

Peter Turner and Clem Newchurch

*KAURNA  
Still Here*



The Guildhouse  
First Nations Collections Project  
with the South Australian Museum

5 March – 8 May 2022





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The South Australian Museum plays a vital role in our country's reckoning of our history; of what we value, collect, and share about our natural and cultural heritage. Almost all South Australians, and large numbers of visitors from wide and far, will have had an experience of wonder at the Museum – be it inspired by an object, a collection, an exhibition.

For Peter Turner and Clem Newchurch, The Collections Project represented a necessary, open-ended invitation to access, inquire, and to share knowledge.

This project is the outcome of the artists reacquainting themselves with collections, documentation and objects that further connects them with their familial stories, cultural and material knowledge, and by connecting with old and sacred traditions, create new futures.

Through the Guildhouse Collections Project with the South Australian Museum, Turner and Newchurch have responded to George French Angas' 1840's depictions of First Nations people and their material culture and the south-eastern coastal landscape of South Australia, its flora and fauna. The artists' work, partly in response to historic works by Angas depicting the Kurna people and their country, which stretches from the Adelaide plain to Cape Jervis on the tip of the Fleurieu Peninsula, has created a dialogue between the past and the present.

Turner and Newchurch's works are informed by Angas' depictions of their culture and country and this exhibition which is informed by Philip Jones' curatorial work on *Illustrating the Antipodes*, has resulted in an important body of work that will continue to grow.

image *Warrior Tools*, (l to r) Clem Newchurch, Large Murlapaka/Bark Shield, Gum species and Ochre, 2018; Clem Newchurch, Small Murlapaka/Bark Shield, Gum species and acrylic paint, 2019; Peter Turner, Midlah/Woomera, Gum species, Emu Bush Barb, Animal Sinew and Tree Resin, 2014; Clem Newchurch, Midlah/Woomera, Sheoak, Wattle Species, Sedge species, Tree Resin, Ochre, 2018 – 2022; Clem Newchurch, Reed Spears, Gum and Wattle species, Native Water Reeds, Sinew, Tree Sap, 2018 – 2022; Clem Newchurch, Lightweight Club, Wattle Species, 2021; Clem Newchurch, Returning Boomerang, Sheoak, 2021.



From their position of deep connection to the country depicted in Angas' illustrations, and incorporating their own familial knowledge, Turner and Newchurch have created carvings, painted and woven works drawing on their Ancestors' practices prior to European colonisation.

This ambitious, collaborative project was catalysed by Newchurch and Turner's shared desire to reignite traditional craft practices amongst the broader community, and in doing so, share culture and wisdom with future generations. Inspired by the large-scale fish net off the coast of Rapid Bay depicted in Angas' 1847 lithograph *Coast scene near Rapid Bay at sunset* the artists proposed the focus of their Collections Project would be a community-engaged string making project.

This project taps into something deep and integral to the way Newchurch and Turner practice their art making, knowledge sharing and leadership with young people. It is through practice, through building connections, sharing stories, and connecting with country that we weave new futures and new ways of knowing.

In the 166th year of the South Australian Museum, this project embodies the ethos we endeavour to see of our cultural institutions. An open invitation to access and participate, with an equally open ear to listen and learn. The Guildhouse First Nations Collections Project is the result of genuine partnership and demonstrates the value of enabling open and ambitious environments for artists, scientists, collections, research, and audiences to coalesce.

We thank the Government of South Australia and our generous supporter Diana Laidlaw, for their commitment to this vital project and congratulate Peter Turner and Clem Newchurch on this important, iterative body of work they have created in response to their residency at the South Australian Museum.

**Emma Fey**

Chief Executive Officer, Guildhouse

**Brian Oldman**

Director, South Australian Museum

image *Cordage*, (l to r) Clem Newchurch, Net Mainline, Sedge species, 2022; Clem Newchurch, Abalone Shell Fire Carrier, Abalone Shell, Native Water Reeds, 2018; Clem Newchurch, Weaving Needle (inspired by Milerum), Wattle and Sedge species, 2022; Clem Newchurch, Hairstring, Clem's hair, 2022.





## *KAURNA: Still Here*

Uncle Peter Turner and Clem Newchurch radiate a deep love of their people's material culture and the ocean, and through this passion retain and share cultural knowledge and practice. Uncle Peter has spent much of his life living in Wallaroo, working for many years as a professional fisherman, and Clem is rarely away from the ocean. When at home in his beloved Aldinga, Clem is most often found in the boat or making art.

For at least a decade I've closely observed Clem's art making and have been fascinated by his investment into understanding the tools of his Barngarla, Kurna, Kokatha, Narungga and Ngarrendjeri ancestors. I remember when Clem began recording footage of himself using contemporary fishing tools and traditional fishing tools that he'd made, and providing comparison between the functionality of the tools. When my daughters see Clem, they're always reminded of the time they saw Clem at the local shops, with a wobbegong shark tooth lodged in his hand, not long out of the water after spear fishing.

This type of praxis is a constant in Clem's art making, always travelling between his respective language groups, spending long lengths of time on country to create, understand and refine, and to use tools on the land and in the ocean. Similarly, Uncle Peter's practice is enhanced by decades of undertaking cultural heritage work, observing objects in situ.

The challenge of making functional objects that resemble those made by Kurna and other ancestors is something welcomed by Uncle Peter and Clem.

Their craftsmanship is the result of being shown by family members including fathers, uncles and cousins how to make and use certain objects, and their quest to be able to make the things they weren't shown how to make. In following their desire to make the broadest range of objects used by their ancestors, Uncle Peter and Clem have had to find other sources from which to learn, including the study of objects and records in collections and archives. Their desire to make their ancestors tools doesn't come from simply wanting to produce objects for display or commerce, but to better understand the ingenuity of their people, the ecology from which materials derive, and the techniques involved in their production.

When you ask Uncle Peter why he has dedicated so much time to making objects, he pats his heart and tells you that it's about connecting with his culture, and also that connection to culture guides him and Clem through the problem solving required to identify the correct plant species and the processes required to refine materials to make objects.

Learning the art of string making and net making are challenges that both Clem and Uncle Peter have had to face. Despite similarities in their shared ancestry, love of the ocean, and making the objects of their ancestors, it's only relatively recently that they've had the opportunity to meet and work together. And their meeting is an important one.

Through Clem and Uncle Peter's meeting the men are able to converse about the knowledge shared by relatives, and their discoveries when experimenting with materials, tools and technique. Whilst Uncle Peter and Clem appreciate what they're learning from each other, in supporting other Aboriginal people wishing to do similar work, they'd encourage a similar level of trial and error that has brought them to this point because it is important in engendering an appreciation of their ancestor's ingenuity and skill.

An appreciation also acquired through their experimentation in tool making, particularly that of string, is an understanding of the scarcity of particular plant species, and the impact of colonisation and climate change on ecosystems that enabled Aboriginal people to thrive for millennia. Uncle Peter points to the cleared plains of the Yorke Peninsula and subsequent blight of wheat and sheep as affecting important ecologies. It is in this context that the significance of Clem and Uncle Peter's work is heightened, as the continuity of their cultural practice becomes a way for assessing the health or further demise of species.

*KAURNA: Still Here* is a poignant title for their exhibition. As Clem and Uncle Peter attest, even though they've both studied early settler colonial artists such as George French Angas, William Von Blandowski and Edward Snell to better understand form and function of objects, they were well along their journey of continuing the cultural practices of their ancestors before encountering this work.

Both Clem and Uncle Peter believe that a motivation of these artists was their belief that Aboriginal people were soon to disappear, not because of colonial occupation, but an assumption of Aboriginal deficit, and therefore their documentation of Aboriginal cultural practices was essential.

However, at the point that Uncle Peter and Clem meet these artists, it is evident that Kurna people are still here, and Aboriginal cultural practices are still alive and being reinvigorated. What isn't certain is that in another 180 years, materials will be available to produce the tools made by Kurna and other Aboriginal language groups that Uncle Peter and Clem belong to.

I am pleased that Clem and Uncle Peter have enjoyed engaging with the South Australian Museum's collection, including archives and objects. Through having the ability to look at objects without the impediment of glass cases, and to be able to study archival material relating to their ancestors, they've been able to push into another dimension of understanding their cultures and their people's ingenuity, and to bring their cultural practice to a level that audiences, and most importantly their descendants will highly appreciate.

### **Dr Jared Thomas**

Research Fellow - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Material Culture and Art  
South Australian Museum

## *Where it all began...*

While living down south of Adelaide on Kurna Country (where I grew up), I started collecting materials to weave with, after being shown the Ngarrindjeri technique by Auntie Ellen Trevorrow. Whilst collecting reeds, I started harvesting Typha for reed spears. This is a plant I had read a bit about and I knew the fibre was used for string making. One day, as if the plant was showing me, I worked out how to strip the fibre. Almost instinctively I worked out a twisting technique in which I would use my teeth to hold it in place. I worked on this technique for several years before meeting Uncle Peter.

I met Uncle Peter in March 2020. I had moved to Yorke Peninsula as I had some work coming up in a school over there, teaching young people a technique I developed for string making.

When we met, it didn't take us long to work out we were on similar paths when it came to making cordage with natural fibres. When Uncle Peter first asked how I made my string, we were surprised that we had both worked out the same method.

This was the start of a strong connection for us. After our first meeting, we regularly went out on Narungga Country and Uncle Peter taught me many things about the land, plants and everything else along the way. While out and about, I would always be looking for new fibres to try make string out of. On multiple occasions I saw Uncle Peter experimenting with the exact same plants in the exact same way.

For this project, both Uncle Peter and I had been referring to paintings from many old non-Aboriginal artists who had painted examples of our Old People's way of life and some of the tools they used. For us the important thing wasn't the artist, it was the content they had painted.

In mid July 2020, an old acquaintance messaged me a picture of a George French Angas painting asking if I thought it was Sellicks Beach. I immediately recognised the painting to be Rapid Bay, a place where my father and mother had taken me since before I could remember, teaching me to fish off of the old jetty. An entire hill was quarried out since the painting was completed but it was still easily and instantly recognisable for me. Not long after this I was visiting Kurna Country again for work. I said to Uncle Peter that I would dedicate some time to collecting some reeds for reed spears. The best place I knew was Rapid Bay, and while I was down there I took a comparison photo, in the location where I felt the painting had been painted.

Several months later, I saw an opportunity for the Adelaide Botanic Gardens Collections Project information session. I decided to attend the event. In my mind, I thought because the Museum of Economic Botany didn't have a lot of local native fibre cordage recorded, they might want to start having some conversations with us.

At this session I stayed back and met Debbie Pryor from Guildhouse, she excitedly told me about the South Australian Museum Collections Project and said I might want to look into this one as an option also. This asked for an Aboriginal artist team to respond to George French Angas.

When I looked into George French Angus' paintings I realised I had seen a fair few of them before, and some of the ones I hadn't seen seemed to catalogue things I had been making for years, including shields, reed spears, boomerangs, weaving, cordage, etc. I thought this would be a perfect opportunity to share our story.



For me, the main message I want to get across with this exhibition is that Kurna people (as well as all our surrounding Nations) are still here... and our culture has survived, in a contemporary format. The mentality for George French Angas' era would have been that our Old people were dying out. But we are still here... and we are bringing as much of our Culture back as we possibly can.

**Clem Newchurch**

image Clem Newchurch

Uncle Peter taking photo of second valley painting, 2022

Digital composition with artist photo and George French Angas, *Coast scene near Rapid Bay at sunset, 1847*.



## Peter Turner

Peter Turner is a Narungga, Kokatha, Ngadjuri man who has lived in Wallaroo since his childhood in the early 1970's. His Ancestral connections extend into surrounding South Australian Aboriginal nations such as Yankanyjatjara and Kurna. He continues to live on Narungga land today, with his wife and younger children.

Peter has had many forms of employment on Narungga land over many years. His earlier jobs included cleaning grain ships and fishing professionally from a young age. For many years Peter has been the only professional snake catcher on Yorke Peninsula.

Peter learnt from his Elders from a young age and was granted responsibility to be a custodian of Northern Narungga Country by his Auntie's. He continues to research as much as he can about his culture. His cultural knowledge and the knowledge he holds in regards to Narungga lands has led him to work in various forms, over many years, protecting cultural heritage assets and the natural environment on Yorke Peninsula. Peter regularly undertakes work with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet's Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division still to this day. Peter is a cultural leader within the Narungga community and regularly shares his knowledge with school children, through working with schools and the Science Curriculum Team within the Department for Education of South Australia.

Amongst many other things, Peter has also been an Artist (painter) and maker of traditional Narungga tools, for many years. He comes from a family of many well-established artists. He uses his traditional knowledge of plants and other resources to revive ancient Narungga practices, such as string and net making.

## Clem Newchurch

Clem is a Kurna Narungga Kokatha man who has resided in the southern Adelaide region for the majority of his life. He has extended Ancestral connections to surrounding South Australian Aboriginal Nations such as Yankanyjatjara and Ngarrindjeri.

Clem worked for many years in the Youth and Community Services industries, working in roles such as Aboriginal Community Education Officer roles within schools and as a Community Development Officer working in Local Government.

More recently Clem has worked in Arts and Education settings, exhibiting works and sharing his cultural knowledge through various settings such as programs, workshops and events. He has also worked in Film and Multimedia settings including Writing and Directing two NITV 'Our Stories' documentaries that have been broadcast on NITV since 2018.

Clem began weaving after learning the Ngarrindjeri weaving style from Ngarrindjeri Elders at Camp Coorong many years ago. He continued weaving at home on Kurna Country, sourcing materials from his local area and in doing so, found the appropriate native plants used to make string. Clem has since been developing his cultural artistic practice, learning from Elders, other community members and other sources (such as the South Australian Museum), sharing his knowledge along the way and supporting the revival of Ancient Kurna cultural practices, including net making and carving.





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Guildhouse and the South Australian Museum acknowledge that they operate on the lands of the Kaurna Nation and recognise the continued relationship to their lands by traditional owners past, present and emerging.

### cover image

*Carriers*, (l to r) Peter Turner, Large Kuru/Gurru/Bowl, Gum species, 2021;  
Clem Newchurch, Fish Scoop/Emu Egg Carrier, Sedge species, 2014;  
Clem Newchurch, Medium Sized Kuru/Gurru/Bowl, Gum species, 2021;  
Clem Newchurch, Woven Mat, Sedge species, 2019;  
Peter Turner, Small Kuru/Gurru/Bowl, Gum species, 2021.

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