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Blood on the Wattle, 2013

292 blown glass pieces, perspex, steel, aluminium & fabric, 210x70x70cm

All images are courtesy the artist and [dianne tanzer gallery + projects](#). Photos by Janelle Low

Interview by Nermina Kulovic

Yhonnie Scarce is a glassblowing artist from Australia who has been selected to feature her work in this year's Venice Biennale as a part of an exhibition called *Personal Structures: Time, Place, Existence*. She is now preparing for the exhibition, but still found the time to have a bit of a chat over Skype and answer a few questions about her work, cultural background, upcoming exhibition and love for the glass.

Nermina Kulovic: You completed your undergraduate studies in 2003 as the first Aboriginal student with a major in glass. Why did you choose glassblowing as your major, it is a bit uncommon?

Yhonnie Scarce: It is, yeah... I've collected a couple of hand-made sculptures from second-hand shops and things like that, so at the time I was interested in how they would be made. I was working as a receptionist at the time and wanted to go back to study so then I found out that the University of South Australia offered glassblowing as a subject. So purely I just wanted to learn how to work with glass. A lot of people that work with glass tend to tell you, you either love it or you hate, and I fell in love with it. It seemed to me like a perfect medium to create the work that I make now.

NK: How much of the things you feel and want to share with the world can you actually share through this fragile medium? Is that part of its charm?

YS: Yes, it's hard work. Particular pieces like the *bush food* are quite organic, so I find that with glassblowing I can get an instant result from it. I think I'm quite impatient, I find frustrating to go through that process of getting the moulds made for casting glass, whereas with glass blowing you can have a really good session, quite instantaneous for me. I don't see myself as a really skilled glassblower, but my skills suit these things that I make because I'm open to it being a little bit off centre, a little bit organic and all different sizes. A lot of glassblowers are perfectionists and you have to be, but I'm a little bit different I think, for me it's more of an expressive medium for my work.

NK: What's the process you have to go through to make one glass piece?

YS: Once you get into the rhythm of making the yams it can actually take less than five minutes to make, and that's with gathering the black powder, so it depends on the piece. The *Bush bananas* take quite a little bit more time. For my workshop at the University of Virginia, US – as part of my residency at the Kluge Ruhe Museum – I worked with Sculpture students. It was mostly me working alongside the students, to give them a little bit of a taste of what it's like, because you have a long day, you work all day in a hot shop and it is quite extreme, tiring and physically exhausting on your body as well, so I'm lucky my forms and pieces can happen very quickly. It's an interesting process.

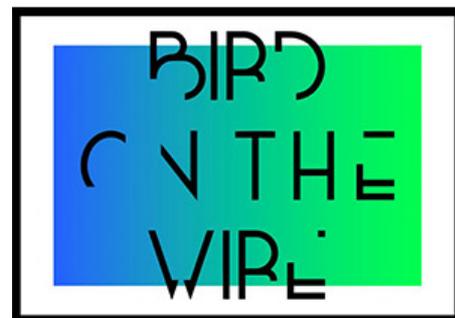
NK: And where do you work?

YS: I hire people's studios. Usually you get the furnace and two or three burners and you work from a bench. To be honest, I wouldn't have my own glass hot shop. If you're making production work it's more feasible that way, but because I work in the hot shop intermittently it's not feasible for me to have my own, I'm happy to hire.

NK: Where do you find inspiration for your works? How much did the fact that you belong to the Kokatha and Nukunu peoples shape your art?

YS: A lot of my work is inspired by personal experiences and particularly from family stories of what my grandparents went through as well. Looking at those effects of colonization and how it has affected Aboriginal people in Australia. Even though it's 21st century we're still having to deal with a lot of issues relating to how the first settlers viewed Aboriginal people when they first came to Australia and that's to do with the issues of identity, racism, genocide and things like that. So, I tend to do a lot of research if I'm creating a work that is about the issues relating to Aboriginal people in Australia. It does affect me quite emotionally, it's something I feel quite strongly about and it comes out in my work.

NK: My favourite piece is *Burial Ground*. There are 224 pieces of blown glass, what do they represent and why are there exactly 224 pieces?



YS: I won an art award a few years ago and part of that award was that I got to travel overseas. I went to Berlin because my interest at the time was about genocide, so I wanted to go to Berlin to visit a concentration camp and go to places where people were victims of genocide, particularly those of the Holocaust as well. I was really intrigued by the fact that Berlin has quite a number of monuments or memorials to the Jewish people and to the victims of the Holocaust, so I started to think about whether Australia has any memorials to those who have been killed or as I would say murdered as a result of genocide during the settlement of Australia. So, I started creating a *Burial Ground* as a memorial to those who have passed away, the 224 yams represent every year up until 2012, because the first fleet came in Australia in 1788 so it represents 224 years, every yam represents every year that someone has died as a result of colonization. I wanted to pile them together as a mass burial ground on top of the box which was inspired by the memorial to the murdered Jewish people in Berlin, so the measurements are actually the size of the autopsy table; it's the length of a human body. I wanted to have that scientific element to that as well and not have the yams just sitting on a box, it had to be clean and crisp as well. It's one of the largest works to date.







NK: You've been selected to participate in this year's Venice Biennale, Personal Structures exhibition, with a piece called *Blood on the Wattle*. How did that come about and what was your first reaction when you found out about it?

YS: I was actually overseas doing the residency at the Kluge Ruhe and when I got back to Melbourne my gallery told me that Global Art Affairs has been in contact with them about doing some work for *Personal Structures: Time, Place, Existence*. They were quite interested in my work, particularly *Burial Ground*, so there was the process of putting in a proposal about what I would intend to make if I was selected. I knew that I had been shortlisted, but we found out earlier than expected that I had been selected so it was quite a big shock to me, I still can't believe it! I think it's pretty much the most artists' dream to be exhibiting in Venice Biennale, so for me to be selected I sort of couldn't decide whether I was going to laugh or cry, but I knew that I couldn't breathe properly! I'm incredibly honoured to be one of the artists representing Australia in that exhibition, it's exciting.

NK: What are you presenting for this exhibition?

YS: Because the curators were interested in *Burial Ground* that I made last year they wanted something very similar, so it [*Blood on the Wattle*] will be another large work, but this time it will have close to 300 yams in it and it will be encased in a perspex coffin.

NK: This exhibition is a huge opportunity for every artist, what do you expect from it?

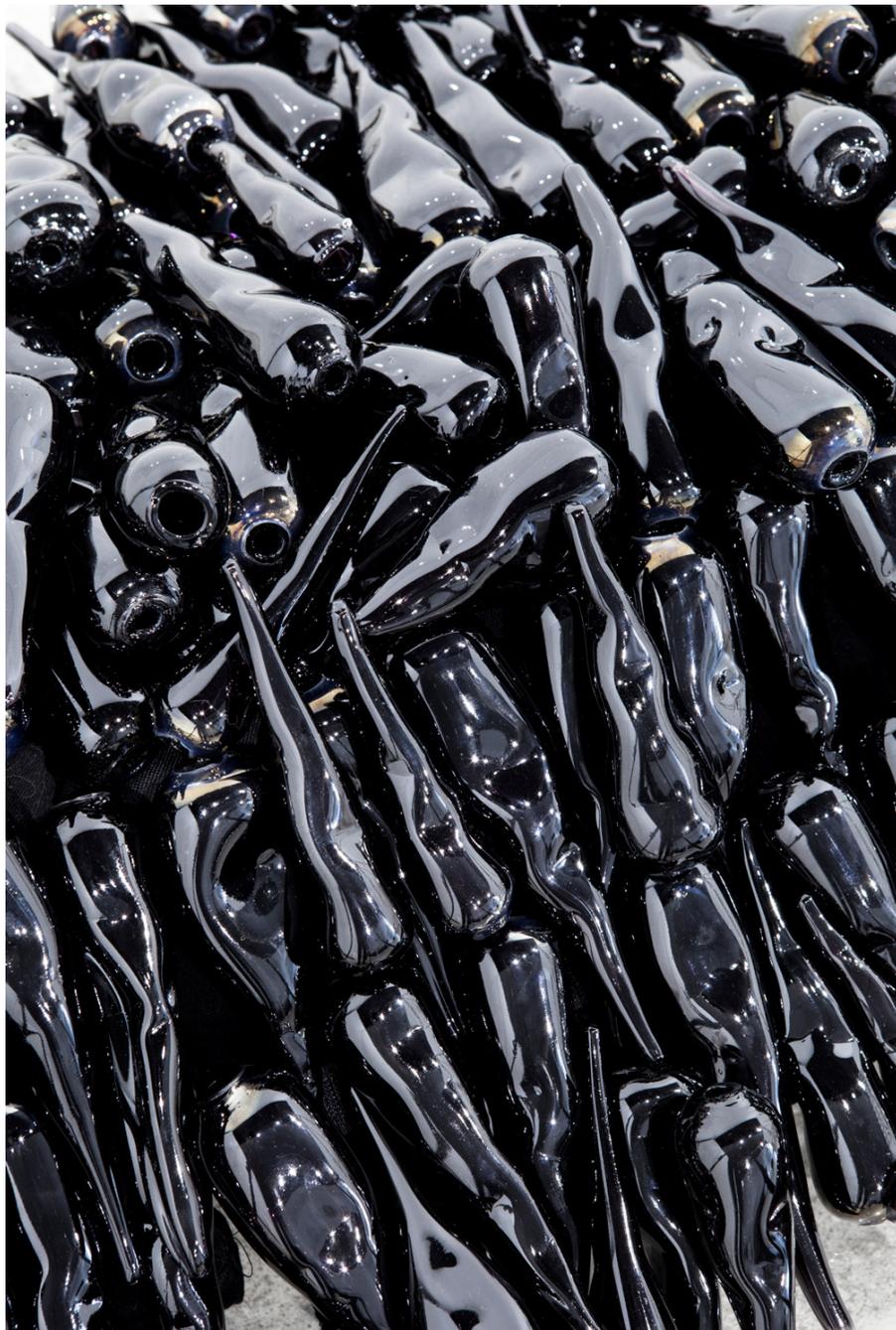
YS: I'm hoping to create other opportunities to be working with other curators internationally. I am excited about meeting other artists from other parts of the world, just to have that cultural exchange happening. You never really know what's going to happen, but you're going with that hope of creating something out of that, because it's such a great opportunity to be exhibiting in one of the biggest art events in the world. I'm happy to go with the flow and see what comes of it.

NK: How do you feel about artistic competitions?

YS: I am nervous every time I exhibit any work, but particularly with this one, it's like the whole art world is watching, so it brings on another level of nervousness, but I think having that nervousness is a good thing as well; I'm proud of this work. No one else has seen it yet, it's going to be showcased for the first time at the Palazzo Bembo. I think if you're not nervous there's something wrong.

NK: Do you have any plans for the future? Do you plan to explore any new medium?

YS: I will always stay with glass, I think. The one thing I love about my work is that I use other mediums with glass, so it could be wood, fabric, twine... But, glass will always be my main medium; it will be there to express my thoughts. I'm in love with glass.



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