

# THE SATURDAY PAPER

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## PORTRAIT

Artist Yhonnie Scarce captures the aftermath of Maralinga in her new exhibition *Thunder Raining Poison*.

By *Ellen van Neerven*.

# Artist Yhonnie Scarce

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She shows me photos of the place where nothing grows. The circumference of the breakaway blast – like a hairline. The glass used to be in sheets, now in pieces, on the red dirt. Can't cook on this ground. Babies are still born blind. The violence is ongoing.

We're a long way from Maralinga, here in Narrm, the land of the Kulin Nation, and her Kokatha ancestors' home, but their story is deep and present in Yhonnie Scarce. She thinks about it a lot, how many who travel central-western South Australia, on Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara and Kokatha lands, don't know about the decades long devastation that began in the 1950s when the British, with the support of the Australian government, executed secret nuclear tests. "It affected the whole state. Even as far as just outside Adelaide, the cloud came over, the sheets went black." What was it? "A genocide."

When Yhonnie's *Thunder Raining Poison* showed at the Art Gallery of South Australia, she was told by security guards that many viewers got so angry they were in tears. "Why weren't we told?" was a repeated phrase.

Yhonnie's glass tells. It's clear and malleable and has a sharp edge. She didn't set off to deceive, but her art tends to "bite people in the arse".

"People think it's a chandelier at first," she says. "Then they are,

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like, ‘No it’s not.’”

I was there in Adelaide in 2015. To stand under this cloud of 2000 hand-blown glass yams is an extreme and emotionally potent experience. As individual objects, they are pretty, soft, delicate and smooth. Together, they reveal a powerful symbol of Country, food source, life source, swallowed by devastation. *Thunder Raining Poison* and *Glass Bomb (Blue Danube)* series I–IV join the works of 29 other contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists that make up *Defying Empire: 3rd National Indigenous Art Triennial* showing at the National Gallery of Australia until September.

Yhonnie is softly spoken in real life, outspoken with art. We are sipping tea from sturdy mugs like the ones my mum has, and eyeing off a plate of jam bickies. Yhonnie’s nieces, Hakira and Kahealea, uni students, 15 months apart, come in and out, asking for food, squabbling over the bath bombs Yhonnie brought back. This is all done in front of me because I’m family now.

It’s what I expected, a real artist’s home, you know: colourful, soft, a place to retreat, like a blanket. Yhonnie fits in so much it’s easy to believe her when she says she rarely leaves.

“I have a bond with glass. It gives me so much,” Yhonnie says. She describes working in the JamFactory studio in Adelaide in four-hour stretches that require being prepared “mentally and physically”, with a good meal the night before or a big breakfast. “If I have an argument with someone earlier, it disappears by the time I leave the room,” she says. She doesn’t have a plan on how many pieces she’ll make – when she’s in the space, she’s single-focused through excursion and sweat – she’s lost kilos in there. She’ll crave something salty afterwards, have a shower. I ask her what she does if she gets burnt while working. “Just run it under water, keep going, nothing you can do,” she smiles. “You burn while learning.” I look down at her smooth unblemished hands. “Glass teaches me. I’m still finding out ways I can use it.”

Unhappy with what’s in the cupboards, the girls ring up Aunty Gen. Genevieve Grieves, a Worimi woman and curator of the recent *The Violence of Denial* show at Arts House, is coming around to save the day. It’s like black art royalty here in this house. How good and free and unburdened I feel being around this mob of women.

Indigenous South Australians face ongoing warfare through human rights abuses and environmental destruction; Yhonnie’s art represents a multigenerational resistance that extends through her nieces. It uncovers dirty secrets still hidden, and the nightmare-true visions of broken pieces on a battered land. On my way home on the tram, my backpack is safely nesting two glass yams Yhonnie gave me, and with them my own silent promise, as a niece and as a daughter, that I will create, use tools for my own survival, add my force

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