



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST

Transcript of interview:

NEIL SHARKEY – CURATOR

LOVE LUST LOSS – THE SHRINE, MELBOURNE

DECEMBER 2021

Neil Sharkey:

Oh, thank you, Tim. It's a pleasure to be here.

Tim Stackpool:

You launched on December the 1st. Has it been going well?

Neil Sharkey:

Yeah, look, we've been getting a steady stream of people coming through. We weren't able to have a big launch, unfortunately, because there's just been so much uncertainty coming out of COVID lockdowns and so forth. We've had what we refer to as a soft launch whereby we've opened the door and people are coming through and we're getting word out about the exhibition and different comms, like what we're doing right here and now. But we do have a lot of public programs and linked in with the exhibition and we're hoping that we can leverage those to create a buzz that a launch would traditionally generate for us. We're all being very adaptive in these times.

Tim Stackpool:

Of course, of course. Now the story and the title of your exhibition, Lust, Love, and Loss, not something thing you would necessarily traditionally expect would be attached to a Shrine of Remembrance. When such an exhibition was first proposed, did you have any barriers thrown up saying, "Well, love and lust has got nothing to do with a memorial to those fallen in war." Did it take much to get this exhibition up?

Neil Sharkey:

No. In the sense that I think there was a good understanding from Shrine trustees, Governor's staff on down that love and relationships and human sexuality have had a profound impact on Australians during times of war. Warfare has impacted upon those aspects of human life and likewise, those aspects of human life, love, and lust, and sexuality and relationships have actually had an effect on the way that this country has prosecuted wars. In a sense. I mean, one of the items that we have on display is what was referred to in the First and Second World Wars as a blue light outfit. It's a ...

Tim Stackpool:

Neil, I think we've just lost you on the tie line. Can you just switch to the phone line?

Neil Sharkey:

Yeah, yeah, sure. I can do that.

Tim Stackpool:

Great. I've got you there. A bit of a technical change. Now you were talking about the blue light outfit.

Neil Sharkey:

Okay. And now what this was was it was a little box filled with prophylactic creams, for the prevention of what we now call sexually transmitted infections, but what were then referred to as VD. And we are primarily talking about syphilis and gonorrhoea here. Now these diseases were responsible for putting thousands and thousands of Australian soldiers out of action during both wars. There was a real need for the military to come to terms with these very human conditions.

Tim Stackpool:

These were standard issue I'm guessing?

Neil Sharkey:

Yeah, absolutely. And I mean, the blue lights, they would set up little clinics that would be lit with the blue light out the front. You knew where to go to pick up these creams and other I guess educational materials that would help keeps you out of trouble.

Tim Stackpool:

I think I remember seeing a number of years ago, some US military educational films, which were produced regarding the dangers of contracting VD while on active duty. I mean, these diseases of course affect the brain as well.

Neil Sharkey:

Penicillin didn't come in in a big way until of late '40s. The treatments were very extensive and involved all sorts of ... I won't go into the details anyway, but it was best to be avoided. But I mean, some soldiers were accused of intentionally contracting these diseases.

Tim Stackpool:

These sorts of things lead to the next question, Neil, which is how did you source this material? What direction did you take in order to compile all of this material?

Neil Sharkey:

Firstly, I sat down and did a lot of reading and thinking and distilling down the ideas as to the various ways in which these matters impact on war and the prosecution of it and a population at war and vice versa. Then I stretched out to some of our partners, our important partners that have helped us in many of our exhibitions over the years and the Australian War Memorial was one of those. I was able to secure the loan of 10 works by mostly Australian artists on these themes. There's some really great stuff there. There's paintings by George Benson, Sidney Nolan, Clifton Pugh, Wendy Sharpe, Peter Churcher as well as some other things like some of the original posters from the war. Propaganda posters where sex is used as a way to like shame men into joining up.

Neil Sharkey:

That was an important source of some items that went on display. The Shrine has its own collection. Lots of individual items from various servicemen and women from all of Australia's conflicts since the First World War. And also just in doing my job over the years, I've been here for 14 years. And in that time I've just encountered, I've just met a lot of people and learned a story or been introduced to some items or objects or memorabilia and just stored them away in the back of my head until I was able to reach out to those families and request to loan them for this exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

It's almost an exhibition 14 years in the making in a way.

Neil Sharkey:

Well, yeah, I suppose so if you look at it that way, but I could say the same for a lot of exhibitions that I've done in recent years. They've benefited from just me being around the tracks for a while.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, the longevity of your employment. From when you got the green light to 1st of December, when you launched, how long was that?

Neil Sharkey:

It's been quite a while actually. I've had a whole extra year to develop it than what I normally would do. From go to woah, maybe three years, I suppose.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow.

Neil Sharkey:

It's really been good actually. I don't usually have that luxury for the extra time. I mean, it was frustrating of course, during all the ... I'm sure a lot of people can relate to that, but yeah, no, I think it's borne good fruit, I think. It's just given me that little bit extra time to meditate on some of these ideas and ...

Tim Stackpool:

Given the subject matter of this exhibition, lust, love, and loss, do you think you could have introduced this exhibition earlier within your 14 year tenure or is now the right time for this exhibition?

Neil Sharkey:

Yeah, look, I suppose I could have perhaps tackled it earlier, but I think the extra time, it's like anything in life, the longer you've got to think on something, the longer you've got to become aware of certain and ways of looking at things in the world. It's usually beneficial. And I think in recent years, maybe in

the last couple of years certainly, there's been a lot of thinking in this space, not just in this immediate space about love and relationships in wartime, but just love and relationships between people in general. And a lot of those discussions have played into what we've done I think. I think that the exhibition has certainly benefited from that. But in terms of somebody saying ... I don't envision that I would've encountered anyone saying you can't do it if you know what I mean?

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah.

Neil Sharkey:

But I think now's a good time.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, that's what I was thinking. I mean, these issues of sexual freedom, oppression, sexual identity, they're all very modern issues. And one which we hear about and talk about in the news almost every day in various forms. Good and bad. Mainly bad, I would say. Because of the nature of them being commonplace, it makes your exhibition at the moment timely. Whereas if we weren't in this period, say 10 years ago or so, I think it would've taken a lot more courage for you to move ahead and try and push this past your trustees or your board or whatever it is you need to do to get the tick of approval. And that's why I asked the question.

Neil Sharkey:

Oh, well, I mean sexual freedom, oppression, sexual identity. I mean, it's perhaps relatively new that we're talking about these things, but of course these things have always been an issue I would posit. I mean, and look, the wars of the 20th century in particular, the two World Wars, I mean, they really brought to fore a lot of issues around sexuality that have been simmering in this country for a long time, for decades even before that. I think they were catalysts that helped shift attitudes further away from a lot of those old ideas about duty and procreation and heading more into the space of pleasure and self-realization. There were just a lot of complicated, wartime relationships. People had to endure long separations.

Neil Sharkey:

They had to deal with infidelities, abusive partners, perhaps especially when those damaged people came home. A lot of people were abandoned because they just drifted apart so much in that time. There were children born out of wedlock, there were husbands and wives just bringing sexually transmitted infections back, infecting their partners. I mean, it just threw lives into turmoil. And I think if you can just imagine all of those issues, a society's not going to be the same then as it was before.

Neil Sharkey:

And things like #MeToo I guess in our modern world have been similar catalysts, but there's always been these big milestones and these catalysts that have like driven the culture in a new direction. Look, I think

it's part of a continuum. It's timely, certainly, to do an exhibition of his type, but again, a lot of these issues are not as new as perhaps they might initially seem, I guess.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Part of the title of your exhibition says "Australian stories of wartime relationships", and you've been through the tough aspects, just rattled off a shopping list of them just then, but have you uncovered some most remarkable stories of long term love as well that you're presenting?

Neil Sharkey:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. There's definitely an upside to this and a really positive side. The exhibition features some really beautiful stories. We've got Bob and Merle James who ... A couple during the Second World War. He was a soldier. He served in the Middle East at Tobruk and El Alamein, and later in New Guinea. She was a member of the Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force. She working in signals. They're just a really glamorous couple. I mean, you can see a photo of them together, their wedding photo, and they look like movie stars. We've got this beautiful collection of all these little love tokens and so forth they sent to each other while he was overseas. And to me, the most poignant thing is this big stack of letters that Merle, this correspondence that she had with a number of other boyfriends that were deployed overseas at the time, through it all, they both had this little aspect of themselves that was separate and apart from their relationship.

Neil Sharkey:

Although they loved each other very much once he did return and the war ended and they got married and they lived a very long life together. That's a really beautiful relationship, but it's tinged with this bitter sweetness in that a lot of these boyfriends that Merle had died on service. It's really poignant that they had this life together, they had children, but if Bob was the one that didn't come back and one of these other chaps did then the course of her life would've been completely different. And another great story in the exhibition is that of Slim and Xanthoula Wrigley. Slim was an Australian prisoner of war captured in Greece in 1941.

Neil Sharkey:

He managed to escape the prisoner of war camp in Salonika, where he was being held by the Germans. And he made his way south and wandered into a village where there was an English speaking, a school teacher there called Yannis. And he took him in, put him in contact with the Greek resistance, and Slim remained in Greece for a year or so fighting with the resistance and so forth. In 1943, he escapes Greece, eventually comes back to Australia. And in the meantime, Yannis is captured by the Germans for his resistance activities and is shot and a year or two later, while Greece is undergoing all this turmoil with the Greek Civil War, his daughter finds Slim's contacts. His address, and the family's in a desperate state. She writes to him and said, "Oh, look, Slim. My dad helped you during the war. He's dead now. We're really suffering. Is anything that you can do to help us?"

Neil Sharkey:

And Slim remembers his friend's beautiful daughter. And he said, "Yeah, look, come to Australia. And if you like me, if you like it here, we can get married." And that's what happened. So, I mean, that's just an amazing story.

Tim Stackpool:

It is.

Neil Sharkey:

And Xanthoula's still with us, she's still alive. Slim died in the mid '90s, but yeah. So, I mean, that's another wonderful story.

Tim Stackpool:

It is. But how do you find those stories, Neil?

Neil Sharkey:

Xanthoula is a long time friend of mine now. I first met her in 2011. She helped me with an exhibition I was doing that about Australians in Greece, Crete and Syria during the exhibition I was doing about those campaigns. And that was when I first encountered Xanthoula and her story. We've been friends ever since. Getting back to what we were talking about before about if you're around long enough, you can leverage that into other projects and other opportunities.

Tim Stackpool:

Now this whole project of lust, love, and loss, there's some other aspects to it. Now there's a book by Peter Reese and Sue Langford called *A Week In September*. How does all of that relate back to your exhibition?

Neil Sharkey:

A Week In September, I mean, it's a great book about an Australian POW on the Thai–Burma Railway and it's based on letters he wrote, but couldn't post to his wife Marjorie at that time. That story doesn't feature in the exhibition. But when we learned about this book and we saw how it could be a tie in because it shares so many of the same themes as our exhibition. There's beautiful serendipity. When we thought we were launching the exhibition a little earlier in the year, we planned that the launch of the book and the exhibition would coincide together, but that couldn't happen then. But we are rescheduling it for February. And so, as I mentioned before, these are one of the opportunities that we have to cross-promote these projects and just give everything a boost and just get people thinking along these lines about these sorts of stories and about how important they are and how profound they are.

Tim Stackpool:

And outside of this podcast, Megan Spencer's also got a series as well. I understand she's talking with couples who talk about their wartime love as well. And this relates back again to your exhibition.

Neil Sharkey:

Yeah. This is probably a more direct link in the sense that we've commissioned Megan to do these podcasts for us. I mean, she's done in recent times, she's done many of these for us and they're always great. She's just got a real sensitivity, love of this topic. Members of her family were involved in the wars. She's really passionate about it. And she and I have had a lot of discussions about it. She's picked out some really great subjects for her podcast. One of whom is Julia Mitchell whose husband served in Afghanistan in 2012-13, and again 2017, and Tanya Johnson, co-founder of the Australian National Veterans Art Museum with her husband who's a veteran. But yeah, look, I'd really encourage people to check in on our website when we post those up and Megan will do a much better job of bringing people through those stories than I can here.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And as always, if anyone wants to head to the description of this episode at insidethegallery.com.au, we always post a link, which you will find to the Shrine. I think is Shrine.org.au.

Neil Sharkey:

That's correct, yes.

Tim Stackpool:

And as Neil said, those podcasts will be available to download. This actually means there's a lot of facets to this exhibition. There's your exhibition at the Shrine. There's the book, there's the podcast. As a curator, do you have to consider all of those different aspects to this project when putting your exhibition together?

Neil Sharkey:

Well certainly in the case of Megan, yes. She and I had, and continue to have a lot of conversations about what it is we're trying to achieve with this exhibition and the sorts of exhibition that we want it to be. That has involved sharing ideas about our own thoughts on this topic and not just Megan, but as you said, all the other ... The designer, the graphic designers, the people producing the signage. I mean, as well as Megan's podcasting, as well as the objects I put up on the walls or in display cases, or the words I wrote on the brochure and the captioning that accompanies the exhibition. Even down to the paint colour. We arrived at strong colours that we thought would encapsulate the themes of the exhibition.

Neil Sharkey:

We've got a warm pink against a khaki, a dark military khaki to subliminally communicate the idea of the human meeting the military machine, as it were. I guess these are all part of the ideas that communicate what I thought the exhibition should be to all of the people that have had a stake in it, or all the people that have been involved in helping to create it and being open to hearing what they thought, whether they thought something would work or whether it wouldn't, or even in ... I made sure that the captions that I wrote were read by other members of the exhibition and collections team here at the Shrine. Just in case that I putting too much of a middle class male bent on things at time because that's what I am.

Neil Sharkey:

Make sure that at all time we've used gender neutral terms and we talk about relationships rather than marriages and couples rather than men and women. The way that the exhibition has been conceived is that the themes are very broad and generalized so that they can apply to most, if not all relationships fundamentally and human experiences. That's really part of this unified vision that you speak of. And the importance of keeping that as a common goal that we're all working towards.

Tim Stackpool:

The inference that is when there is coverage of war is that it's a very masculine event. Even up to today. It's a very masculine event. However, as we see in your exhibition, the spouses or those in the relationship with those who go off to war are entirely affected as well. Seriously, whether that be through the loss of a partner or through the infidelity of a partner or themselves, that sort of thing. And as you say, when people come back home or get back together, the relationship can be either totally destroyed or at least in most circumstances entirely changed.

Neil Sharkey:

And of course, I mean, there's especially more recent times, there's plenty of female service people as well. But yeah, definitely. I mean, and in the case of Merle and Bob who were talking about before, they were both service people. Yeah, true, war is traditionally conceived as a very male pursuit, I suppose, but I would really like people to take away from this exhibition is that the primal emotions of sexual attraction and love can have, and have had as profound effect on the lives of human beings and Australians in wartime as had those equally primal drives of violence and hatred. They're the two sides of a coin. They're very powerful emotions. War is often talked about as being a time that brings out the best and the worst in human beings.

Neil Sharkey:

And I think you only have to pick up a newspaper to see how destructive a love affair gone wrong or a person consumed by their passions, how that can be destructive as well. So, yeah, I think we're dealing with two sides of a coin and there's a beautiful/terrible painting by Clifton Pugh on display called the Vietnam Body Counts. It's one of the paintings on loan from the War Memorial. And I don't know if listeners are familiar with the work of Clifton Pugh, one of Australia's truly great painters. It's a horrible image of mangled bodies. And he drew inspiration from like a Mỹ Lai type. The painting predates Mỹ Lai, the Mỹ Lai massacre of the Vietnam war, but similar stories I guess, and Pugh himself actually had been a soldier in the Second World War.

Neil Sharkey:

And he wrote later on of having killed Japanese prisoners of war and having set up a brothel in Japan while he was an occupying soldier there. This is a guy who knew how these matters could manifest themselves in a very bad way in warfare. But at the same time, the painting, there's a terrible beauty. It's thought provoking, and I hope that the other elements in the exhibition are equally thought provoking and just introduce some of these ideas to people, so people can go away and read more and

meditate on some of these ideas and maybe ask family members with experience of war if they can relate to these sorts of issues.

Neil Sharkey:

I'm sure they can, or they might even find it in old letters or diaries of their parents or grandparents. From that point of view, all of these matters are just as important to military history as battles and troop movements and big men of history and all the rest. It's an exhibition about ordinary people caught up tumultuous events, for ordinary people to think about and reflect on.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. How has it affected you, Neil? In any way?

Neil Sharkey:

Oh, well, some of those stories are very affecting and give you pause to think and reflect and perhaps be saddened. But other times like you can actually take joy. When you think of someone like Bob and Merle James, or Xanthoula and Slim raising a family and building a life for themselves and coming through what must have been very traumatic times and just taking hope that whatever terrible things happen that people who survive will be able to with support, can move forward and build lives for themselves and for their families. That's something I guess I've taken away from it, yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

And is that what you hope people will take away from your exhibition?

Neil Sharkey:

Some of these stories are really great. A lot of people going overseas and in wartime and meeting people that have come to their country, see they never would've met otherwise and having new worlds open for them and new opportunities. There some great stories in with the sad ones.

Tim Stackpool:

All right. Now, just technically, before we finish, I understand this is the first of three exhibition in the Shrine's Identity series. What else is to come?

Neil Sharkey:

Okay. We've got an exhibition that we will be launching April that's all about indigenous Australians in service of the Australian Defence Force since the First World War to the present day. Then we've got an exhibition, which is all about LGBTIQ+ people in the Australian Defence Force. That'll deal with the challenges they've faced over time and the sorts of roles and contribution they've made.

Tim Stackpool:

Certainly some eye opening stuff coming up, I think Neil and congratulations on getting those exhibitions underway anyway, I think, and hopefully none of them have been too hard to get across the line when it comes to your board and your trustees.

Neil Sharkey:

No, not all.

Tim Stackpool:

I certainly hope that Lust, Love, and Loss goes very well. And I thank you very much for your time on the podcast.

Neil Sharkey:

Thank you, Tim. It's been a pleasure.