

# Sangeeta Sandrasegar

## In Conversation

Published on 15 August 2018



In the lead up to National Science Week (11 to 19 August) Lisa Cahill caught up with Sangeeta Sandrasegar about her work with the Australian Tapestry Workshop (ATW) and the science she references in her practice. Her work *Everything has two witnesses, one on earth and one in the sky* features in the exhibition *Painting with Thread: Samples and Tapestries from the Australian Tapestry Workshop* is on display at ADC until 26 September.

**Lisa Cahill: Your work expresses some complex issues about identity, colonisation and the pollutants and their contribution to climate change? Can you tell us how these things all come together in *Everything has two witnesses, one on earth and one in the sky*?**

**Sangeeta Sandrasegar:** This collaboration with the Australian Tapestry Workshop was based on an exhibition and weaver exchange with the workshop and Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh. Coinciding with the Commonwealth Games of 2014 in Glasgow, Scotland, the workshop and I wanted to respond to what a future Commonwealth might hold for the multiple identities emerging from colonial and indigenous pasts. At the beginning of the 21st century this proposes a complex intercultural challenge as we grow with vastly different economies, societies and politics. Through the additional layer of our ecological environment, this work explores the pressing factors of increasing damage to the environments that have fostered our contacts and trades. The piece explores the sustainability of our oceans amidst growing levels of man-made pollutants and its wide effects, for it was the oceans and our mastery of them that gave way to the development of such global connection.

The 'creature' in the tapestry is a 'sea worm'. *Polychaetes* are a class of worms that are well-adapted to many different marine environments, from hydrothermal deep-sea vents to the ocean surface. They are tolerant to pollution, and some populations actually thrive and grow after oil spills. Because of this, they can serve as an indicator species, helping scientists to locate areas of heavy pollution and are starting to be regarded as the latest ally in the battle against oil pollution in the sea. It was through reading about these worms, and exploring other similar subjects I came to see how globally networked research scientists are to collect their data. Through these scientific inter-cultural consortiums assisting each other in their research I started to see as modern continuation of our Commonwealth pasts, and that perhaps we are now coming together to protect our common livelihoods.

The title of the work derives from Australian Indigenous thought, for as they have understood 'Everything has two witnesses, one on earth and one in the sky'. We must begin listening to such environmentally astute testimony - to not lose more of this common wealth, just as we have sought to do in our homelands.

**LC: When and how did your visual art practice collide with science?**

SS: It began a few years back, when I started to look beyond my perspective of examining the world through a cultural (particularly post-Colonial cultural) lens. For the past few years there has been interesting study coming out of the University of Technology in Sydney employing the Indian Ocean as an active conceptual space in which to re-think (in particular Australian) relationships across a variety of cultural analysis - political, geographical, economical and environmental-science. It is a way to move beyond a European/English based framework to situate the multiple other and uncontested stories that encompass Australia's historical and contemporary development and engagement into a larger global analysis. It is has been this broadening concern of thinking about sea-trades that led to thinking about how our environments are being affected by such technological increases. *Everything has two witnesses, one on earth and one in the sky*, follows on from project's that explore the corpus of contemporary pollution and devastation of our seas and the natural life within. I remember in 2010 (Deepwater Horizon oil spill) my attention being drawn to environmental blogs and websites claiming that BP was burning sea turtles alive. There was a flurry of tortured images across the internet and then in a couple of days most of these images and uncensored articles were shut down. The story had all but vanished - and this got me thinking about myths and story-tellings - the tales that are retold, the heresy that is whispered and then those words that may never be uttered. Then in 2013 I spent 3 months in Tokyo after the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. So between my interest and experience of living across cultures I started to think more deeply on environmental changes, and thus the science that lies behind solving some of these contemporary dilemmas.

**LC: There are a lot of visual artists working in a cross disciplinary way in art and science? Why do you think this is?**

SS: There is a rapidly growing amount of artists working across art and science, and towards these deeper collaborations I feel ill-equipped to respond. For myself, my work has grown as a personal response to my understanding of how environmental issues are a part of my world and that I may speak to them. To that end, it is from reading and learning that I have educated myself in some cross-disciplinary concerns, but I have not actively engaged to work with scientists as many artists currently are. The reasons for these collaborations are multiple, whether it is exploring optics or sound, interpreting technologies or programming, the cross over between scientific and visual knowledge is able to expand our understanding of these subjects. There are as many varied possibilities for these collaborations as there ways of thinking and that is great for both fields, which are so essentially linked in that they deal with raw ideas.

**LC: Climate change is a concern for all of us and we are seeing the global effects daily. Do you feel a sense of responsibility to focus your work on these issues?**

SS: I definitely agree that climate change is a global and personal concern that is daily experienced, and definitely, I have begun making work that deal with my individual response to this, but these works come from what I have learnt or seen and want to share. I do not see my art making as a responsibility to any particular cause or as a platform, my practice comes from my want to share ideas or thoughts or knowledge that has touched me. I feel responsible for what I put out into the world, and I can be responsible to how I respond to things around me, but I am not a politician or lobbyist.

**LC: What's next on the horizon for you? Are there any more tapestries in the works?**

SS: I am currently beginning two new projects for next year. One in Berlin, and the second at The Tarrawarra Museum of Art in Melbourne. The piece I am hoping to develop at TWMA, is primarily concerned with how we view the world, what may be seen and not seen, dependant on our individual perspectives: our social, cultural and economical backgrounds. I have become interested in the idea of looking, whether we draw from an empirical or scientific approach, our educations inform how much we see or do not see. I am just starting to investigate dye approaches, and colours, and this is from an aim to understand colour three-fold, scientifically, applied arts and culturally. So whilst there is not a tapestry in the works as yet, I am hoping to learn more about the skill and technology of dying which is such a strong and integral component of The Australian Tapestry Workshop's production.

Read more about *Painting with Thread: Samples and Tapestries from the Australian Tapestry Workshop* [here](#)

Read more about artist Sangeeta Sandrasegar [here](#)

Image: Artist Sangeeta Sandrasegar with the work she designed, *Everything has two witnesses, one on earth and one in the sky* (2014) designed by Sangeeta Sandrasegar and woven by Sue Batten.

Lower: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, Antonia Syme, Director ATW with Isobel Crombie, Assistant Director of NGV. Photos: Jeremy Wehrauch. Images courtesy the Australian Tapestry Workshop.



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