

LA PER AN ABORIGINAL SEASIDE STORY

17 JULY – 10 OCTOBER 2010





ARTIST UNKNOWN

La Perouse / South-east region / Australia

SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE c1939

assorted shells, blue velvet, cardboard

10 x 17 x 4.5 cm

Gift of Alan Lloyd 1995

21.1995



PETER YANADA McKENZIE

b1944

Eora / South-east region / Australia

BIG RAT #1 1991

from the series *It's a man's game*

gelatin silver photograph

53.8 x 36 cm image, 54.7 x 37 cm sheet

274.2008.3

Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008

© Peter Yanada McKenzie

BIG RAT #2 1991

from the series *It's a man's game*

gelatin silver photograph

54.2 x 36 cm image, 54.7 x 37 cm sheet

274.2008.4

Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008

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PETER YANADA McKENZIE

b1944

Eora / South-east region / Australia

THE HUDDLE 1991

from the series *It's a man's game*

gelatin silver photograph

32.2 x 46.7 cm image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm sheet

274.2008.11

Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008

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"LA PER.! LA PER.! LA PER.!" 1991

from the series *It's a man's game*

gelatin silver photograph

30.2 x 46 cm image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm sheet

274.2008.9

Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008

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WELL I'M GLAD THAT GAME IS OVER 1991

from the series *It's a man's game*

gelatin silver photograph

29.3 x 44.2 cm image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm sheet

274.2008.13

Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008

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"COME ON CLEO, I'M BLOODY DYING HERE!" 1991

from the series *It's a man's game*

gelatin silver photograph

29.4 x 44.1 cm image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm sheet

274.2008.7

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PETER YANADA MCKENZIE

b1944

Eora / South-east region / Australia

THE INNER SANCTUM #8 1991

from the series *The inner sanctum*
gelatin silver photograph
29.5 x 44 cm image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm sheet
275.2008.4
Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008
© Peter Yanada McKenzie

THE INNER SANCTUM #2 1991

from the series *The inner sanctum*
gelatin silver photograph
39 x 44.5 cm image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm sheet
275.2008.1
Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008
© Peter Yanada McKenzie

THE INNER SANCTUM #5 1991

from the series *The inner sanctum*
gelatin silver photograph
30 x 44.5 cm image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm sheet
275.2008.2
Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008
© Peter Yanada McKenzie

THE INNER SANCTUM #6 1991

from the series *The inner sanctum*
gelatin silver photograph
29.4 x 44.3 cm image, 40.6 x 50.8 cm sheet
275.2008.3
Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008
© Peter Yanada McKenzie

BACK INTO THE SHADOWS

On the north shore of what's now known as Botany Bay lies the Aboriginal community of La Perouse, known by family and friends as La Per. This community is deeply embroiled within Australia's history. Central to both Aboriginal and Australian identity, Botany Bay is the site of first contact, the site of first invasion and the site of first resistance. Today La Per remains Aboriginal land held in trust by the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council and stands testament to the enduring strength of Aboriginal culture. Officially gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve in 1895,¹ at a time when Botany Bay was on the outskirts of Sydney Town, La Per became one of the first government-sanctioned missions designed to segregate Aboriginal people from mainstream Australia. However, the bay had been home to Kooris long before colonisation, with one of the oldest accounts coming from Mahroot in 1845, who recalled 'All this my country! Pretty place Botany. Little piccaninny, I run about here. Plenty blackfellow then; corrobory; great fight; all canoe about'.² Yet, as Sydney has grown, this seaside community of locals has found itself in the centre of one of the biggest metropolises in the southern hemisphere becoming, by default, the first urbanised Aboriginal community in Australia and an important part of the country's landscape.

Our nation's 'hero' Captain James Cook sailed through the heads on 29 April 1770 to the claim the rich waters of Botany Bay and beyond for the British Empire, and, in doing so, made history. Although Cook was sailing blind, the coast's network of Koori clans and families had already sighted the Endeavour, and Cook and his men were being carefully watched.³ Their first landfall on Terra Australis occurred on the southern shore at Kamay⁴ (Kurnell) and was met with strong resistance: local Gweagal men took arms and met the invading party. After coming under musket fire the warriors, armed with spears and shields, were forced to retreat. Cook and his men pursued and

found there a few small huts made of the bark from trees ...
A quantity of darts [spears and also include several 'wooden swords' or boomerangs] lay about the huts. These we took away with us ...⁵

Indigenous 'curiosities' were not the only stolen items of Imperial tourism: Joseph Banks at this time also commenced his vast collection of botanical specimens, leading Cook to rename the bay from Stingray Bay to Botany Bay.

Some eight years later Captain Arthur Phillip, in charge of an armada, landed in Botany Bay to settle but after consideration Phillip moved the colony north to Warrang (Sydney Cove). Just before leaving on the 24 January 1788 two French ships under the command of Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de La Pérouse sort refuge in Botany Bay, setting up camp at what's still known today as Frenchmans Bay. Locals again defended their country and conflict ensued between the locals and the French, although it's unclear how the violence broke out.

David Collins, in 'An account of the English Colony in New South Wales', stated

we also had the mortification to learn, that M. De la Perouse has been compelled to fire upon the natives at Botany Bay, where they frequently annoyed his people who were employed on shore.⁶

On the 10 March 1788 the French left Botany Bay, sailed into the Pacific and were never seen again.

Yet history is not all that is created at La Perouse. Responding to an ongoing interest in Aboriginal objects – an obsession founded in the colonial perversion for 'the other' – local artisans have actively established one of the first Indigenous art industries and, indeed, one of the first urban Aboriginal art movements. An early account of this trade dates back to 1880 when it was reported that the men 'are generally employed fishing; some also make native weapons for sale'.⁷ These weapons, including shields, clubs and boomerangs made by the local men, were carved and decorated with pokerwork, while the women have become known for their sculptural shell work. Both of these disciplines have been based on the maintenance and continuation of traditional knowledge, skills and practices in a changing world – a principle that has become the guiding light of the Indigenous art industry. Weapons created for hunting are now used to engage and educate, while shells, for tools and fish hooks, are employed to decorate artworks.

This burgeoning art industry, encouraged by missionaries, has been made possible by the many local and international tourists who visit the picturesque yet encumbered seaside community of La Per. Conveniently located at the end of the tram line⁸ known as the 'Loop', it has remained a popular day trip, especially after 1905 when the area was declared a public space. Botany Bay has been marketed as a key historical destination – the birthplace of the nation – festooned with colonial monuments that form a punctuated backdrop. The creation of this history uses Aboriginality as a counterpoint, juxtaposing 'black' against 'white'. This apartheid is highlighted in the mission system, which positions Indigenous Australia at a comfortable arm's length. Within this didactic understanding of Australia's history the existence of an Aboriginal community at the site of first contact is auspicious. The late Aboriginal local Tom Williams commented

land rights legislation means to us here is that La Perouse is the most significant historical place in Australia, what could be more appropriate than Aboriginal people owning, controlling and managing their own land at this place?⁹

La Per artists respond directly to this notion of history, working with iconic images like the Sydney Harbour Bridge to decorate boomerangs or as the subject of shell work and, in doing so, re-craft Australia's image and history. For generations carvings have been created from locally harvested timbers with knowledge of species and their use being maintained and passed down. Boomerangs are often made from the light and easily worked timber like that of the region's mangrove and flame trees. Sections are specifically collected with 'elbows' or bends that form the iconic shape of the returning boomerang, an object unique to the south-east. For tens of thousands of years artists have mastered the ancient

aerodynamic technology by traditionally working with stone tools while in recent times broken glass was used to shape and smooth and today electrical tools and sandpaper are employed.

Celebrated images of local flora and fauna, including the koala, possum, kookaburra, and the national emblems, the kangaroo and emu, adorn these objects, along with Harbour Bridge scenes, which neatly sit within the 'elbow' or bend of boomerangs. The pokerwork designs belong to specific families, with two of the major families being the Simms and the Timberys.¹⁰ In reference to the inherited styles and techniques Peter McKenzie commented

if you were to show me a boomerang that you knew had been purchased at La Perouse, I could probably identify who made it, or what family, by the decorations. They were all different. When you look at this imagery, it looks like early coats of arms.¹¹

As seen in a historical invasion scene, which is a favoured Timbery family narrative, members of the Timbery family are 'fishing on the boats at Yarra Bay, when Jimmy Cook arrived';¹² while local fauna like the emu and the Sydney Harbour Bridge are Simms' custodial design motifs. These designs have been passed down through generations and were originally applied with

wire kept on a fire in a four gallon drum. They used three different types of wire: a round wire, then they would flatten one wire out and have a blunt edge and your third wire would be flattened and with a sharp end to draw the finer lines. The round wire was used to blacken areas, and the blunt one for heavier lines.¹³

Families would sell their work at the Loop and so successful was this trade that in the 1950s Bob Simms, who had appeared on television throwing boomerangs and who, at the Sydney Showground, was 'lighting them at one end and throwing them [to create] big circles of fire',¹⁴ started a 'small factory: the demand for boomerangs was so huge he could not cope by hand-making them'¹⁵ while Joe Timbery, a world champion boomerang thrower, opened a museum and shop with the family's 'curios for sale'.¹⁶ The slogan 'you buy 'em, we'll try 'em' was used to encourage buyers with a demonstration of boomerang throwing being part of the process.¹⁷ This cultural performance received international acclaim and in 1954 Joe Timbery was asked to conduct a demonstration for Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh. Today Joe's nephew Laddie Timbery is the senior carver and continues the tradition of road-testing his products – throwing (and catching) boomerangs to the enjoyment of an audience – in a complex process that re-contextualises the 'souvenir' as an encounter, to which Ilaria Vanni stated 'the object becomes metonymic of a lived experience. Its spurious character has to be supplemented by the narrative ...'¹⁸ Laddie started working full-time as an artist in the early 1980s and now works in Huskisson on the south coast of New South Wales, and has been going to the Loop at the weekends all his life.

Yet as John Dixon, a boomerang carver, commented 'it's long hours for small returns – and that's not a boomerang joke!'¹⁹ Despite this, Laddie is a familiar sight at the Loop and sells the work created by himself and his extended family.²⁰ He is often joined by carver Vic Simms, better known as an award-winning singer, songwriter and performer, and until recently Greg Simms (son of Bob Simms). Laddie, Greg and Vic represent an important historical lineage and narrate the landscape, telling the history of their country.

La Per women artists have been working with and earning an income from shell work for generations, with one of the earliest reports from 1882.²¹ Families would take shell-collecting trips throughout their traditional lands, to the local beaches, catch the ferry across the bay to Kamay or Cronulla and spend the day harvesting shells. Strong family connections from along the south coast of New South Wales, including the sister community of Wreck Bay, also provided another important source of material with many road trips returning buckets of shells. Renowned artist and Elder of the Year²² Lola Ryan collected at

Cronulla Beach, Boat 'arbour, Wanda Beach. And if we wanted the real pretty ones, you'd have to go down the south coast to Wreck Bay. There were button shells, star shells and brown ones we call nuppies or gubbens.²³

Award winning artist Esme Timbery (nee Russell)²⁴ continues the practice to this day and it was her great-grandmother Queen Emma Timbery, an important community leader, who exhibited her shell work in an Australian manufacturing fair in England where it was reportedly 'almost fought for'.²⁵ Esme Timbery and her sister Rose Timbery, like most shell artists, learnt shell work as young girls from their mother, grandmother and aunts by first sorting the shells by type, size and colour. In the 1940s they joined the shell working sorority and started selling their work at the Loop. Shell work includes the creation of boxes, ornamental booties or small slippers, frames and, since the 1930s, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, as seen in the historical work by an unknown artist in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection, which uses shell grit to infill the bridge uprights.

Artists work with a cardboard base to sculpt their subjects into a three-dimensional form; they often work from family templates, which are then covered in material to be shelled and in some cases topped with glitter – a modern take on shell grit. The shell designs and patterns, like the men's pokerwork, are inherited and fellow shell artist the late Jessie Ardler described

those designs I do, – the patterns of the shells on boxes – they were taken from Auntie Ollie and Mum. They did the same sort of thing. You could always tell one another's. Rosaleen and Esme [Timbery] do different from us ... Lola [Ryan] and them do different and the Cooley's do another. Me and Mum and Auntie Ollie and Auntie Louie all did the same type of thing in the pattern of the shells. The pattern and the design have been handed down.²⁶

During the 1950s and 1960s La Per women exhibited their works at the Royal Easter Show and at markets, fairs and department stalls alongside the men's work and as Esme Timbery stated 'Boomerang and shell work go together'.²⁷

Recalling her mother's, Gladys Ardler, and her grandmother's practice, Julie Freeman stated that shell work meant

traditional knowledge was imparted from the mums to the kids. That was allowed by the missionaries because they didn't really look at it as being traditional or Aboriginal, but in fact it kept a whole range of Aboriginal ways intact so it was very special.²⁸

The lack of cultural understanding continues today with most audiences failing to understand the traditional knowledge of country that enables artists to harvest particular shells at specific beaches and bays during different seasons and environmental events. Today Esme Timbery is one of the last full-time practitioners, as the 'young ones don't seem to have the patience of these old people to keep it going',²⁹ while contemporary artists like Timbery's daughter Marilyn Russell and daughter-in-law Phyllis Stewart and Julie Freeman occasionally create shell work. Hetti Perkins commented on shell art stating that it 'interrogates what is and what isn't Aboriginal art ... challenges those sort of stereotypes ... what's contemporary, what's traditional ... what is art, what is craft'.³⁰ Shell artist Mavis Longbottom astutely commented that

I reckon you have to be a bit artistic to do shellwork, if not I don't think you could make it; to match all your shells and get the colour into it you've got to be an artist.³¹

Lola Ryan took the practice of shell work to a new level, collaborating with Sydney-based art collector Peter Fay, to create abstract conceptual images, seen in their *Australian map* and *Australian bird* series.

La Per's unique history and identity was highlighted in the landmark photographic series created by local photographer Peter Yanada McKenzie,³² *After 200 years: photographic essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia today*. A national photographic project coordinated by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies³³ in 1988, *After 200 years* surveys the survival of Indigenous Australian communities after 200 years of invasion, making McKenzie's subject – the site of first invasion – particularly pertinent. McKenzie's series is dominated by people – friends and family – and by place; what he documented takes the audience on a unprecedented personal journey into the community, including into the studios of boomerang-maker John Dixon and shell artists Mavis Longbottom and Lola Ryan. McKenzie, who has described himself in conversation as 'just plain curious about everyday life and people', commented on the importance of photography,

Things are changing so fast for Kooris, we need to take photos because things will be different tomorrow. Photography is pertinent because in the Aboriginal household the most prized possession is the photos in the photo tin.³⁴

In a later body of work McKenzie takes the relationship between photographer and subject, and photograph and audience, further, intimately documenting the local rugby league team, the La Perouse Panthers, in their 1991 winning season.

This series is a hyper-intimate view of local men. Producing national heroes like the Ella brothers, football in La Per is dominated by 'a camaraderie ... which exists right to this day,' described McKenzie. 'Football is indeed possibly more considered than religion or even traditional culture and religion. Football is probably the new religion'.³⁵ McKenzie captured the team passion, determination and energy within his black and white prints, documenting the on-field action, where collaboration and mateship are evident, along with the intense and often bloody action. In other works we are paradoxically taken deep into the sacred masculine world of the locker room, where men appear laden with anticipation and excitement. Players are seen before and after the game: contemplative, alert and hungry, getting massaged, signing autographs and receiving instructions. Focused on the game, the players are unconcerned with the presence of McKenzie's camera that captures the community intimately.

Drawing on unbroken local traditions and knowledge, the community of La Per is unique. McKenzie commented

Being Aboriginal was knowing that the artifacts that Uncle Bob made, what Jo Timbery made and Joe Budd and Bobbie Dark and Herbert Timbery and Dessie Cooper ... what those men did was something nobody else could do. It was because they were Aborigines that they knew how to do it ... them gub-bahs [non Aboriginal people] didn't know how to do it, only blackfellas could do that thing ...³⁶

Sadly these skills, and the history and achievements of La Per, are all too often forgotten and pushed 'back into the shadows'.³⁷ Generations of artists, at the forefront of cultural education, have challenged, and continue to challenge, this position. Using art as an important vehicle for cultural expression, they continue age-old practices and assert their traditional rights within the wider Sydney landscape, witnessed by the use of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in boomerangs and shell work. Through their cultural wealth and long-term engagement with an outside audience the La Per community has generated a vibrant tourist trade and contemporary art market,³⁸ exporting their artists locally, domestically and internationally. The subjects and objects that the La Perouse artists have embraced speak volumes of the cultural revolution of the place: while the Sydney Harbour Bridge seems an inconsequential subject and the boomerang simply a functional object, both make for poignant symbols for the La Perouse experience of Australian history – the Sydney Harbour Bridge representing Aboriginal peoples' ability to transcend boundaries and the boomerang standing for an ever-present return to cultural beginnings. Today's continuing presence of Laddie Timbery and Vic Simms at the Loop represents an unparalleled and unbroken line of cultural strength; the engagement with and preservation of their work, along with that of their families', generously provides a richer and complete understanding of the Sydney landscape.

Jonathan Jones

End notes:

1 Peter McKenzie and Ann Stephen, 'La Perouse: an urban Aboriginal community' in Max Kelly (ed), *Sydney: city of suburbs*, New South Wales University Press in association with the Sydney History Group, Sydney 1987, p 176

2 Mahroot's evidence to the NSW Legislative Council's Select Committee on Aborigines (1845) in K Willey, *When the sky fell down: the destruction of the tribes of the Sydney region, 1788–1850s*, Collins, Sydney 1979, p 217

3 Geoff Timbery in *Memories of Jimmy Cook*, DVD, 23 min 36 sec, Primal Vision, Sydney 2000. Directors Larry Gray and Mary O'Malley

4 Also spelled 'Gamay'

5 Captain W J L Wharton (ed), *Captain Cook's journal during his first voyage around the world made in H. M. Bark 'Endeavour', 1768–71* (a literal transcription of the original manuscript), eBooks@Adelaide, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide 2010. See <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/cook/james/c77j/chapter8.html>

6 David Collins, 'An account of the English Colony in New South Wales', *Australiana Facsimile Editions no 76*, reproduced by the Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide 1971, p 17 in Maria Nugent, *Botany Bay: where histories meet*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 2005, p 94

7 'Report of Aborigines Protection Board for 1890' in Nugent 2005, p 79

8 Now Sydney Bus route no 394

9 Tom Williams in Penny Taylor, *After 200 years: photographic essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia today*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra 1988, p 342

10 The Timbery name is first recorded by Europeans in 1819 when a French artist, writer and adventure, Jacques Arago, made a portrait of a local man (whose direct descendents still call La Perouse home) and transcribed his name as Timbéré

11 Peter McKenzie in Hetti Perkins and Jonathan Jones (eds), *Half Light: portraits from Black Australia*, Art Gallery New South Wales, Sydney 2008, p 100

12 Jeff Timbery in Ilaria Vanni, *Symbolic souvenirs: a one day conference on cultural tourism* (notes), Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Australian National University, Canberra 1998

13 Greg Simms in Vanni 1998 (notes)

14 Peter McKenzie in Perkins and Jones (eds) 2008, p 100

15 Ilaria Vanni, 'Bridging the gap: The production of tourist objects at La Perouse', in Kleinert and Neale (eds), 2000, p 402

16 See Jeff Carter's black and white photograph, *Timbery family standing outside their boomerang shop at the Joe Timbery Museum, La Perouse, New South Wales* 1963, at National Library of Australia. See [http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4268712?lookfor=timbery%20{pi:nla.pic*\)&offset=5&max=8](http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4268712?lookfor=timbery%20{pi:nla.pic*)&offset=5&max=8)

17 Jeff Carter 1963. See [http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4268712?lookfor=timbery%20{pi:nla.pic*\)&offset=5&max=8](http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4268712?lookfor=timbery%20{pi:nla.pic*)&offset=5&max=8)

18 Ilaria Vanni 1998 (notes)

19 John Dixon in Penny Taylor, *After 200 years: photographic essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia today*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra 1988, p 351

20 Which includes David Little, Jeff Timbery (Laddie's son) and Jeanette Timbery

21 Maria Nugent, 'The economy of shells: a history of Aboriginal women at La Perouse making shellwork for sale', National Museum of Australia, Canberra 2009. See www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/indig_part/NMA_Economy_shells_20091109.html

22 'The Dharawal (Lapa) Elders', Aboriginal biographies. See www.stgeorgesdet.nsw.edu.au/showcase/wingara/lapaelders.htm (accessed 16 July 2010)

23 Lola Ryan in Bob Percival (ed), *Talking Lapa: a local community history of La Perouse*, Board of Studies, Sydney 1995, p 25

24 In 2005 Esme Timbery won the inaugural Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Award

25 Reported in *Australian Aborigines' Advocate* (the magazine of the United Aborigines Mission), February 1910, in Ilaria Vanni, 'Bridging the gap: the production of tourist objects at La Perouse', in Kleinert and Neale (eds) 2000, p 401

26 Peter McKenzie and Ann Stephen, 'La Perouse: an urban Aboriginal community', in Kelly (ed) 1987, p 180

27 Esme Timbery in *Memories of Jimmy Cook*, DVD, 23 min 36 sec, Primal Vision, Sydney 2000. Directors Larry Gray and Mary O'Malley

28 Julie Freeman in *Pallingjang Saltwater: Aboriginal artists of the Illawarra and South Coast regions of New South Wales* (exhibition catalogue), Wollongong City Gallery, Wollongong 1997, p 5

29 Christie Moore and Sandra Murphy in Percival (ed) 1995, p 42

30 Hetti Perkins in *She Sells Seashells: artists at work*, film, 30 min, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney 2007. Director Kelrick Martin

31 Mavis Longbottom in Taylor 1988, p 342

32 Peter McKenzie is also a curator, graphic designer and musician

33 Now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

34 Peter McKenzie in Karen Pakulua, 'Beyond black and white', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 2008, pp 18–19

35 Peter McKenzie in Perkins and Jones (eds) 2008, p 99

36 Peter McKenzie in Peter McKenzie and Ann Stephen, 'La Perouse: an urban Aboriginal community', in Kelly (ed) 1987, p 188

37 Vic Simms, 'Back Into The Shadows' (song), written and recorded 1973, RCA Corporation

38 Maria Nugent 2009. See www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/indig_part/NMA_Economy_shells_20091109.html

FRONT COVER:

Peter Yanada McKenzie "LA PER.! LA PER.! LA PER.!" 1991 from the series *It's a mans game* gelatin silver photograph Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2008
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