



# Gurabain

where the saltwater meets the freshwater

**MARILYN RUSSELL**

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are advised that this resource contains images of deceased persons.*

Georges River Council acknowledges the Bidjigal people of the Eora Nation, who are the Traditional Custodians of all lands, waters and sky in the Georges River area.

We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who live work and meet on these lands.

*Guraban* is presented in collaboration with the Gujaga Foundation and supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW.



## ARTIST

Born in 1952 Marilyn Russell is a Bidjigal woman from the coastal community of La Perouse in South-Eastern Sydney. Her artmaking practice is a continuation of shellwork techniques practiced by many generations of Aboriginal women including her mother Esme Timbery and great, great grandmother Queen Emma Timbery.

Russell learned how to create shellwork pieces by watching her mother as a child. Her work *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]*, which is included in the exhibition *Guraban: where saltwater meets freshwater*, continues the tradition of passing knowledge from mother to daughter and was made with the help of her daughter and granddaughter. “*It’s supposed to be handed down from grandmothers, mothers, daughters, granddaughters.*” Marilyn Russell, 2008.

Shellwork pieces are created from shells collected from specific beaches, they are sorted by colour and size and used to create intricate patterns and designs. The shells are glued onto frames made from plywood and paper covered in coloured velvet. *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]* also includes the use of glitter, a material which was introduced by Russell's daughter and granddaughter, and which has not been a part of Russell's earlier work.



Image: *Slippers*, 2022, Shells, velvet, glitter, glue, paper, plywood, Marilyn Russell. Photography: Silversalt Photography





Image: *Slippers*, 2022, Shells, velvet, glitter, glue, paper, plywood, Marilyn Russell. Photography: Silversalt Photography

Shellwork has a long history with records of Aboriginal women creating and selling shellwork at Circular Quay and Botany Bay from the 1880s. Pieces of this type were originally created as women's craft and were later adapted to create souvenirs which could be sold to holiday makers. This was particularly prominent in La Perouse, as a tramline opened in 1902 which made visiting this beachside area easy and popular.



Image: Slippers, 2022, Shells, velvet, glitter, glue, paper, plywood, Marilyn Russell. Photography: Silversalt Photography



While *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]*, uses many of the same techniques as these early pieces it is not a tourist souvenir. Russell has created versions of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, a symbol of western ideas of land ownership and use. By decorating the bridge with delicate patterns of shells in this traditional style, Russell encourages viewers to reflect on the history of Sydney and Aboriginal custodianship of land and water on which the bridge was built. She juxtaposes this icon of western engineering with delicate natural objects and recontextualises a traditional craft practice as a contemporary political statement. These seemingly straightforward artworks tell many stories of connection to family, culture, and country.



Image: *Untitled*, 2022, Shells, velvet, glitter, glue, paper, plywood, Marilyn Russell. Photography: Silversalt Photography

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Top & bottom image: *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]*, 2022, Marilyn Russell. Photography: Silversalt Photography



## FRAMES

- Cultural:** Constructs of identity, race, merging of historical and contemporary experience.
- Structural:** Visual symbols embedded in the material and form. Interpretation is conveyed throughout the artmaking process.
- Subjective:** Works are linked to memory and experience.
- Postmodern:** Challenging the interpretation of historical objects, stories, and figures. Recontextualising historical objects by viewing them through a contemporary perspective on racism.

## Subject – People, Objects, Places and Spaces

### KEY WORDS

- Recontextualized:** Change the meaning of something by thinking about it from a new point of view.
- Custodianship:** The act of taking care of the land and environment.
- Pattern:** A repeated design of shapes, line and colour.
- Juxtapose:** To place different things next to each other to compare them.

## ACTIVITIES



Image: *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]*, 2022, Marilyn Russell. Photography: Silversalt Photography

### Stage 4

- Look closely at *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]*. List three words you can use to describe the texture of the shells on this work.
- Look closely at *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]*. List the different shapes that the shells have been placed within on this work.
- Look closely at the fabric covering the sculptures. Describe how the texture of it is different to that of the shells.
- Marilyn Russell lives in the Sydney beach suburb of La Perouse. Explain how her work is a symbol of her home.

## Stage 5

- Explain how the materials used in *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]* are a symbol of cultural traditions.
- How has the material practice of traditional shellwork changed in *Untitled [Sydney Harbour Bridge]*?
- Explain how the Sydney Harbour Bridge is a symbol of western ideas of land ownership and use.
- Explain how shells are a symbol of Aboriginal custodianship of land.

## ACTIVITIES

### Stage 6

- The practice of shellwork has been handed down through generations of women in Marilyn Russell's family. Why do you think this carries importance within the context of Australian Aboriginal history?
- How has Russell subverted a traditional craft practice to make a political statement?

### Essay Questions

- Consider Marilyn Russell's material and conceptual practice. Explain how these are used as symbols in her work.
- Explore ways in which artists challenge their audiences to question traditional or mainstream points of view.



## DISCOVER

### Past exhibitions

'Wuliwulawala: Dharawal women Sharing Stories' 17 Apr - 14 Jun 2021, Hazelhurst Arts Centre

<https://cms.ssc.nsw.gov.au/Community/Hazelhurst/Exhibitions/Previous-Exhibitions/2021/Wuliwulawala-Dharawal-Women-Sharing-Stories>

'Scratching the Surface - Indigenous Australian Artists Working With and About the Surface' 19 Sep - 3 Nov 2016, IDAIA Gallery

<http://www.idaia.com.au/en/exhibitions/scratching-the-surface-indigenous-australian-artists-working-with-and-about-the-surface/>

### Articles

'The Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Aboriginal shellworkers of La Perouse' 2015, Australian Museum

<https://australian.museum/blog/science/the-sydney-harbour-bridge-and-the-aboriginal-shellworkers-of-la-perouse/>

'Marilyn Russell and Esme Timbery Case Study' 2018, Na Ngara Gallery

[https://www.nangara.gallery/\\_files/ugd/2a3a92\\_5855c70fece54778891dcf59a2417d03.pdf](https://www.nangara.gallery/_files/ugd/2a3a92_5855c70fece54778891dcf59a2417d03.pdf)

'La Per: An Aboriginal Seaside Story' 2010, Art Gallery of NSW

<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media/downloads/files/la-per-collection-notes.pdf>

# Guraban

where the saltwater meets the freshwater

29 October 2022 – 29 January 2023  
Hurstville Museum & Gallery

Combining historical material and objects, documents and photographs sourced from public and private collections along with the work of leading First Nations visual artists, Jenine Boeree & Nicole Monks, Dennis Golding, Djon Mundine, Marilyn Russell and Jason Wing, the exhibition presents stories associated with the Georges River in the local region, highlighting multiple perspectives on Aboriginal connections to the river, its people and places.

It has been developed in collaboration with local First Nations groups, individuals, artists and the Gujaga Foundation, a peak organisation leading Dharawal language and cultural activities, providing services relating to Aboriginal culture in eastern, southern and southwestern Sydney. The commissioned artworks have been made possible through funding from Create NSW.

*A hardcopy and digital catalogue is available for this exhibition.*

*A virtual tour of this exhibition is available to view online [here](#).*

## **HURSTVILLE MUSEUM & GALLERY**

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Back cover image: 'Guraban: where the saltwater meets the freshwater' exhibition view, Hurstville Museum & Gallery, 2022.  
(detail) Photography: Silversalt.





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Marlyn Russell (Chicago)  
Shippore 2002  
Acrylic, enamel, glass, steel, painted aluminum  
Collection of the artist



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