kanalaritja
AN UNBROKEN STRING

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The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) is proud to present a national touring exhibition focused on shell-stringing, one of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community’s most culturally significant and closely-guarded traditions.

_**kanalaritja**: An Unbroken String_ features a variety of beautiful, delicate and rare shell necklaces, created by Tasmanian Aboriginal Ancestors in the 1800s, and acclaimed makers of today, as well as a new wave of stringers who had the opportunity to learn the tradition through the _luna tunapri_ (women’s knowledge) cultural revitalisation project.

Since 2010, TMAG has worked with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community to facilitate a number of _luna tunapri_ workshops in which women in the Community – who had not had shell stringing passed down through their families – were guided through the intricate processes of collecting, cleaning and stringing.

The women were encouraged to look in their local areas for shell collecting beaches and to use the knowledge shared with them to develop their own distinctive shell stringing styles and new traditions.

Building on the overwhelming success of the _luna tunapri_ project, the women aspired to share their journey with the wider public, leading to the creation of _kanalaritja_: An Unbroken String.

“Shell-stringing has never before been the focus of a touring exhibition, nor comprehensively documented in a dedicated publication,” TMAG Director Janet Carding said.

_“kanalaritja_: An Unbroken String is a culmination of the journey of cultural renewal, while also celebrating the generations of makers who have sustained this uniquely Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural practice.

“Importantly, this is a project that has been led by the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and I would like to acknowledge them for allowing us to help tell their story.

“Museums and galleries hold and care for material that represents many thousands of years of cultural heritage, and it is a privilege to play a part in helping those treasures form a link to the future by supporting today’s artists, and to help ensure that their practice continues to thrive for the benefit of all.”

_**kanalaritja**: An Unbroken String_ is accompanied by a dedicated publication featuring a range of essays and photographs, aiming to build awareness and provide a definitive account of the unique cultural practice of shell stringing.

Young visitors can also follow the _kanalaritja_ trail around the exhibition, and resources are being developed for teachers.

Following its showing at TMAG, the exhibition will tour to every state and territory in Australia between 2017 and 2019.

“The development, production and tour of the exhibition and book has been generously supported by the Australia Council for the Arts and the Australian Government’s Visions of Australia program, and the TMAG Foundation have funded the significant acquisition of new works made for the exhibition,” Ms Carding said.

“I would also like to thank the lenders to the exhibition premiere, including the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and Museum Victoria who have enabled an important 19th century necklace to return to Tasmania for the first time in more than 160 years.”

_**kanalaritja**: An Unbroken String_ is on show at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery from 9 December 2016 until 21 May 2017, before touring nationally.

History of shell stringing

Shell stringing is a celebration of culture and a symbol of identity – an unbroken string that connects the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community, to Ancestors, culture and Country.

For Pakana (Tasmanian Aborigines) an intimate understanding of Sea Country and the skill of collecting and stringing shells extends far beyond living memory.

Pierced shells from Tasmania’s west coast have dated the tradition to at least 1800 years ago.

Shell stringing is the Community’s longest continued cultural practice, a practice which not only withstood invasion but continued throughout the Black War and during the time Pakana Ancestors were incarcerated in government missions at Wybalenna on Flinders Island and Oyster Cove, south of Hobart.

Today, connection to Country and cultural knowledge of shell resources, the weather patterns and the tides remains within the Pakana Community, particularly the shell stringers.

Pakana proudly continue this unique tradition and honour the fortitude of their Ancestors who ensured its survival.
Quotes from today’s makers

Jeanette James

“Like many stringers, my earliest memory of the tradition is of being on the beaches collecting shells. It was something we always did as a family. There is an expectation for us, as a group of Aboriginal women responsible for maintaining such an important part of our culture for future generations, to follow cultural protocol: look after Country, understand the environment and how to sustainably collect the shells and protect the seaweed beds. In honour of the elder stringers uphold the quality of work, it reflects on all of us.”

Lola Greeno

“With only a small number of women holding the knowledge of shell stringing, we were concerned about the continuation of the practice. It was my dream to enable other Aboriginal women from around Tasmania to learn and revive this important cultural practice within their families.”

Ashlee Murray

“We are one of the only peoples in the world stringing shells like this, so I think it is quite definitive of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. It is incredibly important to me personally and to our Community at large, whether you are practicing shell stringing or not.”

Liz Tew

“I was inspired to learn as no one in my family since Fanny Cochrane Smith has made shell necklaces. I feel proud that my family can once again continue this tradition. I collected these shells mostly from beaches on the north east, on our Ancestor’s Country. When I’m out collecting the connection I feel is hard to put into words. My mind slows down, I feel calm and content, a sense of belonging to my Country, continuing my culture that has endured for so long.”

To download hi-res media images, please visit www.tmag.tas.gov.au/kanalaritja.

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