

Indigenous | Aboriginal

Aboriginal artist tells a darker side of Australia's history

Saturday 16 November 2024 • By [Michael Cugley](#)



An Aboriginal artist has come to Aotearoa to unveil her first solo art exhibition in Wellington. Yhonnie Scarce is showing the impacts of colonisation through her pieces, in particular a piece that talks about a part of Australian history rarely discussed in modern society.

The history in question is nuclear testing by the UK in South Australia in the 1950s and 1960s and its effects on indigenous peoples who lived there.

Scarce says the stories she's heard have been heartbreaking.

"A lot of Aboriginal people died through radiation poisoning. We don't know how many died. I think the number is still unknown but I've heard a lot of stories through my family connections as nuclear test survivors," she says.

She says this was unknown to the world for many years.

"The nuclear tests that happened in South Australia occurred in secret and I think maybe up until 20 years ago no one really knew what happened out there."

Later, after the Australian government discovered there had been more radiation effects than the British had revealed, a royal commission was held with limited compensation.

But Scarce argues that due to a “flora and fauna act” under which she believes Aborigines were classified at the time, the government was able to let the tests happen and keep them secret.

“At that time too Aboriginal people weren’t considered citizens of Australia, they were under the “Flora and Fauna Act”. So I think that’s how the government, in my personal view, how it was able to do the tests and not care about who it was affecting, particularly Aboriginal people.”

However, the so-called “flora and fauna act”, widely believed in by Aborigines, has been proved to be an urban myth. It may have developed currency after the 1967 referendum, which set out to eliminate discriminatory references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and count them as a part of the Australian population for the first time.

But it’s not as if nuclear testing was the only thing oppressing Aboriginal people. The eradication of language and customs is also expressed in her work.

“Not being able to speak their language or undertake cultural practices as well. So, the purpose of that work as well is to acknowledge their struggles as Aboriginal women but also the fact that they held on to their identity and some of their language. So, they were hiding that from their white employers.”

Scarce says her works talk about the dark history of the Aboriginal people and that Australians remember the history of their origin.

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