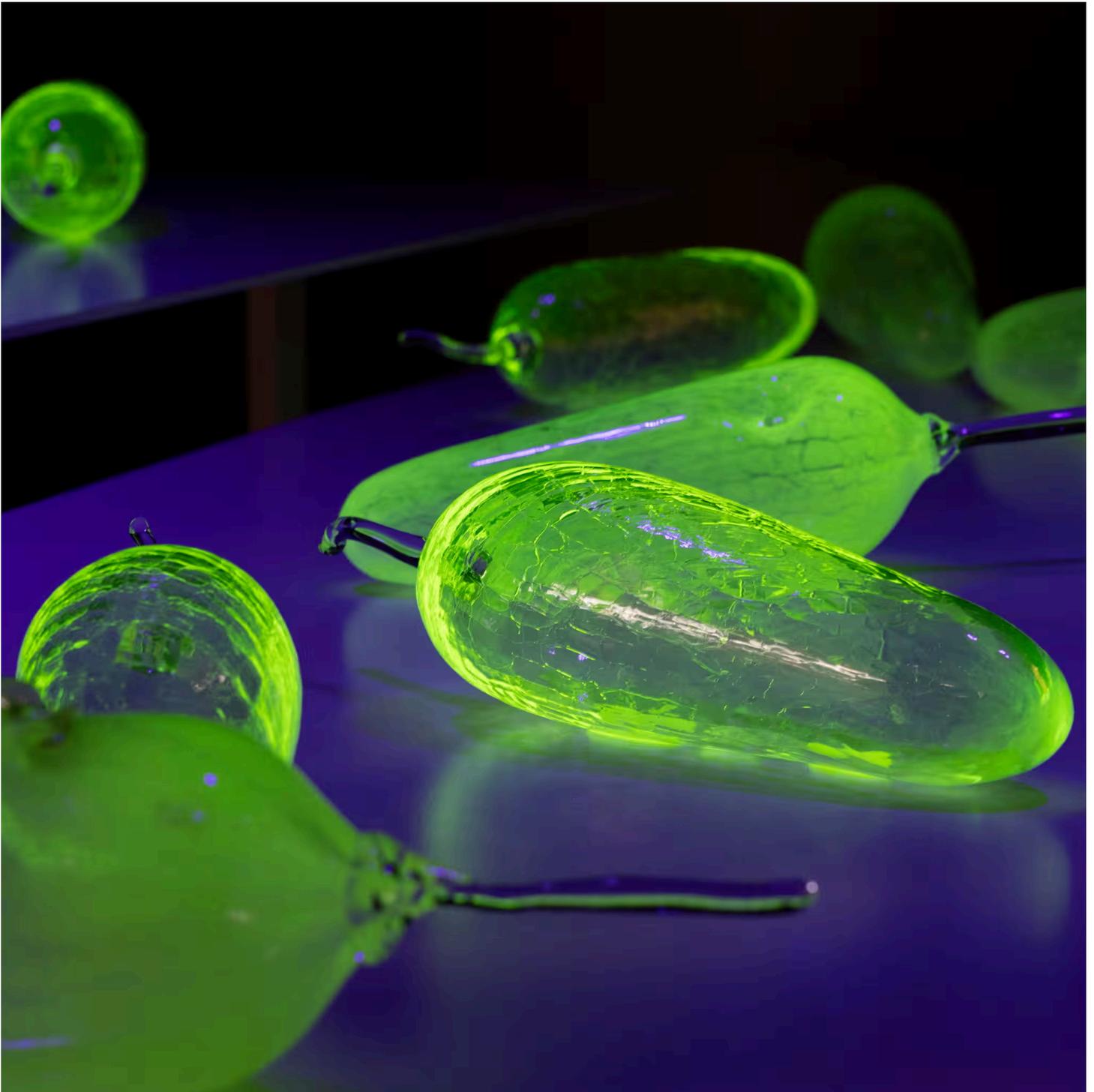


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'Like a radioactive cloud': elegance and horror combine in powerful Yhonnie Scarce exhibition

Australia's forgotten nuclear history and its dehumanisation of Aboriginal people come together in First Nations glass artist's fiercely intellectual work

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by [Rosamund Brennan](#)

Scarce's installation, *Hollowing Earth*, features glass bush bananas infused with trace amounts of uranium – a reference to the desecration of country through uranium mining. Photograph: Bo Wong

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Yhonnie Scarce grew up in the grim aftermath of nuclear weapons testing in South Australia in the 50s and 60s, not far from her birthplace of Woomera. From the tender age of ten, she heard stories from elders about a cataclysmic roar, the sky turning red and a poisonous black mist hovering over the desert, like an apparition.

Born in 1973, the Kothakha and Nukunu glass artist has spent much of her career researching the British government's testing of nuclear weapons in Maralinga and Emu Field, which she says "lit a fire in my heart that hasn't been extinguished".

The blasts wreaked havoc on generations of Aboriginal people, as well as military personnel and non-Aboriginal civilians – sending radioactive clouds thousands of kilometres, causing burns, blindness, birth defects and premature death.

When the toxic plumes reached Ceduna, where Scarce's family lived, radioactive slag rained down from the sky, singeing their skin. Their concerns about the burns were rebuffed by doctors, who spuriously claimed there was a measles outbreak. But today, according to Scarce, cancer is prevalent in the town.

"I call this a mass genocide," Scarce says. "I don't know if we'll ever find out how many Aboriginal people died over that 10-year period. But I can imagine it's thousands."

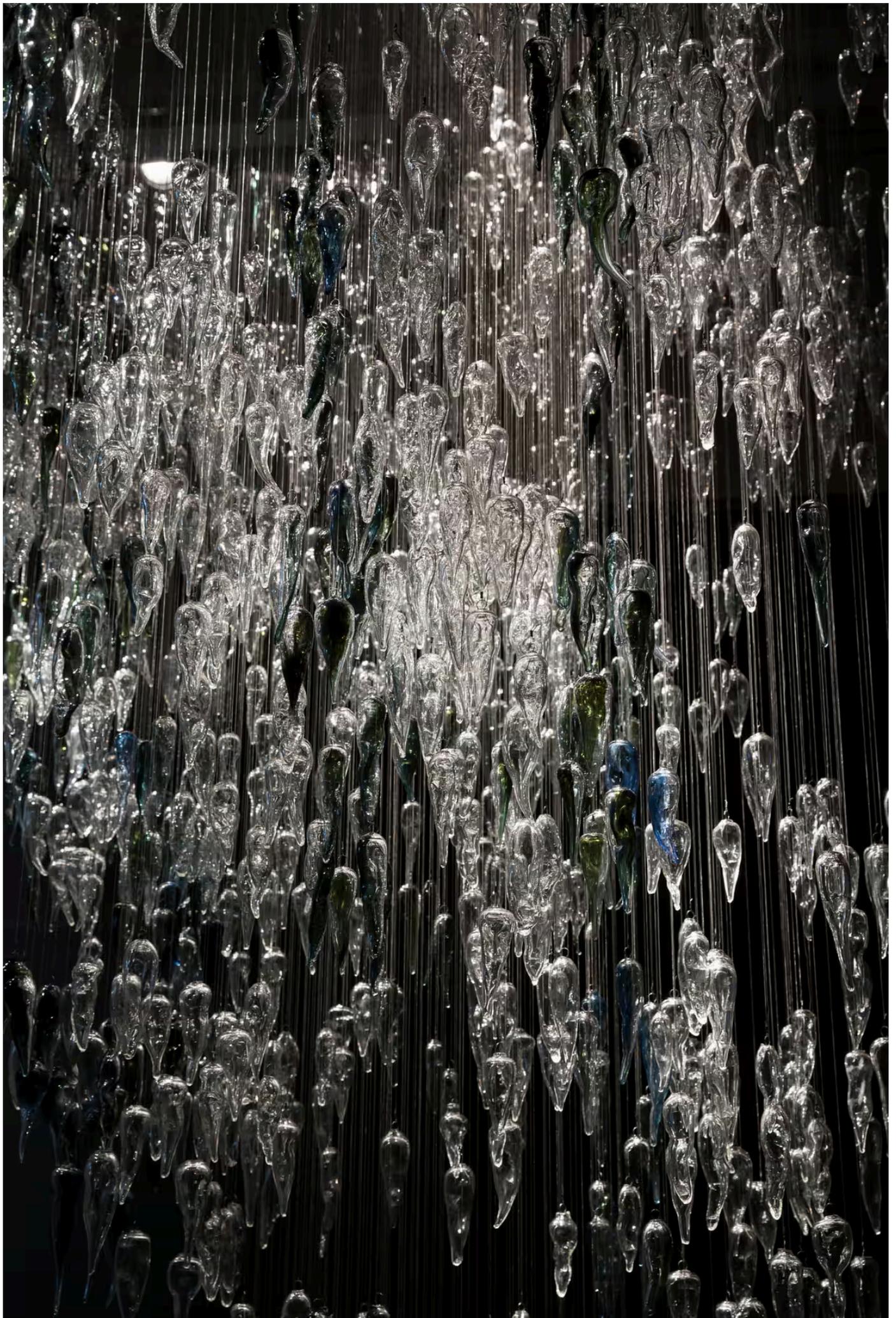


The installation *Death Zephyr* is one of three 'cloud' installations, each hand-blown glass yam representing an Aboriginal life lost after atomic testing in Australia. Photograph: Bo Wong/Yhonnie Scarce/Art Gallery of Western Australia

Standing in the darkened gallery space of Scarce's survey exhibition *The Light of Day* at the [Art Gallery of Western Australia](#), I feel suddenly immobilised and overcome, as if the wind has been knocked straight out of me.

Thousands of glass yams hang suspended on steel wires, recalling the menacing clouds that drifted across the desert. Across Scarce's three "cloud" installations – *Thunder Raining Poison*, *Death Zephyr* and *Cloud Chamber* – each teardrop-shaped yam represents an Aboriginal life lost, forming a colossal, shimmering requiem to those whose histories have been buried.

Thousands of tiny shadows coalesce on the gallery floor beneath the glass yams, which Scarce explains is intrinsic to the work. "That's the old people coming through," she says, referring to the many unrecorded and unknown casualties. "Every time those clouds are installed somewhere, they show us something different."



Thunder Raining Poison, another of Scarce's 'cloud' installations. Photograph: Yhonnie Scarce

The series is revelatory of Scarce's practice: at once fiercely intellectual, deeply felt and elegant in its materiality. As a glass-blower, Scarce quite literally breathes life into her work, animating its delicate, molten surface, giving form to invisible pain and loss.

Glass is, of course, inherently fragile, but through her inventive formations, the artist shows us its resilience. It can shapeshift, transmute and hold its form under immense pressure. So too, Scarce says, can her people.

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Glass holds special significance for Scarce: crafted from silica, or sand, it emerges from the very essence of the landscape. As Australia's only professional Indigenous glass-blower, she veered away from working with traditional forms like decorative vases or bowls, instead drawing from what she calls the "bush supermarket": depicting yams, plums and bush bananas to convey the history of her people.

Conceived by Wardandi and Badimaya curator Clothilde Bullen, the career-spanning exhibition at AGWA also features works which examine the dehumanisation and exploitation of Aboriginal people through displacement, indentured labour and institutionalised racism. One such work is *In The Dead House*, which features glass bush bananas laid out on a mortuary trolley, their bodies split wide open.



The Dead House: broken glass bananas laid on a mortuary trolley, representing the legacy of the trade in Indigenous remains. Photograph: Bo Wong

The work references the horrific [legacy of Adelaide coroner Dr William Ramsay Smith](#), known for profiting from the export of Aboriginal remains to British museums in the early 20th century. Smith's gruesome practices, which involved decapitating corpses, find an eerie parallel in the bush bananas which serve as a haunting reminder of the violence inflicted upon Indigenous bodies.

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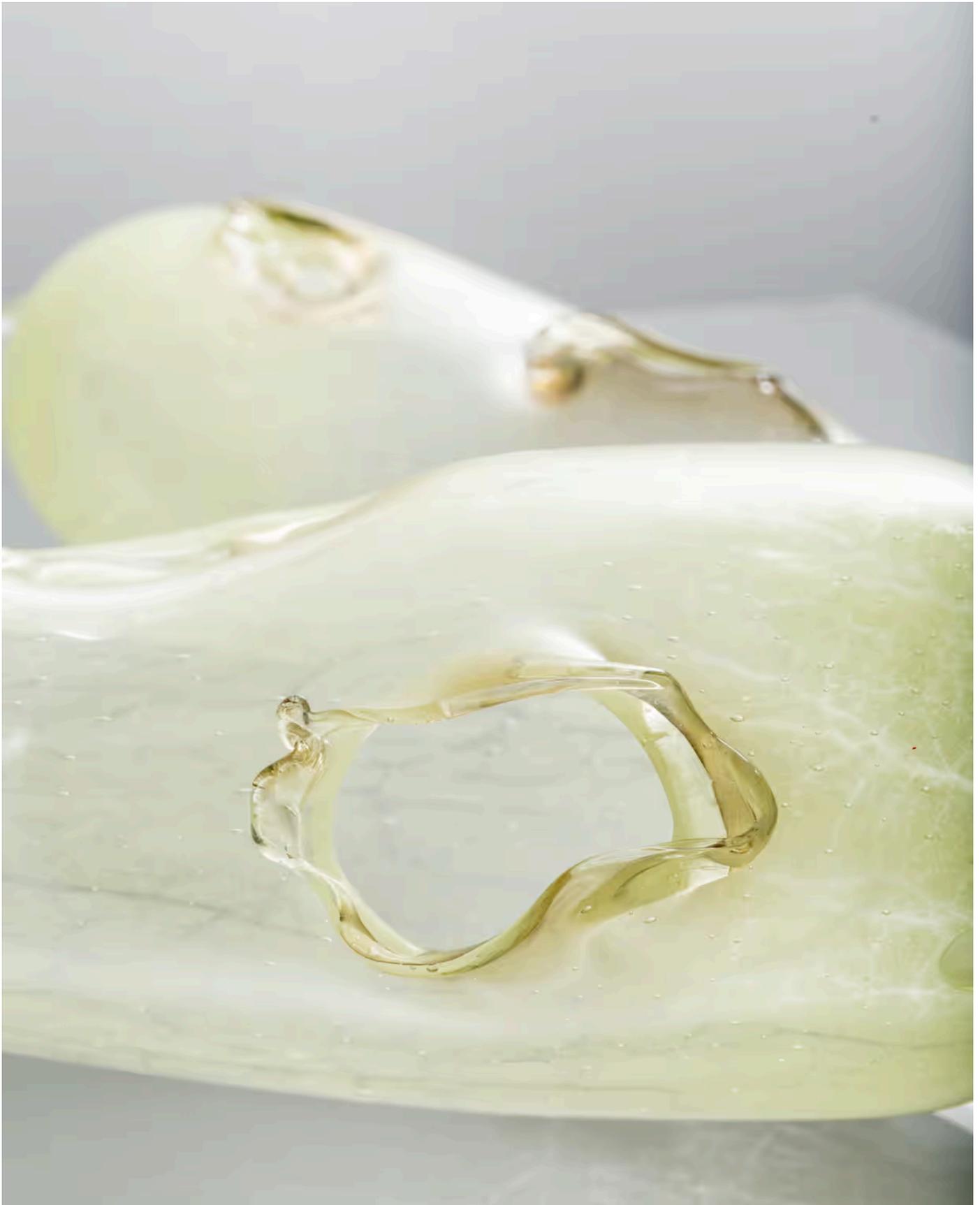
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Remember Royalty, a work acquired by the Tate in 2022 and on loan to AGWA for the exhibition, features four suspended black-and-white portraits of Scarce's ancestors, blown up in large format and exhibited with glass bush food offerings, to restore the agency that was violently taken from them.

Similarly, in Dinah, Scarce presents a photograph of her great-grandmother Dinah Coleman over a stately mantelpiece, which is thought to have been taken by the anthropologist Norman Tindale at Koonibba mission in 1924. "When this photo was taken, it was like she was seen as something other than human, and treated as such," Scarce says. "This is about giving her power back."

In the upstairs gallery, Scarce reveals the intersecting histories of her birthplace with Hollowing Earth, an installation of glass bush bananas infused with trace amounts of uranium. Glowing a fluorescent green in the darkened gallery, the works reference the desecration of country through uranium mining. Ironically, the world's largest known deposit of uranium is found on the outskirts of Woomera, near the site of the British nuclear tests.



Formed uranium and glass from the installation *Hollowing Earth*. Photograph: Janelle Low/Yhonnie Scarce

Emerging out of the darkened space containing *Hollowing Earth*, I encounter a table where bush plums burst through broken, deformed Edwardian-style porcelain cups, like a sinister mad hatter's tea party. Titled *Servant and Slave*, the work explores the little-known histories of the indentured servitude of Aboriginal women in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

"The porcelain cups represent the white fragility of these wives [who mistreated the women]," says Scarce. "There was physical violence or food being withheld, and they certainly weren't being paid."



'It always comes back to family for me,' says Yhonnie Scarce. Photograph: Janelle Low

Like many of Scarce's works, *Servant and Slave* is imbued with ancestral stories of resilience and intimate expressions of familial love. Her great-grandmother Fanny and great-great-grandmother Florey were forced to work as domestic servants in the early 1900s, as explored in her work *Florey and Fanny*, which features aprons lovingly handsewn with their names.

"It always comes back to family for me," Scarce says. "As sad as these stories are, you've got to love them for who they are and what they've had to endure."

In a seemingly fated moment, when those monstrous atomic bombs exploded at Maralinga almost 70 years ago, the red desert sand melted into thousands of green shards of glass that still litter the site today. Across Scarce's 20-year career, it's as if she's been slowly collecting the disaster's shattered remains and, piece by piece, crystallising a dark, hidden chapter of Australia's history. Like a radioactive cloud, her astonishing body of work engulfs you in its sheer power and potency.

Yhonnie Scarce: *Light of Day* is showing at the Art Gallery of Western Australia until 19 May 2024

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