Sunday Island at the tip of the Dampier Peninsula. His forebears were saltwater people, the Djawi whose territory embraces land and sea, including the Montgomery Islands of King Sound. While the pearling industry saw the sea primarily as a site of resources, for saltwater people like the Djawi and the Bardi the sea is a sentient being. Ancestor spirit beings connect people to the sea as well as the land, conferring rights and responsibilities.²² In the maintenance of these responsibilities saltwater people develop a profound knowledge and understanding of their environment. While these connections of the Djawi and Bardi to their territory were deeply disrupted during the development of the pearling and pastoral industries, they have persisted, maintained through ceremony, song and story.

As an elder and law man of the Bardi and Djawi people, Aubrey Tigan engraves traditional designs on pearl shell to keep 'the law alive'. In dreams the old people have told him to 'get the designs out there.'²³ One of his designs he calls *Trading Shell Design*, the traditional 'interlocking key' pattern that originated in the Dampier peninsula and is found on

Aubrey Tigan, *Jidids at Iwani (Whirlpool) Story*
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Photograph, Michal Klivanek; courtesy Short Street Gallery, Broome



Trading Shell Design Riji
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Photograph, Michal Klivanek; courtesy Short Street Gallery, Broome



Aubrey Tigan, *Love Riji*
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Photograph, Michal Klivanek; courtesy Short Street Gallery, Broome



Aubrey Tigan, *Honest Man Riji*
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Photograph, Michal Klivanek; courtesy Short Street Gallery, Broome

shells distributed right across northwest and central Australia.²⁴ He comments: 'This is a traded shell design from before. It might be from Roebuck Bay or it might be the desert. I don't know.'²⁵

Other engraved shells are used in the initiation ceremonies of young men, a complex process that may take up to 10 years. These designs are composed of close-set, parallel lines, crosshatched or straight up and down as in the *Honest Man Riji*.²⁶ In the *Love Riji* the parallel lines are aligned diagonally in and around a lozenge shape. These shells are usually shown in pairs as the shells are used to 'sing a husband and wife together, so that they stay married and will love each other forever.'²⁷

Tigan also creates new designs drawing on his deep knowledge and memory of the coastal environment, the configuration of islands, the tides and whirlpools, the stone fish traps that hold fish so they can be easily harvested as the tide turns, the cyclones that sweep in from the sea in the wet season between December and March. While Aubrey Tigan's engraved shells are now embedded within the Australian art economy, they retain their traditional cultural and economic significance.²⁸ They 'speak' the culture by bringing the past into the present to keep the culture strong.²⁹

* * * * *

The Church of the Sacred Heart at the former Aboriginal mission of Beagle Bay 127 kilometres of red, rutted road north of Broome is decorated with pearl shell, the dim interior of the sanctuary gleaming with refracted light from the pearl shell altar and wall decorations; an echo across time and continents of 6th Century Italy where the great Christian Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna created an epiphany of light' to the glory of God and his representative on earth, the Emperor. It is the play of light on the glittering surface of the glass and stone mosaics as well as their iconography that creates the sacred space, the mystery of light held in darkness.³⁰

In the Beagle Bay church, the sacred space is created by the soft, luminescent glow of pearl shell mosaic on the walls and floor and altar of the church. Likewise in Broome, an altar and the baptismal font in the Our Lady Queen of Peace Cathedral are lined

with gleaming pearl shell. The empty font seen from a pew appears as an ellipse of fractured light in the dim interior of the church, reminiscent of pools of water left by the tide and gleaming in the moonlight on Cable Beach, or the shards of broken shell, remnants of the pearling industry, glittering in the red sand near Streeter's Jetty on the Broome foreshore.

The early Christians considered the baptismal font as a sarcophagus, the site of death and rebirth. 'By the rite of immersion the natural man ... dies in Christ, then rises and ascends out the water, symbolising the resurrection, the renewal to eternal life in the spirit!'³¹

A watery ellipse; the conjunction of life and death.

Outside the cities Australia is dotted with dams to catch the rain and run-off to provide water for farms and pastoral leases in the settled areas. Glassy at noon these sheets of water shimmer under a breeze at dusk. In dry years they are often empty, and in some parts of Australia these glittering ellipses may instead be salt pans, the result of excessive irrigation which has caused salt from ancient seabeds to rise and poison the land. When Ernestine Hill flew from Perth to Broome in July 1930 she saw below salt lakes 'translucent as alabaster ... bitter as brine and solid as marble.'³²

Echoing this bitter conjunction of sea and land, a shimmering ellipse of broken pearl shell is laid out on the cement floor of the gallery. Salt lakes for Hill, symbolised the 'dream and bitter reality' of the changes made to land by the pastoral industry. This crisis, compounded by drought is even more compelling in 2008 where, in a dry continent, all life depends on water.

Water is everything.

I would like to thank Kim Akerman for generously sharing his extensive knowledge of Aboriginal pearl shell in the Kimberley with me, Keryn Walshe who gave me access to the records and pearl shell collection of the South Australian Museum, and Aubrey Tigan and Emily Rohr of the Short St Gallery, Broome, who kindly provided information on Aubrey Tigan's pearl shell designs.

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Kay Lawrence, *No work for a white man*, wooden chair, photograph, blanket under-trousers, mother-of-pearl, buttons cotton thread | Photograph, Michal Klivanek

Touched by living moonlight

John Kean

Ernestine Hill was the favoured journalist of the flapper generation. With an adventurous disposition and warned of many dangers to be faced, she embarked on her epic journey.

'Of course you will take a gun' they said to me when I left Melbourne, 'even if it's only one of those little mother-of-pearl things the vamps used to carry in their evening bags. Apart from wild blacks there will be crocodiles, and Malays running amok, and men that haven't seen a white woman in thirty years. There might be three hundred miles of desolation on a truck with a drunken Afghan, and you'll be alone in the night-time, in those pearling-towns of sand and sin, with a half-caste woman keeping the shanty—'¹

To her surprise, Hill found a chivalrous reception in multicultural northern Australia - a vivid world populated with a host of characters. Some were etched against the sharp light of the long horizon and others with dusty faces, stared from dark shadows, saving energy in the unrelenting heat, revealing just enough of their improbable stories to whet the journalistic appetite. While the north was slowly shaking itself free of the horrors of frontier conflict, this plucky author embraced the individuals she met as no more threatening than those left behind in the class-conscious and bitterly sectarian south.

She discovered an Australia "far from the rhythm of the big machine", and her adventures spilled out in *The Great Australian Loneliness*² one of the raciest portraits ever written of this continent. A book equivalent to Robyn Davidson's *Tracks*,³ tracing a journey of discovery in outback Australia that would captivate the free spirits of a generation. In contrast to her effervescent youth, Hill became a world

wearily figure, emphysemic with 'otherwhereish eyes';⁴ forever identified with the romance of youthful adventure.

Ernestine Hill dispatched censorial articles to the *Adelaide Advertiser*, the *Melbourne Argus* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Her emboldening account of the discovery of gold at the Granites was denounced for inciting an ill-fated stampede to this isolated God-forsaken outcrop in the Tanami desert.⁵ From a Darwin court she reported the trials of naked revenge killers from the Western Desert. She chronicled women doing men's jobs, races mixing socially and sexually and those making a living from the resources that could only be gained at the very edges of 'civilization'.

'The typewriter was always with me, dangling from a camel-saddle, jingling on a truck, covered with a camp-sheet in the rains. On anything that came along, I followed 'the story'. It was all in a journalist's job, and it was all good hunting.'⁶

Prising open the secrets of the pearling industry was one of her great quests.

The richest merchandise of all

Ernestine Hill's accounts of the pearling industry captured a deep-seated yearning for pearls, an obsession chronicled in literature since classical times.

'The richest merchandise of all, and the most sovereign commodity throughout the whole world, are these pearls.'⁷ Pliny the Elder, *History naturalis* A.D. 77

In Europe pearls have long been a symbol of the exotic realm. The word 'orient' describes a pearl's iridescence. An even more ancient meaning of the

word, refers to the Eastern sky. With origins over the known horizon, pearls possessed a mystery and rarity that made them the exclusive possession of kings, conquerors, popes and cardinals. They reflected on their owners' supreme power and the mystique gained from the possession of translucent tear-drops from heaven, reconfirmed their God-ordained status.⁸

In the popular culture of the first decades of the 20th Century, strings of pearls were the ultimate fashion statement associated with the sophistication of Louise Brooks or the exotic eroticism of Josephine Baker and Rudolf Valentino. Later in the century a string of pearls given to young women at their coming of age marked their 'rite of passage', symbolising both their desirability and the discernment that would see them prosper in womanhood.⁹

Throughout history and in stark contrast to the luxury for which they were destined, pearls have been born as the product of indentured labour, greed and despair. The industry has been played out in the shallow waters of many tropical locations, depending on the seasonal availability, access to trade routes and the sustainability of the resource. In a rolling history of exploitation and eventual decline, pearls were harvested from the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, Gulf of Myanmar, Japan and the South Pacific. At times a region's economy was dependent on this one precious commodity. In Bahrain for instance, 90% of the population relied on the industry before the discovery of oil in 1932.¹⁰

'slaves to the eternal vanity of woman'

In the 1860s the pearl hunters' focus turned to the undisturbed shallow beds of northern Australia. These tepid, dangerous waters were home to the Gold-lip, *Pinctada maxima* which yields pearls of

great size and lustre. As had been the case in previous centres of the industry, the trade in pearls from the north-west coast came at the cost of hundreds of young lives.

On her arrival in 1930 at the tiny out-post of Cossak, seventy years after the arrival of the first pearlers, Hill was transfixed by stories the industry's first deadly years.

Nearly all pearlers employed aboriginal divers, for whereas those that engaged Malays were responsible for wages, baksheesh to an Island Sultan, and repatriation, native labour was free, too free. A bag of flour and a stick of tobacco bought a human life. The recruiters were paid £5 a head by the pearlers, and they made good profit.

In little ketches they travelled the coast, following the camp-smokes for a thousand miles, there on the beaches in the firelight, buying the young men from the old. From hundreds of miles inland the blacks were brought, men who had never seen the sea and were now to live and die in it. A dark sentence in history tells that when they refused to come voluntarily they were lassoed from horseback, and dragged.¹¹

The conditions aboard the ketches were intolerable:

All day in the dazzle of sun and sea they worked, slaves to the eternal vanity of woman. Fatalities were many. Swept along by a swift tide underneath, quite frequently a diver would be caught on coral cups and disembowelled, or bitten in halves by a shark as he swam for the dingy, or tangled in the weeds, or blotted out of existence by a blanket ray below there. Sometimes he would miscalculate the power of his lungs, his straining, bursting lungs, and, within a foot of the surface, a horrible gush of bubbles, a rolling of white eyes, and a black shadow of his body would go drifting gently down.... There were plenty others to take his place.¹²

Hill reports that it was only after the prohibition of 'blackbirding' in Western Australia, in the late 1880s, that crews were brought from Manila, Timor and Japan. It was then that the more romantic and still familiar image of the 'port of pearls' began to emerge:

Broome, a lonely cable station in the sand-hills, became an Eldorado in mother-of-pearl. A Japanese town sprang up there, with a population of 4,000, a kaleidoscope of silk kimonos, with Cingalese jewellers,

Malay sail-makers and Manila carpenters, adventurers from all parts of the globe. The diving suit was introduced. The schooners lay forgotten in the mangroves while fleets of luggers put out to sea.¹³

Immune to the cost of lives spent in harsh conditions, the translucent mystery of pearls and the allure that came with their possession was, for the stylish rich, worth the high price paid for the commodity. Living half a world away from scenes of forced labour and the stench of rotting shellfish, a perfect pearl was an irresistible object of desire.

Big Men and Bower Birds

The incandescence of pearl products share qualities with the night sky, for their capacity to retain and transmit light is akin to the heavenly bodies. For many of us, the shell, with its infinitely beautiful nacre, is every bit as fascinating as its more precious seed.

In 'the good times' shells were cast aside in their thousands at the site where they were levered open in search of a pearl, occasionally found at their heart. Monuments in the wake of the industry created spectacular middens. 'The residue is piled high in heaps, or splintered along the beaches, where in fifty years it has become a mosaic of sparkling beauty, paving the road with living moonlight...'¹⁴ The waste of pearl shells is all the more alarming if the value of the commodity on Indigenous trade routes is entered into the equation.

To the cultures of the South Pacific, pearl shells conferred prestige on their possessors. They were carefully guarded and used by powerful men to transform their appearance with a purpose similar to that of the rulers of Europe who commissioned costumes encrusted with thousands of pearls.¹⁵

Captain Cook and his peers were entranced by ceremonies they encountered in Polynesia. In Tahiti they witnessed the power of the 'Chief Mourner', a towering figure, his costume a tunic of pearl shells, topped with arc of more shells, from which radiated the feathers of the Tropic Bird. On land the 'Chief Mourner' paraded though the village in a reign of terror, menacing those that came before him with a club edged with sharks' teeth. Light reflected from the shells, (traded exclusively among the high-born Tahitians), added to the 'Chief Mourner's' fearsome visage.¹⁶

Large Gold-lipped Pearl shells, gathered from the Torres Strait, formed a crucial item in a trade network from the Papuan coast to the Highlands of New Guinea. Here they were worked into shining crescents, kina and worn on the chests of 'Big Men' as a symbol of their wealth and prestige.¹⁷ These kina, in combination with face paint, huge wigs and headdresses made of the billowing and sometimes iridescent feathers of Birds of Paradise, are used to create some of the most elaborate self-transformations to emerge from the human imagination.



Before European contact and locked in misty valleys, highlanders knew nothing of the sea. On independence the value of these pearl shell crescents was recognised when Papua New Guinea's currency was launched as the Kina.

On the fringe of the Indian Ocean, near Broome, there is a belief among the Panaka – Palijari men, that a large rock near the coast is the transmogrified body of an ancestral Bower Bird. By rubbing the rock and uttering verbal requests, many shells can be gained 'dry shelling' the adjacent reefs at low tide. It is no surprise the Bower Bird, famous for its jewel-hoard, is associated with the desire for pearl shell.¹⁸

Aboriginal people living in close proximity to the coast used pearl shells as everyday ornaments, either on their foreheads, chest or loins. Shells were

Nyigina elder Butcher Joe Nangan, *Karapulu Men shell*, Broome, Kimberley, Western Australia
Courtesy, Kim Akerman

cleaned and polished and a hole drilled at the hinge aiding suspension from hair-string bands. Many were engraved with a meandering 'key pattern' while others were decorated utilising bilateral symmetry to suggest the arms, legs and torso of the human form. The deep etched lines were then filled with red ochre.¹⁹

Shells from the Eighty Mile Beach and the Dampier Peninsular were traded inland, through the Kimberley and deep into the deserts to the south



and east. Trade routes paralleled monsoonal pathways, reinforcing the perception in Aboriginal Australia that pearly is connected with rain. As the shells passed, via many pairs of hands, deeper into the desert, the secrecy increased surrounding the ceremonies to which they were central.²⁰

My first contact with these shells was in 1978 when Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi asked me to pull over as we were heading west from Papunya. He got out of the truck and walked over to a low bush on the side of the road and from an old leather suitcase he pulled out a small parcel wrapped in ochre stained rags. Inside was a pearl shell, large and beautiful, incised with abstract geometric meanders. I was breathless with the miracle of this object from the sea being revealed, as if by magic, in the heart of

Engraved Pearl shell phalocrypton on hair belt,
Moola Bulla Station, Kimberley, Western Australia
Courtesy, Kim Akerman

central Australia. Satisfied that his treasure was still secure Tjungurrayi re-wrapped the shell and stashed the suitcase back under low bushes. We continued on our way.

In Pitjantjatjara country, more than 1000 kilometres from their source, Charles Mountford recorded rainmaking ceremonies in which the edge of the shell was ground into pearly dust, evoking the small beadlike clouds that spread evenly over the desert sky to consolidate, if the correct protocols were followed, into a rain-bearing front.²² Gradually the hand-span disk reduced as it was ground to form slender blades of iridescence. Shells, procured around Broome and which have moved along desert trade routes, have been sighted by avid anthropologists in a wide arc from Katherine, into Western Queensland, Alice Springs and down to the eastern edge of the Great Australian Bight.²²

During the 20th Century with the growth of the pearling industry, shells for the Indigenous trade became more readily available and they were carved with increased virtuosity using metal tools. Their ubiquity slowly eroded the secrecy with which they were guarded in the desert. In recent years Aubrey Tigan's traditionally engraved shells have been presented, not as artefacts, or jewellery but as art objects in white-walled galleries.

'The best things in my Grandma's button jar'

As well as collecting 'artificial curiosities' such as the costume of the 'Chief Mourner', Cook and the privateers that would follow in his wake, traded for shells which they took back to England stimulating a button industry that would flourish in the 19th century.²³

As a result of increased trade in the Pacific, Europe secured an abundant source of shells for a burgeoning manufacturing industry. Birmingham, in the industrial heart of England, emerged as the centre of the industry. Here in the 19th and 20th centuries, a proliferation of small family-owned factories imported pearl, abalone and trochus shells which were machined to become buttons and the raw material for 'mother of pearl' inlay. The resulting products were available at a reasonable cost to consumers across the colonial realm.²⁴ Objects with qualities of iridescence, translucency and

silkeness, that had seduced English royalty since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, were now obtainable for wage earners. The middle class adorned their shirts with pearl buttons and topped their hats with opalescent pins. Hundreds of elaborated patterns evolved around the humble template of a button. Everybody who was anybody could possess little jewel-like disks to refract and transmit the pale light of northern Europe.

My father was a product of the Industrial Revolution in northern England but I was born in Fiji in the twilight of the colonial era. Several months before I was born, my mother had experienced the excitement of the young Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Suva. The red, white and blue bunting that had adorned her reception was carefully selected by Red Cross women to ensure that after the Queen's fleeting visit it was of good enough quality to be recast, in a variety of forms, as mementoes of the event. When these crafted items became available my mother bought a baby's white pillow-slip, finished with delicate pearl buttons. The slip, because of the auspicious events that it denotes, remains a treasure buried but not forgotten in my mother's linen cabinet.

More than half a century after those events, we now live in a bedazzling world of plastics, reflective surfaces and plasma screens. The range of fluorescent colours and new materials has dimmed our perception of the magic of naturally occurring materials. Button jars and boxes of beach-combed shells are no longer the sites from which a child's imagination begins to engage with possibilities that lie outside the house, street and suburb. A global world with its infinite variety and channels of seduction is instantly available via the TV, www and \$2 shops filled with container loads of bright ephemera. For many Australian families button jars are a thing of the past. New cloths don't need replacement buttons and most of us neglect the gentle art in which the world of cotton and thread are experienced through fingertips.

Dipping a hand into a button jar is like diving through memory. The soft sensation of form and texture transmitting through some sort of osmosis, the re-acquaintance with the shared experience of several generations. Seeking out the shiniest pearl disk is like finding a needle in a haystack, fingers

gliding among buttons that have been bought in cards of six or a dozen, sewn on, then separated, picked over, re-matched, re-cycled and finally snipped from the worn vestiges of an old garment to merge with others of its kind in the same jar from which it was selected.

Pearl buttons retain their lustre and remain as attractive as bright objects to Bower Birds. They remind us of the magical qualities of the natural world. Seductive, 'otherwhereish', pearl buttons are the innocent tokens of tragically unbalanced trade.

Just as Ernestine Hill gained inspiration from the 'port of pearls', Kay Lawrence has visited Broome. In contrast to Hill's breathless accounts of the town of 'sand and sin' Lawrence's project was to travel back through time, via slow work with wool, cotton thread and buttons, to immerse herself in the meaning and consequences of the labour responsible for the recovery of natural materials.

By re-fashioning the equipment used by vulnerable divers on remote reefs with buttons, the most humble artefact of their labour, Lawrence sets out to reconcile the imbalance at the heart of pearling history. In decorating the suits of 'oriental' divers with buttons, the lust, envy and tragedy that has been a part of the industry is memorialised, and lost divers laid to rest.

Nyigina elder Butcher Joe Nangan,
Engraved pearl shells,
Broome, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy, Broome Historical Society
Photograph, Yane Sotiroski

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- ¹⁰ Kristin Joyce and Shellei Addison, *Pearls Ornament and Obsession*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1993, p.115-26.
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- ¹² *Ibid*, p. 40-41
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p. 41. Hill describes the Broome that she encountered and the characters that she met. For the purposes of this essay I have cited her references to an earlier period to emphasis the impact of the pearl industry on indigenous Australian's. Hill's account of Broome's Japanese graveyard is a testament to the lives of overseas labourers lost to the industry.
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- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 33-40
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 15-32
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- ²² Kim Akerman with John Stanton, *Riji and Jakoli: Kimberley Pearl Shell in Aboriginal Australia*, Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences, Monograph series, Number 4, 1994, p. 14
- ²³ A cache of shells from the South Pacific intended for trade in England are on display at the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville. The shells were originally collected by the crew of HMS Pandora, sent in search of the Bounty and her mutinous crew. The shells were eventually recovered from the wreck of the Pandora when she struck the Great Barrier Reef on her return voyage in 1791.
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Kay Lawrence, *No work for a white man*, detail, blanket under-trousers, mother-of-pearl buttons, cotton thread | Model, Tadashi Nakamura | Photograph, Michal Klivanek





Kay Lawrence, *No work for a white man*, detail, wooden chair, blanket, mother-of-pearl buttons, cotton thread | Photograph, Michal Klivanek

Cloth and shell: revealing the luminous

Diana Wood Conroy

'This is for everybody – man and woman. This is rain. This everything water' was a comment made by Mumbadadi, a Walmajarri elder at Christmas Creek, Western Australia in 1990, in reference to the central importance of pearl shell.¹ The unexpected presence of pearl shell flickering across wool and cotton textiles, stretching over the floor, and enclosed in museum cases imbue Kay Lawrence's exhibition *This everything water* with an almost sacred intensity. With a minimal use of colour, the austerity of soft creams and greys touches of ochre and umber gently emphasises the nacreous gleam of pearl against the chiaroscuro of the setting. The magical and sometimes ominous quality of the objects is heightened by the everyday simplicity of a white wooden table, a book and a chair. Her work builds on her obsessive concern with buttons made from mother of pearl, as emblematic not only of colonial trade from the pearl shell harvested in North West Australia, but also pearl shell as central to revived traditions of the Bardi, Djawi and Nyul Nyul people of the Kimberley.

Since the 1970s Kay Lawrence's highly regarded art practice has upheld the intricate craft and the powerful impact of embroidery and techniques such as woven Gobelin tapestry, conjoined with unexpected approaches to the history of Australian settlement. The sixteen metre long *Parliament House Embroidery* in Canberra, which she participated in from 1982-1988 as designer, explored the interweaving of Aboriginal and colonial histories.² In 2001 she was one of seven artists in the *Weaving the Murray Centenary of Federation* project that focused on the perilous despoiling of the river environment and its relationship to settlers and Ngarrindjeri history.³ Through many renowned public commissions, for example, in Parliament

House South Australia, she has documented the positioning of women, as well as exploring primal images of family ties and motherhood in her exhibition work. This focus on relationship has given her an empathy with Indigenous people for whom kinship and country are inseparable.

The enigmatic group of works in *This everything water* seems to extend Kay Lawrence's earlier ideas to open up metaphors about whiteness and blackness, water and light. The whiteness and luminosity of pearl contrasts to the opaque density of blankets, and both materials overlap in the meeting of two ancient religious traditions; the spirituality of country and Dreaming intersecting with monastic Christianity. Both were tangled together in the violent commerce of the pearling industry around Broome. The use of mother-of-pearl, its meanings and associations by missionaries, Aboriginal people, Asian divers and pearl traders provides the core of *This everything water*.

Whiteness itself is the invisible force that has defined Aboriginal art, writes Marcia Langton. 'White is normal. White is the way everyone would be if they had evolved. White is the ultimate condition towards which the grand narrative of evolution, progress, civilisation edges'.⁴ Kay Lawrence's artist's book *White: a glossary of terms*, is a lexicon of whiteness, as if to unsettle the viewer by making visible an almost invisible condition, a way of being that underpinned the unconscious assumptions of colonial settlement.

The problematic interaction between Christianity and Indigenous cultures in Australia has received consistent attention over the last five years. For the exhibition *Holy Holy Holy* that explored these themes at Flinders University City Gallery in 2004, Marcia Langton wrote that the engagement

between the two religious systems, both through conflict and discourse, contributed to the contemporary Aboriginal art of today as much as traditional engagement with the land. Christian missions provided a safe haven in the 'ocean of violence' against Aboriginal people, despite lack of converts.⁵

Kay Lawrence and I made two visits to Broome and the Dampier Peninsula in 2004 and 2007 in preparing for this exhibition. The Dampier Peninsula, home of the Bardi and Djawi peoples, is embedded in the history of early contact between Europeans and Aboriginal people. William Dampier landed in Cygnet Bay, King's Sound in 1688.⁶ My own interest in remote missions and their place in Aboriginal histories was quickened by our journey to the exceptional Church of the Sacred Heart at Beagle Bay 127 kilometres north of Broome. The outstanding characteristic of the church is the prolific use of iridescent pearl shell as a religious symbol in the decoration of altars, floors, and around windows.

Mary Durack and the historian Margaret Zucker recounted how the Beagle Bay church came to be built with an almost medieval self-sufficiency. Father Thomas Bachmair conceived the idea at a dark time in 1914 when the Pallottine monks, being German, were placed in enforced confinement at the inaccessible Beagle Bay settlement. The Church of the Sacred Heart was dedicated on the Feast of the Assumption in 1918.⁷ The church was an artefact of the sea; shaped like a shell itself, its chalky white exterior contained the tessellated pearl glinting in the shadows of the interior space. Within the brilliantly white walls of the Beagle Bay church, its ecclesiastical structure resonates with the narrative formulas of Christian tradition as firmly as a patterned pearl shell 'riji' or bark painting is set into Aboriginal culture.

Visiting the remote church in 2004 with Kay I was struck to observe how its motifs and architectural spaces echo those of Early Christian basilicas. The emblematic signs in pearl mosaic on walls and furniture include the angel, lamb, fish, heart, cross, chalice, vase, ship, censor, lily, and basket. The relationship of these images to text is hinted throughout, with inscriptions in Latin, and the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega* referring to well known Biblical passages, just as an Aboriginal image is immersed in a ceremonial context of story and song. I was reminded of the extraordinary sixth century mosaic in an apse of the 'Angeloktisti' Church at Kiti ('Built by Angels') in Cyprus, where tiny pearl shell tesserae enhanced the halo of Mary and the Archangels Michael and Gabriel.⁸

In the Beagle Bay Church of the Sacred Heart, the *sacra* of Christian imagery included the mosaic of the sanctuary floor, an arrangement shadowed by Kay Lawrence in her pearl shell installation on the floor of the gallery. Here the small images set into the diamond grid of the floor showed a mingling with Nyul Nyul, Bardi and Nimanboor imagery, with spears, lamb, fish, basket, snake on an altar, axe, crayfish, bat or moth, bird on a twig, palm frond, and a bee.⁹ The simple power of these crude mosaic images oddly recall the urgency and truncation of paintings hidden deep in rock catacombs cut below Rome at a time of persecution.¹⁰

At Beagle Bay it turned out, through some marvelous serendipity that the sacred pearl shell of Djawi and Bardi was also inscribed in the Book of Revelations as the artefact of heaven. Describing his vision of the city of God, shining with luminous substances St John wrote: 'And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was one pearl; and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass' (Rev. 21. 21). In his book *The Doors of Perception* that became a cult text in the 1960s, Aldous Huxley argued that 'inwardly glowing objects' allowed access to the shimmering marvels seen by the inner eye of visionaries, and reminded the viewer of the 'obscure intimations of the unconscious encountered at the mind's antipodes'.¹¹ For Aboriginal people such as Mumbadadi, pearl shells were understood as emblematic of metaphysical phenomena and as objects that could effect change and transformation.¹²

The diversity of Christian missions established across Australia since the beginning of the 19th Century reflect the complexity, the dissension and disunity of the Christian Church in Europe and vary consequently in their impact on the differing communities of Aboriginal people. Puritanical Presbyterians in the Centre (I remember films shown from Ernabella Mission as a child in a Presbyterian Church in Sydney) contrasted to the highly educated multi-lingual Catholics such as the Trappists and Pallottine orders at Beagle Bay. Like the Anglican W E Stanner, Father Ernest A Worms who arrived in Beagle Bay in 1931 stands out as a discerning scholar and anthropologist of Aboriginal language and religion. Pearl shell is the emblem of ocean, water and weather and Worms documented the far-reaching trade in incised pearl shell – calling the sacred objects 'shell tjuringas' and describing their great occult force in rain making ceremonies far to the east in the desert country more than 1000 kilometres from the sea.¹³ For different reasons, the value of pearl shell was recognised by Europeans and Japanese, and traded throughout the colonial sea routes, across north and south hemispheres.¹⁴

Mary Durack in her comprehensive account of the North West wrote how Father Worms was realistic about the disjunctions between the two worlds and felt that Aboriginal religion was 'revealing overall a spiritual sense far deeper than that of the average civilised man of a materialistic age' and that the integrity of the Dreaming was imperilled by the devastation caused by settlement. 'It is the aim of the Pallottine fathers of the North West to meet the Aboriginal on the threshold of the modern world and to save his spiritual heritage before it is irreparably lost.'¹⁵ This statement seems patronising today, now that the Bardi have achieved native title to their land, but at the time it was an unusual recognition of the calibre of Indigenous society.

Kay Lawrence's collection of *Whitework* blankets sewn with pearl button mosaics remind us of the haptic sensation of the blanket's touch; one of the earliest human memories is to be enfolded in a blanket, hiding in the protective covering of bed-clothes. The images sewn in the iterative flecks of pearl buttons on the old woollen blankets are sparse. The ovoid forms, the graphic skulls carry forward the narrative trajectory of textiles, which are closely

aligned to the body. The watery gleams of the pearl buttons ward off and avert danger, another ancient function of significant textiles.¹⁶ The image of the skull is always a sign of danger and death, even if folded and half obscured, but also a reminder of life and beauty in the precept *memento mori*, remember death. Shell is a kind of bone, and bone could also be the material of tesserae, the tiny mosaic pieces in antique mosaic.

As the blanket wraps and warms (and sometimes betrays, poisoned by settlers as disastrous gifts) so the story soothes or saddens the heart. With the beginning of the pearling industry from the 1860s, Aborigines were often cruelly exploited, not least for their diving skills. A folder in the Broome Historical Society Museum had a chilling reminder of activities in the region: 'The skull of a wild native was also forwarded, together with the brains of a native. These were obtained by the Perth Museum' (Broome Chronicle, n.d, c. 1912).

Within the larger tragedy of Aboriginal dispossession, the pervasive stories in Broome are the lost stories of the young divers who died in their hundreds from the crippling bends in the early 20th Century, poignantly remembered in the Japanese cemetery. During a first visit to Broome in 2004 I urged Kay to visit the diving artefacts and memorabilia in the tourist complex called *Pearl Luggers* with its motto 'The Men, the Sea, the Legend' in Broome because I had once been a diver in a modest way myself, diving down to a Roman shipwreck only ten metres below the surface. I remembered the heaviness of the water above my head, its encompassing dimness, and the sudden fear of not knowing which way was up; up to the glittering surface, shifting in a fractured mosaic of light above the stillness of the depths where I crouched on the sand, measuring sarcophagi. To put on a wetsuit is to make a journey as a kind of amphibian, losing ease and comfort, becoming deliberate in every movement as you press slowly down to the depths, weighted with lead.

The miraculous, shining trousers of *No Work for a White Man* came from seeing the rough trousers made of blankets that divers wore for warmth beneath the diving suit. The pearl buttons are heavy as water, inhibiting movement, forcing slowness and stillness on the wearer. By contrast,



the white cotton suit hung near by in the gallery, worn by the white pearlery, would be light and airy to wear. John Puihiatau Pule, the remarkable artist and poet from the Pacific Island of Niue described a black suit he was given on the occasion of confirmation by his father: 'That day when I first tried the suit on I felt the early stages of infinite struggles... The suit. It had become an act of process to show that I had been successfully changed...'¹⁷

Even without putting on the cumbersome trousers, perhaps one way for non-Indigenous artists to successfully change is to interact differently, carefully, aware as far as possible of the stereotypes of whiteness. Kay Lawrence's searching into whiteness and water required working with blackness and red dust at the peripheries of art practice, away from the city. The red road to Djurgargyn, Kelk Creek, north of Beagle Bay was incised into the glittering bush like a line engraved into pearl shell. Mother Debbie Sibosado of Aboriginal and Filipino descent, wife of Steve Anderson, and Naomi Sibosado Anderson their daughter are focused on reviving cultural tourism on a heritage property very near the point of the Dampier Peninsula. The land is very flat, on the edge of tidal estuary mudflats, sprinkled with paperbarks and woolly butts, with subtly changing areas of grass and a meandering pool with blue waterlilies. In the deep distance is a line of silver that indicates the ocean to the west. These Bardi people have evidence that the country is coming back through their custodianship; they say they are dreaming the country back into life. It's a country of feeling, with nodes of small communities forming a net of relationships across the land.

The numinous beauty of the incised shells of the Djawi artist Aubrey Tigan, clustered beside Kay Lawrence's works in museum cases, reflect the potent artefacts that were traded across the desert because they affected weather and clouds and could bring rain. They were indeed agents of transformation, carrying designs that migrated right across the desert to the east. Aubrey Tigan speaks of how being in the country talking to people allows not only the intellect but also the heart to be nourished. 'And when I make those old Djawi designs I feel happy, it takes everything away from me – I'm like a free man, free inside, it goes right through me. I am back in my country!'¹⁸

Kay Lawrence's work in *This everything water* reflect turbulent moments of loss and change when two incommensurable systems collide, yet both Aboriginal and white valued pearl shell as sacred, and as vital to trade and exchange. The ancient spiritualities of Europe have been forgotten, rooted in direct experience and ritual practice rather than intellect. An appreciation for non-Indigenous religious systems is strangely reawakened by the mixed folkloric imagery of a remote mission in Beagle Bay. Probing the religious complexities of Indigenous people can result in a different understanding of Christian imagery. Kay Lawrence's faceted body of work hovers around cultural forms, shifting focus, fracturing meaning in the fragments of broken shell like the sliding reflections of light in water. Her poetic structures of textile and pearl shell align Indigenous and non-Indigenous, bringing to mind Stephen Muecke's thoughts on the need to oscillate between ancient and modern, to attend to dreams, and to understand that the future may be foreshadowed in this present moment, filled to the brim in *This everything water*.¹⁹

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Joseph Neebery, Joseph Gregory, some sisters and many people from the mission community. The men made 60,000 bricks and the women and children collected thousands of shells, from small trochus to giant clams fished locally. For cement and whitewash, seashells were crushed, burned and treated. Mary Durack, *The Rock and the Sand*, Constable, London, 1969, p. 203-204

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Baptismal font, Our Lady Queen of Peace Cathedral, Broome Photograph, Diana Wood Conroy

List of Artworks

all measurements: height x length x width

Pearl shell work by Kay Lawrence

Kay Lawrence, *Whitework*, 2004-2008

Wooden desk, artist's book designed by John Nowland, blankets, mother-of-pearl buttons, cotton thread, dimensions variable
Collection: the artist

Kay Lawrence, *No Work for a White Man*, 2006-2008

Blanket under-trousers, mother-of-pearl buttons, cotton thread, white cotton-drill suit made by Adriana Loro, coat hanger, photograph by Michal Kluvanek, wooden frame, glass, dimensions variable
Collection: the artist

Kay Lawrence, *Water is everything*, 2008

Broken pearl shell, 4 x 530 x 250cm
Collection: the artist

Kay Lawrence, *This is rain*, 2007

Grey woollen blanket, mother-of-pearl buttons, cotton, 200 x 134cm
Collection: the artist

Kay Lawrence, *Bitter as brine*, 2008

Cream woollen blanket, mother-of-pearl buttons, cotton, 161 x 188cm
Collection: the artist

Kay Lawrence, *Rising Salt*, 2008

Grey woollen blanket, mother-of-pearl buttons, cotton, 190 x 161cm
Collection: the artist

Pearl shell from South Australian Museum and private collection

A70123 Untreated pearl shell valve, North Western Australia, late 20th Century
Collection: South Australian Museum

A3320 Plain pearl shell pendant with hair string, 19.5 x 10.5 x 1.8 cm
Flora Vale, Western Australia, early 20th Century
Collection: South Australian Museum

A3317 Pearl shell engraved with a haphazard meander and marks indicating bird and macropod tracks, 15.8 x 11.6 x 0.5cm
Cygnet Bay, Western Australia, 1890's
Collection: South Australian Museum

A 3068 Pearl shell blade (Pinjapinja) on dentalium string, 39 x 3.6 x 1.5cm
Cygnet Bay, Western Australia, 1890's
Collection: South Australian Museum

A1059 Pearl shell blade (Pinjapinja) on skein of hair string, 78 x 2.4 x 1cm
Brunswick Bay, Western Australia, early 20th Century
Collection: South Australian Museum

A3318 Pearl shell engraved with maze and bilaterally symmetrical design, Mt Casuarina, Western Australia, early 20th Century
Collection: South Australian Museum

A29397 Pearl shell engraved with haphazard maze, Broome, Western Australia, undated
Collection: South Australian Museum

A72475 Pearl shell engraved with angular maze, Kimberley, Western Australia, early 20th Century
Collection: South Australian Museum

Pearl shell phallocrypt engraved with bilaterally symmetrical design on hair belt, Moola Bulla Station, Kimberley, Western Australia, undated
Private collection

Pearl shells by Butcher Joe Nangan

Nyigina elder Butcher Joe Nangan
Mermaids, 1977
Engraved pearl shell valve, 16.4cm
Broome, Kimberley, Western Australia
Private collection

Nyigina elder Butcher Joe Nangan
Karapulu Men shell
Engraved pearl shell
Broome, Kimberley, Western Australia
Private collection

Nyigina elder Butcher Joe Nangan
Nyarinyari bungu-Walibungu shell
Engraved pearl shell
Broome, Kimberley, Western Australia
Private collection

Pearl shells by Aubrey Tigan

Aubrey Tigan, *Riji* (cat 11420), 2007

Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 16 x 12cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Private collection

Aubrey Tigan, *Honest Man Riji* (cat 24258), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 17 x 13cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy, Short St Gallery, Broome

Aubrey Tigan, *Love Riji* (cat 11222), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 17 x 14cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy, Short St Gallery, Broome

Aubrey Tigan, *Riji - Cyclone Story* (cat 23668), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 18 x 15cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy, Short St Gallery, Broome

Aubrey Tigan, *Riji - Fish Trap* (cat 24192), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 16 x 13cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy Short St Gallery, Broome

Aubrey Tigan, *Stringray (Barnamba) Design Riji* (cat 24191), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 16.5 x 13cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy Short St Gallery, Broome

Aubrey Tigan, *Trading Shell Design Riji* (cat 24190), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 17.5 x 14cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy Short St Gallery, Broome

Aubrey Tigan, *Jidids at Iwani (Whirlpool) Story* (cat 24189), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 16 x 13.5cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy Short St Gallery, Broome

Aubrey Tigan, *Gordon Bay* (cat 24185), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 15 x 12cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy Short St Gallery, Broome

Aubrey Tigan, *Island Riji* (cat 23393), 2007
Engraved pearl shell filled with ochre, 17 x 14cm
Djaridjin, Dampier Peninsula, Western Australia
Courtesy Short St Gallery, Broome

Acknowledgements

The Director, SASA Gallery, would like to acknowledge the contribution to the development of the 2008 SASA Gallery exhibition program by the SASA Gallery Advisory Committee and Exhibition Programming Committee; SASA Gallery staff; Dr John Barbour, Research Degree Coordinator, SASA, UniSA; Professor Kay Lawrence, Head of School, South Australian School of Art, UniSA; Professor Drew Dawson, Dean; Research, Div EASS, UniSA; and Professor Michael Rowan, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Div EASS, UniSA.

The Director, SASA Gallery, thanks Tony and Connie Perrini for the generous support of the 2008 SASA Gallery exhibition program by Perrini Estate.

The Director, SASA Gallery, and Prof Kay Lawrence, Head of School, SASA, would like to thank Aubrey Tigan, John Kean, Diana Wood Conroy and Fred Littlejohn for their involvement in this exhibition, catalogue and associated events.

Special thanks to Keryn Walshe, South Australian Museum, Emily Rohr and staff at the Short Street Gallery, Broome, and Kim Ackerman, who were generous with information and lent work for the exhibition. Also to the Broome Historical Society who gave permission to document work by Butcher Joe Nangan for publication; John E de Burgh Norman AO and Verity Norman who gave advice and permission to publish a photograph; Yane Sotiroski for photography and Michal Klivanek for photography and installation advice.

Thanks also to Professor Geoff Parr, Honorary Research Associate, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, for advice and assistance with lighting; and Gail Greenwood, Director, Flinders University Art Museum for lending gallery

equipment; Julianne Pearce and Anna Hughes, Visual Arts Coordinators, 2008 Adelaide Bank Festival of Arts; Sarah Johnson and Mimi Kelly, Museum and Galleries, NSW.

Kay Lawrence would like to acknowledge colleagues and friends who contributed to the development of this exhibition, especially those, too numerous to name, who gave her buttons and blankets. Thanks to John Nowland for the design and manufacture of the artists book and Natalie Harkin for contributing a text; Adam Carpenter for design services; Karen Russell for making the blanket under-trousers and Tadashi Nakamura for modelling them; Adriana Loro who made the pearl suit; Willie Creek Pearl Farm, Broome for supplying the pearl shell; Naomi Sibosado Anderson for assisting her to make contact with elders of the Bardi community and Naomi's parents Debbie and Steve for their hospitality at Djurgargyn; Ellie Lawrence Wood for finding *The Great Australian Loneliness* on eBay. Also, Mary Knights, Irmina van Niele and Nici Cumpston for their invaluable advice and Arts SA for their generous grant.

Published by

The South Australian School of Art Gallery
University of South Australia
GPO Box 2471, Adelaide 5001
South Australia
March 2008

ISBN 978-0-9803590-1-5

CRICOS Provider No: 001218

Printed by Cruickshank Printers

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The exhibition, catalogue and visit by the external scholars were developed by the South Australian School of Art with the support of the Divisional Performance Research Fund; the Division of Education, Arts & Social Sciences, UniSA; and the Five Year Research Infrastructure Fund.



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