



Djunngaal Elders Group Yarrbah Collection, Punishment Dress, curated by Simone Arnol and Bernard Lee Singleton for CIAF 2019. Wade Lewis

How First Nations fashion design can rewrite painful memories and be a powerful method of healing

Published: May 24, 2024 6.12am AEST

Treena Clark

Chancellor's Postdoctoral Indigenous Research Fellow, Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, University of Technology Sydney

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this article contains names, images and stories of deceased people.

Around the world, fashion researchers, designers and artists are exploring the links between clothing, adornment and wellbeing.

“Encllothed cognition” considers the psychology of clothing, and designers are exploring how to create garments to heal the wearer.

First Nations people understand the power of connection to cultural clothing and adornment. Items like possum and kangaroo skin cloaks can contribute to healing and cultural practice.

But it's not only traditional clothing that can lead to healing. In Australia, there is a rise of designers and artists creating and fashioning painful Protectionist-era clothing on the runway and in the galleries.

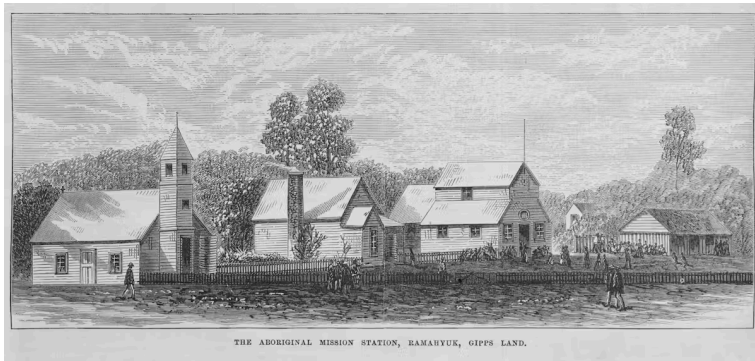
By recreating clothing tied to painful and traumatic memories and histories, these designers and artists hope to share these horrific policies, rewrite the meaning behind them, and move forward in healing.

A history of missions, reserves and trauma

First Nations peoples living in controlled reserves, missions and stations were forced to wear plain clothing and expected to keep them well-maintained and clean. Often, garments were forms of payment and punishment.

In some institutions, First Nations people generated clothing and adornment for interstate and international exhibitions and tourist trades.

These regimes and power through clothing significantly impacted those living there, including their cultural practice, identity and wellbeing.



The Aboriginal mission station Ramahyuk Gippsland. State Library Victoria

There are two national days to pause, acknowledge and remember the Stolen Generation and their families and communities – National Sorry Day on May 26 and the Anniversary of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations on February 13.

Healing and wellbeing involve a holistic approach, and art contributes to this.

Using clothing as art or designing garments with a transformative and positive spin can benefit members of the Stolen Generation and their families.

Healing through fashion design

The Queensland Yarrabah community has been experimenting with fashion to tell Yarrabah Mission stories.

The 2019 Cairns Indigenous Art Fair invited the Djunngaal Yarrabah Elders Group to work on a collection for the Buwal-Barra fashion show. The collection, named ByDaBell, represents the significance of the bell at the Yarrabah Mission, which strictly controlled their day.

Yarrabah Elders recreated three significant dresses worn in the mission: an everyday casual dress, a church formal dress and a punishment potato sack dress. In doing so, the Elders told a powerful story about their mission experiences and how clothing was used to punish or control.

For the Yarrabah community and many First Nations people, truth-telling is a form of healing and reminder of resilience.



cairnsindigenouartfair

6,581 followers

[View profile](#)

[View more on Instagram](#)

181 likes

cairnsindigenouartfair

Introducing a new group of women who have designed a special collection for this years Fashion Performance.

The Djungaal Yarrabah Elders group practice sewing and recreating dresses which were learned from the "Mission days" under the Aboriginal Protection Act before the 1967 Referendum. Three dresses come to light in their collection. An everyday wear dormitory dress, a church service dress and the bag dress which was a punishment dress made from potato sack bags.

Their collection "ByDaBell" depicts the story of their life in the dormitory and shows a continuation of history and culture throughout a heavily burdened and oppressive time in Australia's history.

The group currently sew from their hub in Yarrabah and have produced an amazing collection for the upcoming Fashion Performance of 2019, Buwal-barra. "Messenger" Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow.
Tickets are selling fast - don't miss this amazing event. www.ciaf.com.au
Photography by Wade Lewis Art#ciaf2019

Add a comment...

Healing through truth-telling was also seen weaved within a commissioned wedding dress made for the 2020 Queensland Museum exhibition I Do! Wedding Stories from Queensland.

As a collaborative effort by fashion designer and artist Simone Arnol (Gunggandji), artist and curator Bernard Singleton (Umpila, Djabugay/Yirrgay) and Djunngaal Yarrabah Elders, the garment told stories about mission experiences and the colonial wedding practices within it.

Based on mission-style wedding dresses, the gown featured a five-metre-long circle train embedded with a powerful image of a mission imprisonment. The stained lining from traditional materials represented the suppression of First Nations culture.

Mission wedding dress ensemble (2020), Simone Arnol in collaboration with Djunngaal Elders – Yarrabah. Queensland Museum, CC BY-NC-ND

Healing through art garments

Artist Yhonnie Scarce (Kokatha/Nukunu) created a piece about the experiences of her grandmother Fanny and great-great-grandmother Florey as domestic servants in the early 1900s.

The work features two linen aprons, depicting those worn by Flora and Fanny, and 16 hand-blown glass bush plums placed inside and poking through the pockets. Their names were also carefully hand stitched onto each apron.

The piece represents the strength of Flora and Fanny in their roles as matriarchs caring for family and holding onto their cultural identity.



acca_melbourne
41.7K followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

130 likes

acca_melbourne

TODAY – ART IN FOCUS: Learn more about 'Yhonnie Scarce: Missile Park' with Art in Focus, a series of free introductions to the exhibition with a focus on one artwork per session, led by ACCA's Visitor Experience Team members.

-

Presented twice weekly on Wednesdays at 11am and Sundays at 3pm. Registrations aren't required. Meet in the ACCA foyer.

-

Yhonnie Scarce is a master glass-blower, which she puts to the service of spectacular and spectral installations full of aesthetic, cultural and political significance. Her work also engages the photographic archive and found objects to explore the impact and legacies of colonial and family histories and memory.

-

Image: Yhonnie Scarce, 'Florey and Fanny' 2012, installation view, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. City of Yarra Council collection, Melbourne. Photograph: Andrew Curtis @andrew.curtis.photography

[#ArtStartsAtACCA](#) [#ACCAMelbourne](#) [#YhonnieScarce](#) [#YhonnieScarceMissilePark](#)

Add a comment...

Shellworked Slippers by Esme Timbery (Bidjigal) contains 200 pairs of tiny, adorned shoes to represent the children of the Stolen Generation and the shell craft practice of Aboriginal women at La Perouse, Sydney.

Made from fabric and encrusted with glitter and shells of various sizes, colours and designs, the slippers speak to the experiences of the children who were forcibly removed and the strength and resilience of First Nations families and communities.

While not a uniform of children who were removed and placed in institutions, the large quantity of small and empty shoes reminds the viewer of the suffering and trauma experienced under the Protectionist policies.



[View more on Instagram](#)

mca_australia

The MCA would like to acknowledge the recent passing of highly respected, greatly admired and much-loved local artist Esme Timbery. A proud descendant of the Bidjigal people, born in 1931 Esme's direct descendants were on the shoreline as the English First Fleet and a few days later the French explorer Jean-Francois de Galaup, Comte de la Perouse sailed into Kamay (Botany Bay). With an unbroken connection to country, Esme inspired audiences through her intricate shell worked harbour bridges, shoes and other objects created from wood, glue, cardboard, fabric, glitter and shells that she began exhibiting in 1997.

Esme's artwork was a result of forging new materials with the distinctive matriarchal cultural practice of shell working - passed down from mother to daughter or grandmother to granddaughter. A great source of inspiration to many shell workers from La Perouse was Queen Emma Timbery, Esme Timbery's great-grandmother, who often displayed and sold her shellwork at Sydney's annual Royal Easter Show.

Esme's artwork is held in numerous public collections including the MCA and she was the recipient of the first Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Award 2005. Her major public art installations throughout Sydney include Sydney International Airport (2000) with artist Judy Watson, 'Shell wall' commission in Barangaroo with artist Jonathan Jones (2015), and a large installation 'Movement of shells, movement of times' in collaboration with daughter Marilyn Russell in St Peters, part of The Transurban Public Art Program (2023).

The MCA would like to pass on our condolences to Esme's children and extended family including eldest daughter and practicing artist Marilyn Russell, Clifford (Dec), Bill, Steven,

Neil, Leonard, Charlie, Kim and Michelle. The Sydney and connected NSW south coast Aboriginal community has lost a giant. She will be greatly missed.

Image: Esme Timbery, 'Shellworked slippers', 2008, shell, glitter, fabric, cardboard and glue, Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased with funds provided by the Coe and Mordant families, 2008, © Esme Timbery / Licensed by Copyright Agency, photograph: Jessica Maurer

[View all 5 comments](#)

Add a comment...

Sharing stories, remembering history

First Nations fashion designers and artists are transforming Protectionist-era fashions on the runway and in exhibitions. In doing this, they aim to speak back to racist and colonial policies and heal.

We need to keep sharing these stories about the true history of this country and how garments repressed and controlled First Nations people.

The movement toward healing painful memories and intergenerational trauma through garments positively contributes to First Nations people's wellbeing.

First Nations peoples are resistant and, through clothing, will continue to explore and celebrate culture and identity.