



WESTERN
AUSTRALIAN

Indigenous **ART AWARDS 2012**



Yhonnie Scarce

Language: Kokatha/Nukunu

The Koonibba Aboriginal community lies about 40 km north-west of Tjutjuna (Ceduna) on the Eyre Peninsula. In the cemetery just outside the community precinct are the well-tended graves of Yhonnie Scarce's ancestors, including those of her grandfather and uncle. Many of the burial mounds are covered in smoothed shards of broken green and brown glass that glitter in the daylight and sparkle with a brilliant intensity as the sun sets. At some distance lie the few graves of Lutheran missionary family members; while marked with grand tombstones, they appear by comparison lonely or even abandoned. The artist has, however, little sympathy for those whose mission it was to salvage the souls of her people, precipitating an era of dispossession and heartbreak. It is this history and the desire to bring it to light that fuels the artist's creative passion.

Now living in Melbourne, where she completed her training with a Master of Fine Art from Monash University following a Bachelor of Visual Arts at the University of South Australia, Scarce was born in Woomera, South Australia, and lived for many years in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). Desert country is in Scarce's blood, and this finds expression in her work as an artist. She is a Kokatha, Nukunu and Mirning woman, and the lands she calls home range from the infinite plains of the Nullarbor to the wilderness of the Great Australian Bight. The stories that are the bloodstream of this heartland traverse the millennia-old dreaming journeys of the southern right whales to their birthing waters in the Bight and haunting gothic-esque tales of paranormal experiences on lonely highways. This is a country of dramatic extremes, dazzling in its intensity.

Scarce's work literally fuses together the disparate elements and histories of her country, sand and heat crystallising into unexpectedly fluid forms of rigorous conceptual clarity. Her art-making has to be addressed with military-like precision, as the process is unforgiving and potentially dangerous. As she describes it, 'you've got to build a relationship with the medium'.¹ Preparing for a session in the 'hot shop', she dons industrial garments and glasses to protect her from the heat, which can reach 1400°C. Drawing the molten glass from the furnace, she twists it, like barley sugar, on a pipe, applying pincers and other tools to shape the material. Metallic glazes, painted symbols, photographs and mixed media supports are often employed to complete the work.

In *Florey and Fanny* 2011, glass forms inhabit the pockets of two domestic aprons that represent her great-great-grandmother Florey and grandmother Fanny. The bush foods hidden in the folds of their pockets represent the culture that our people tenaciously held onto in a world of enforced servitude to colonial agendas in the domestic and political realms. Scarce remains loyal to this legacy of defying the assimilationist project: 'I'm that perfect example of how they wanted to breed us out. I've got fair skin and blue eyes, so I could be considered white, but I was raised Aboriginal and I know exactly where I come from and I'm proud of it ...'

The bush bananas, yams and plums ubiquitous in Scarce's installation works are anthropomorphic, each one unique. For her, art is an 'intuitive way of connecting with the land ... where you come from, where you're ancestors are from'. Like the medium of glass itself, she handles the untold history of our people in Australia – the suffering and survival – with the tenderest of care.

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Florey and Fanny 2011



Florey and Fanny 2011 (details)



1 All Yhonnie Scarce quotes from an interview on *Colour Theory*, episode 2,5 May 2013, NITV/SBS.

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Burial Ground 2011–2012 (detail)