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STORYBOX

Interview with Leanne Tobin about 'Stories Untold'

Conducted 25 September 2020 at Parramatta Artist Studios, Parramatta.

Supported by the City of Parramatta for STORYBOX Parramatta. storybox.co/parramatta

Leanne Tobin. Stories Untold, 2020.
Collage and mixed media

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Interviewer: Dr. Sarah Barns, ESEM Projects.

Tell us about this artwork.

This artwork is called Stories Untold. Because all these stories are not well-known. I've taken snippets out of old paintings, I've taken old photos and put things together. There's Government House, the Parramatta Girls home, my mum's sister was in there. There's a lot of big stories.

When I paint, to start with, I always do it, I stain the canvas with the earth, with the ochre from the country, I then build these layers up with acrylic paint, I went with shimmering gold and coppers.

Other parts, I've borrowed artworks I've created in the past. A lot of my artworks are storytelling about my family, I then combine them. I brought in three different stories here, the wedding, with Maria and Robert Lock, I've got the Native Institute and all the students lined up there, I've got photos of the houses my mum's house she grew up in grew up in, my nan, her family , her as a young child, my great great grandmother Sarah Castles, Granny Lock they knew her as.

They were given a block of land to raise sheep and cattle and pigs on, it wasn't in a viable area, on Richmond Rd in Blacktown, it didn't do too well. We weren't meant to be farmers, our people.

There's lots of layers of collage, paper, paint, pen, tissue paper, secret covering over my nan's mouth. The secret began with Maria Lock, marrying in, learning white fella ways.

This is mum's old house that she was raised in. She was born in terrace houses that were right near the river here where The Albion Hotel is.

This is my mum and her family .This is her family there. I've got Nan here who kept the secret and the weaving of the story, that's her mother there. Sarah Castles, Maria Lock, Yarramundi's daughter.

Who was Sarah Castles?

Sarah Castles is interesting because she's a Womali woman from Cammeraygal, I think they're called. Cammeraygal people over at Prospect Hill and her father was an elder, Charlie Boren. She was very tough. Apparently she used to smoke a white clay pipe and ride a horse and round up the kids from the back paddock. She was pretty tough, but you know, they had to be in those days.

I've got the axe in the tree log there because in the tree stump, because unfortunately that's what Maria Locks kids had to do. This is Maria Lock I've represented her here with Robert Lock. He was a convict. They got married in the church here at St. John's Parramatta.

And all her children, most of the boys became fencers where they were caught up having to cut down trees and build fences. So it's sort of a really sad irony really, that's what they ended up doing as a job, dividing up their country. And so that's their story. And they had 10 kids. Maria Lock had 10 kids. I'm not sure how many Sarah had, she had a few too, because we've got so many descendants now.

Maria's marriage to Robert was the first between an Aboriginal person and a convict. When did it take place?

I'm pretty sure Maria was married Australia day, 26th of January, 1832. What they used to do, they used to have feasts as well in front of that church. So it was a significant thing. It was a real push to marry off Aboriginal women in particular, especially if they'd gone through the Native Institute and marry them into convicts in the local area and then give them a block of land to farm.

We know she was actually fully literate. And yet Robert Lock was an illiterate English convict, who was a carpenter who worked at the Blacktown Native Institute site. And so he was illiterate and she was fully literate. So consequently, she was writing all these letters on his behalf requesting the land they were promised, she

requested her brother Colby, who was a guide with William Cox, building the road over the mountains.

He got a block of land opposite the Blacktown Native Institute site on Richmond Road. When he passed away, she had the notion to write a letter... I'd say her and Robert cooked it up to write a letter and request the land that he had and they got that land as well. So when she died, she'd accrued a hundred acres.

But unfortunately for us later on 1920s, of course, then the land was taken from us. The Aboriginal Protection Board rescinded the land. So I'm not sure what happened there, but it's pretty sad. We've been fighting ever since to try and get some sort of skerrick of that land back. We're so lucky we've got the Native Institute and that was through the perseverance of a lot of people pushing and pushing for years. So yeah, that's a good thing.

It's weird there was such huge story going on that we didn't know about, and my mother didn't know. Yet, we found ourselves brought back to it anyway.

Nan kept the secret, mum found out after my Nan had passed. She only found out because one of her cousins had started doing the family history, the family tree. And thank you to the British, who were such meticulous record keepers that we had records right back to the first contact time. So, we had all those recordings of Yarramundi meeting with Governor Phillip and with his father on the banks of the Hawkesbury, or we know it as Deerubbin.

And with all those stories we were able to then look back and find those connections. It was a weird thing that it was kept so secret. Yet, mum's mother was the only one, my Nan was the only one who'd kept that secret, with all her relatives living around her in the same neighborhood, very much aware of their Aboriginality, very much aware of their connections.

But it was never spoken, never ever spoken about. And, in fact, if you talk to other Aboriginal families, you'd find that there's always someone that's going, "Ssh, don't talk about that". You were anything, you were Spanish, you were Black, Irish, you were anything but Aboriginal.

And, unfortunately, that's the story that we've since uncovered.

What really drives me to tell the story of mum's family is that it was kept secret, they weren't allowed to speak out. They had to keep it secret for their own safety. Nan, she had six children she had to look out for. It's funny though, because traditions still carried on. My uncles used to build canoes out of corrugated tin and tar, take them down the river and fish for eels, and they bought eels back.

My Nan used to cook them up. So, there's a lot of traditions that were carried on despite that suppression.

How did Maria come to be a part of the Parramatta Native Institute?

Well, that's an interesting story. We're not sure how it went down, but we know Yarramundi was involved with Governor Macquarie. He had actually earlier on met Governor Phillip with his father. And so there was already a relationship established with the government. And then when Macquarie came on board, he was anxious to sort of civilize the blacks as such. So he ended up talking with Yarramundi We sort of think possibly it was a deal. We like to think that Yarramundi might have sort of seen the need to learn the new ways. And he placed his daughter in there. Many of the other children that were part of that Institute were, orphaned in skirmishes that had happened at different, you know, they'll sort of round it up and sort of stolen, basically the first stolen generation, really.

But Maria Lock's name was the first enrolment. So that's quite significant. And she graduated with distinction and above all the others with the award that was granted to both non-indigenous and indigenous people. So she, she did top of the exam, the colonial white exam. So she'd really well. And after that, we know that she was very active in getting kids into school. So she had 10 children. So yeah, it was to her advantage..

But the Institute closed after 12 years. She then went to Plimpton, I think it was Plimpton Primary.

This is a scene here that captures it sort of references another work of yours as well. Do you want to talk a little about that scene?

The original Native Institute was set up behind St. John's church. And that's where Maria Lock was put into and graduated from. And she ended up living with the Hassalls who lived at the back of the church there. And I guess she was probably a housemaid. She married Bennelong's son Dicky, I forget his real name. We'll call him Dickey because that was what he's commonly known as. Bennelong's son was also in the Institute for a little while. Then they got married, but he died shortly after. Dicky was a salt water person, she was freshwater. So we don't know, but we suspect there might've been a tribal arrangement and it would have been convenient because they were both going through the Native Institute. But yeah, there are all sorts of stories with Dicky. We're not sure what happened, but yeah, it's pretty sad that he passed away very early.

And then she was left to work as a maid. She was still at the Hassalls, I think at that stage and then Robert Lock was working out with his father. They were both carpenters working on the Native Institute at Blacktown because they'd moved everybody out of the Parramatta.

Tell us more about Parramatta?

The name of 'Parramatta' is 'Burramatta'. 'Burra' being 'eel', and 'matta' being 'placed near water'. So, meeting place near water. It was a place 'where the eels lay down' because it was the salt and fresh water coming together.

Around The Crescent, I purposely put those concentric circles around the areas, where all the clans from different areas would come. We'd have people from down South coast coming up, across from the mountains, from North. Everybody would come and congregate and meet and ritual ceremony, lots of dancing. You can imagine, there was lots of sound and singing and music and cultural exchange, trade, a big feast.

It was always done at a certain time. They knew when the eels were fat and sleek when they were coming out of the rivers and all the creeks and heading down to the sea to begin their migratory journey up to the top of Australia. So there were adult eels, they were at their fattest and sleekest so, it would be great eating. And so it was a time of plenty.

I think it was November, they used to meet. So it was a big, big time. They'd wait for the full moon, high tides would have been on their cultural calendar to have that date set aside. So that's what's represented by all those circles coming together. They're all little groups of people coming together.

I've got the giant eel as it moves out to sea, and the smaller eels as they're heading up to the creeks, into the freshwater billabongs, beginning their life journey. The eels would migrate all the way up to the Coral Sea, and then come all the way down again, young little glass eels would make their way up the freshwater. When you look at the neighbouring stories around us, there's a shared story about the eel being like a reptile ancestral creator figure, one that created the mountains and the rivers too. The eel was a creation figure, a creation story of place.

I've also got Pemulwuy here, he's facing off. He was a resistance fighter, and in the vague distance you can see bodies suspended in the trees. That was how Macquarie way to ward off people from attacking, he left them up there as a warning. It's a tragic story but it's definitely part of Parramatta's story.

What do the circles in the painting mean?

There was all these layers that made up those clan groups and made them unique. You had your outer community, you had your family, smaller family groups, and then your kinships as well.

I'm descended from Boorooberongal, belonging to the Red Kangaroo, which is at Hawkesbury, Richmond way. And then Weymali, which was the Possum people from Prospect Hill.

We all had what are sometimes called ‘totems’ which is a contemporary term, it was more of a connection to country and sometimes they were food sources as well. You were identified by the land you came from. Also known as Sandstone people or Freshwater people or people from the Mud plains. All those different clan groups that would come together, but it wasn’t as divided as we are today. It was much more fluid.

How did you discover your story?

I was 23 or 24 when I found out about our ancestry. Once I found out, I had a hunger to learn more. My gosh, what a big story. No one else knew about it. I mean, Aboriginal people knew, Darug people did, but the general public knew nothing. You learned about Blaxland, Wentworth, and Lawson going over the mountains, but nothing about the people that were here before for thousands, and thousands, and thousands of years. So, it just became a quest for me to find out everything, as much as possible.

When mum found out, I came back down from Northern Territory, where I was living up there and working, and came back to country. Mum had started going to Darug meetings, tribal meetings, and we started meeting more family. With that, of course, you have extended family, extended stories, little bits of the jigsaw puzzle coming together. So, something that mum knew about at childhood, someone would add something else to that. This is how a lot of those stories have come about.

I’m also an avid reader. I never used to like history when I was a kid, but ironically now I’m just totally embedded in it, in the thick of it, retelling it and bringing it out, and helping other people tell their stories too. It’s an important role I’ve found now. I’ve given up other jobs to take this on pretty much full-time.

As I was learning, I realised people wanted to know about what I was learning. So, it became this thing where I was almost chasing stuff and finding out more things. Then as soon as I’d find it, I’d share it.

Now there’s young ones coming up who want to know more. They’re a little bit more comfortable in their place. Our kids, our grandkids, and our children, they identify as Darug and there’s no problem. They’re very comfortable with it. Whereas we’ve had to fit that skin on us and work our way through it. It hasn’t been easy, but I think with the sense of belonging that comes with it, it just makes you feel like you’re just telling the truth. I’m just telling what happened, and the whole truth, not just the popular bits, the big stories.

What was the children’s experience like in the Parramatta Native Institute?

Parramatta was a bit wild apparently with the rum and everything. They tried to take the children away and put them somewhere in a safer place. I think away from all the temptations. The more you read, the more you see lots of interesting stories coming out of those places, but it was pretty wild. You had the Parramatta Female Factory and all those other things that were happening. So it wasn’t a very nice place for children, that’s for sure.

The Parramatta Native Institute only went for 12 years or something. It wasn’t very long. Maria was one of the very few success stories. They didn’t have a lot of success. They had a lot of deaths, child deaths, which caused a lot of upset among the Aboriginal mob around them. I think people kept running away too. You had a lot of Aboriginal children running away or parents trying to come and take them at night time. It was pretty sad because the kids were basically deprived from their parents. I’ve taught kids who have lived out in the bush and when they’d come in and they’re in four walls, it’s very, very hard for them to sit still, stay seated in one spot would have been such a difficult thing for the kids to adjust to.

And just everything was so foreign and new and weird and so different to their Aboriginal ways. And meanwhile, they could see the mountains from the distance, they could see the trees, they knew their parents were not far away. It would have been really hard for those kids. Imagine just kids crying and at night time in their beds because they weren’t really allowed to talk or have fun, really. It was really very serious, rigorous, religious training and domestic training.

Tell us about the fences?

The fencing is dividing. One of the first things the British did when they landed in Australia, they cut down trees. And they started to contain. Whether it was containing people, containing property, dividing land. They built fences.

Aboriginals, we never had those divisions, it was never ever like that. A lot of areas were shared and you could acknowledge people and ask permission to come on the country, but it was always acknowledged that those resources were shared.

So that caused major division between Aboriginal people and the British, because the British were very much about "this is mine, I've contained it, this is my property, that's yours over there".

So those fences were just something that just wasn't an understood concept in Aboriginal way. So our people really suffered with that.

There's so many different accounts of Aboriginal people. We know with our own family, with Sarah Castle's kids and also with Robert and Maria's children who became fences and where they were logging trees, splitting them and making fences and dividing up their own ancestral country, which I just can't imagine what that was like to do that. Such a different world and within three years, two thirds of the population were wiped out by disease. So consequently, you had a very splintered group of people, raggle-taggle trying to pin things together and just basically surviving.

They're still there, those layers of stories, and we have these other layers that come on top. And regardless of how many layers, how many buildings, how much concrete or tar you build, underneath, those stories are still there and they're still part of this country. So I'm really obliged to tell those stories. I feel a real sense of responsibility about that.