Cella

Stephen Turner

Droit House, Margate Harbour

10 August to 8 September 2002

Detail from *Cella*

Photograph by Michael Harvey

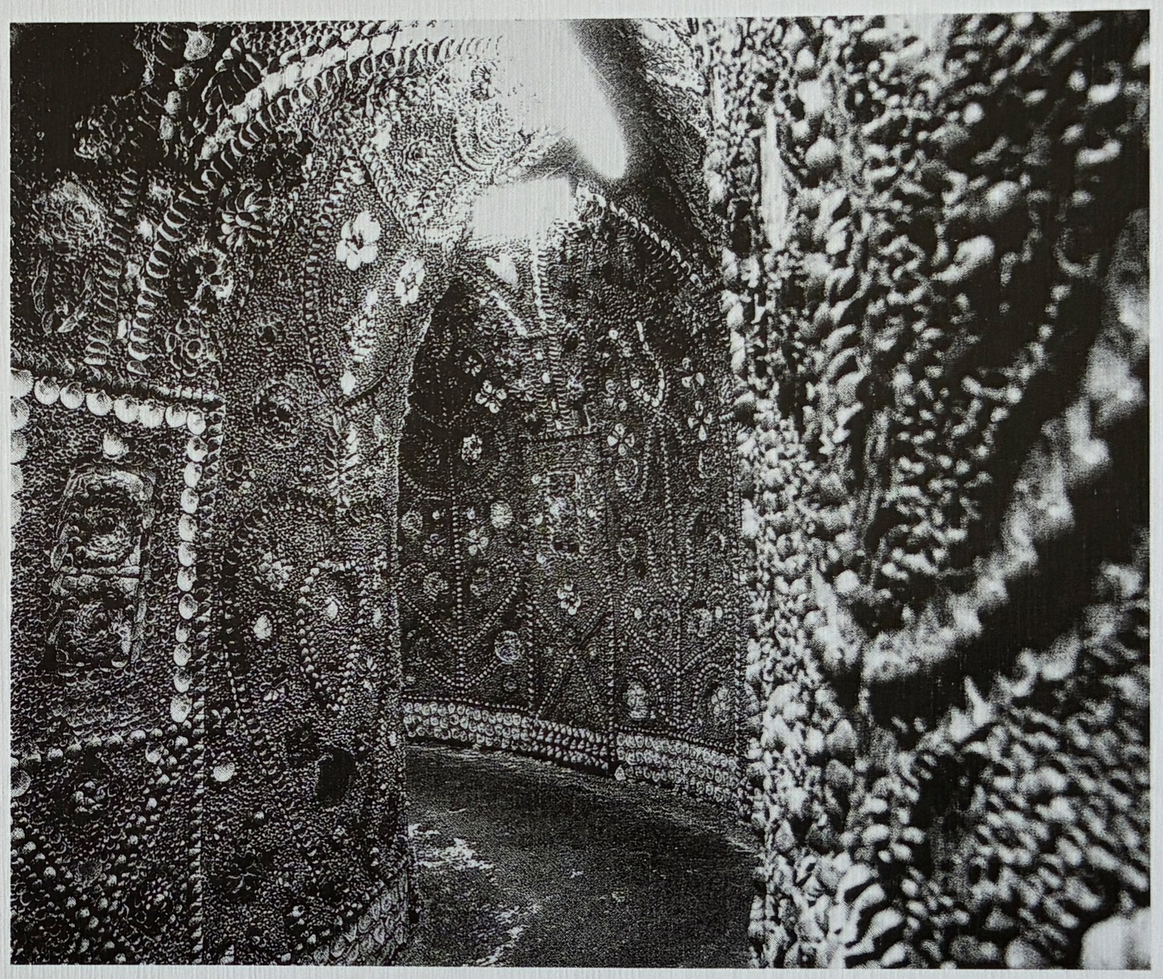
There is something very special about walking along a beach looking for shells. I have been doing it for years – it is the timelessness of the activity that I find rewarding. These beautiful objects, in effect abandoned homes, are imbued with a sense of preciousness and magic. Hold one to your ear and you will hear the sounds of the sea. As a child, I was systematic about my beach forays. The brightest colours, the most unusual forms and the smallest cowries always found their way into my collection, stored in boxes on a bookshelf. These days I prefer to observe the cluster of shells and their relationships to one another. Deposited by the tide, they appear not unlike an artist's palette. Their random pattern trapped on the shoreline for a few hours.

Stephen Turner's new work *Cella*, commissioned for the Droit House, references a number of different facets of Margate's history – social, cultural and economic – as well as the natural cycle of tide and time. Made from thousands of mussel shells, the tower stretches from floor to ceiling to create a contemporary shell grotto. The tower, as when one places a shell next to one's ear, murmurs, in this case with sounds recorded throughout a tide's cycle. This

abundance of shells, harvested off Dover, eaten in Whitstable and returned to the sea for cleaning near Margate symbolise our long relationship with the sea. In the early nineteenth century for instance, when JMW Turner was a regular visitor to the North Kent coast, mussels were eaten widely and the empty shells recycled for use as commercial paint containers.

The mussel has a matt blue-black hinged shell. Open it up and an iridescent lining is revealed, giving the object a value. In certain cultures shells have had an exchange value yet in *Cella* their true value is a reminder of the importance of the natural world in our post-industrial society. Traditionally shells have been used for decorative purposes including the manufacture of buttons and furniture inlay. The Victorians created images and three-dimensional tableaux from shells and even today seaside resorts sell shell knick-knacks. In *Cella* the mussel shell is not used for decorative ends, but rather to create a strong architectural form. The layering of so many mussels sets up a rhythm that mimics the repetition of time and tide.

The Shell Grotto, Margate
Photograph by Colin Curwood



The Shell Grotto in Margate, from which Turner has taken inspiration for this work, is a curious subterranean series of corridors culminating in a chamber. The walls are covered in an array of decorative motifs, made from a range of shells. The Shell Grotto has never been dated, although it was discovered in 1835, and much conjecture surrounds its early history. Its appearance, however, is like that of a temple. Turner has remarked that '*Cella* is a secular shrine to the seashore and to the tides that refresh it. It is an antidote to the noise and clamour of Dreamland across the road, and the "kiss me quick" culture of the Marine Terrace. It is a place for contemplation.'

Margate has long been regarded as the quintessential seaside resort. Its golden sands and blue waters jostle for our attention with the colourful neon signs and flashing lights of arcades offering different pleasures. For Turner, and JMW Turner almost two centuries earlier, the real dream land is the natural world – the ebb and flow of the tide, the changing patterns of light on water and the clouds scudding across the sky.

Victoria Pomery
Director, The Turner Centre

Acknowledgments

This publication coincides with the installation *Cella*, a new work by Stephen Turner, commissioned by the Turner Centre to be shown in the Droit House, Margate.

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The original inspiration for *Cella* was The Margate Shell Grotto owned and managed by Sarah Vickery.

The artist would like to thank Juliette Buss, Karen Eslea, Helen Parker and Victoria Pomery of the Turner Centre for their care and hard work, as well as everyone else who has made the project possible.

Cella is open from 10 August to 8 September 2002, Tuesday to Sunday 10am to 5pm.

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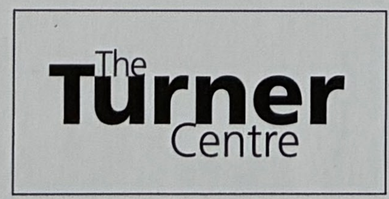
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