

Australian history put through the looking glass by Aboriginal artists Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce in new exhibition

ABC Arts / By [Hannah Reich](#) for The Art Show

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The beauty of this artwork by Yhonnie Scarce belies its subject: the devastating effects of British nuclear testing on her people. (*Supplied: TarraWarra/Andrew Curtis*)

There are certain works of art that are impossible to ignore, that have a magnetic pull that can be felt from anywhere in a gallery.

Cloud Chamber — a monumental sculpture made from 1,000 delicate glass yams suspended from the ceiling — is one of those works.

Currently, the sculpture sits in front of a large window onto the lush green hills outside Victoria's TarraWarra Museum of Art, but as artist Yhonnie Scarce says: "When you bring glass together and en masse ... they move with the light and they create their own landscapes."

"I think it's a beautiful way to draw people in and tell them a story because they are so mesmerised by the colour."

The glass yams of Cloud Chamber have been hung to form the shape of a mushroom cloud —

specifically, the cloud from the final nuclear bomb that [the British set off while testing nuclear weapons in Maralinga in the 50s and 60s](#).

At the time of the tests, Maralinga was home to the Maralinga Tjarutja people — and the fall-out had predictably terrible repercussions for them. But clouds from those explosions also travelled to Woomera — where Scarce, who belongs to the Kokatha and Nukunu peoples, was born in 1973.

Cloud Chamber is one of [a suite of works by Scarce that explore the cataclysmic effect of Maralinga](#) on Aboriginal land and people, across generations.



It's [glass] a medium that encourages you to have courage ... placing a pipe in a of molten glass is not for the faint-hearted," says Scarce. (*Supplied: TarraWarra/Sean Fennessy*)

At TarraWarra, on the lands of the Wurundjeri people, Scarce's work sits alongside and in dialogue with work by Waanyi artist Judy Watson, in an exhibition titled Looking Glass: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce.

Arnernte and Kalkadoon curator Hetti Perkins originally curated Scarce and Watson into a show at Birmingham UK's Ikon Gallery, but COVID-19 brought the show home and to Tarrawarra, where the exhibition has reopened the museum after eight months of closure.

In the exhibition essay, Perkins describes Watson and Scarce's work as a "tender trap".

She told ABC Arts: "Both Judy and Yhonnie's works really draw people in, they're so beautiful, but they're kind of seductive."

"It's like a Venus flytrap; they get people in there and snap! The trap shuts."

"It's often the least strident-looking works that can actually pack the most powerful punch because you don't see it coming. And it's just like a king hit."

Watson says she likes the idea of a viewer being slowly drawn into her work then "suddenly my deadly poison dart will explode or implode within their consciousness".

Once in the trap, or king hit, or caught with a poison dart, you are forced to face dark and uncomfortable histories that thrum beneath the surface of the work.

WARNING: This article contains graphic content that may be confronting for some readers.

Sand, heat and glass

"I didn't find it [glass]. I think it found me," says Scarce.

"I'm from desert people, sand and heat create glass. So that's why I think it was always sort of inevitable."

Scarce has been working with glass for 15 years now and says the medium isn't as fragile as it seems.

"Of course if you drop it, it might break ... it shatters, but there's always remnants that are left behind," she says.

"So I felt like that was the perfect medium to make my work, in terms of representing Aboriginal people — if you apply pressure, it's not going to really go anywhere, but it is going to change."

There's another layer of meaning for Scarce: [the heat from the blasts at Maralinga melted desert sand into glass](#).

The artist first heard about [Emu Field and Maralinga](#) as a child, and her aunt is [nuclear test survivor and Kokatha activist Sue Coleman-Haseldine](#).



ce says the bushfoods are a stand-in for bodies and corpses, and a reference to original connection to country (pictured here, *Fallout Babies*). (*Supplied: THIS IS ANTASY/Janelle Low*)

Since 2014, Scarce has been exploring this history in glass works; often these take the shapes of bush foods.

Her 2016 works *Fallout Babies* and *Only a Mother Could Love Them*, both included in *Looking Glass*, use glass bush plums and photographs of Woomera cemetery to explore [the impact of nuclear testing on the babies of Woomera who were born with birth defects or stillborn](#).

"I feel like it's always been a part of my own personal history ... [but] it's only in the last, maybe less than a decade that people were becoming aware of what happened in South Australia," says Scarce.

'Swallowing the experience'

Watson, who works across painting, printmaking, drawing, video, sculpture and public art, was born in 1959 in Mundubbera, Queensland.

But it was only in 2007 at the funeral of her grandmother (a member of the Stolen Generations) that she learnt about a late 19th-century massacre of Aboriginal people at Lawn Hill (north-west Queensland) that her great-great grandmother Rosie survived.

Tony Roberts' book [Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900](#) recounts Rosie's incredible survival story and describes a homestead at Lawn Hill station in 1883 that had "40 pairs of blacks' ears nailed round the walls".

In 2008, Watson enlisted Scarce — who she met that year when they were both curated into an exhibition at the South Australian School of Art Gallery — to help her make a work about the ears and Rosie's escape.

For the work, the artists moulded and cast the ears of volunteers (including Watson's family and members of the public) in dental alginate.



Scarce (top left) and Watson (right) casting volunteer's ears in 2008. After being cast the ears were then repoured in beeswax. (Supplied: Nici Cumpston)

While the participants waited for the moulds to set they read passages from Roberts' book about the ears and Rosie's escape.

One volunteer told Watson that reading those words in that manner meant that the story "actually went into her".

"You have to read it and to have your ears cast to realise what this means ... it's like swallowing the experience and embedding it really deeply in the body," says Watson.

Watson first exhibited the ears in 2008 as an installation titled *Salt in the Wound*, but they appear in TarraWarra again, nailed to the walls of the gallery.



on has been asking for the public's help in mapping the locations of massacres of
iginal people since 2016 for "the names of places" project. (*Supplied:*
iWarra/Andrew Curtis)

It's not the only Watson work in Looking Glass that is about massacres of Indigenous Australians:
video work *The Witness Tree* explores [the Myall Creek Massacre](#).

Standing stones

Also on display at TarraWarra are large fabric paintings by Watson that depict ghostly standing
stones and imagery from Waanyi country, including stone tools, bush string and the Gumbi Gumbi
leaf.



Some of the objects depicted in the Standing Stones series come from the University of Cambridge and The British Museum. (Supplied: Milani Gallery/Carl Warner)

They are a response to recent trips that explored both sides of Watson's ancestry, including a trip to Waanyi country, which she says has its own standing stones: large termite mounds that are visible as you drive through Boodjamulla National Park.

The other trip was to the UK and Ireland (her father's heritage is English, Scottish and Irish) to visit ancient sites, including [the Standing Stones of Stenness](#) and Stonehenge.

"The [European] standing stones are beautiful, monumental, almost memorial-like," says Watson.

"At some of those sites, there were people being very affectionate with those ancient stones ... enjoying the space or sitting reflectively."

"It was a very different feeling to the way I see some people reacting to Aboriginal culture in Australia ... Some people are very respectful, but there has been so much wanton destruction."

Watson says engravings at waterholes near Mt Isa, in Waanyi country, have been used as target practice, and that she was also "deeply wounded" by [the destruction of Juukan Gorge caves by mining giant Rio Tinto](#) earlier this year.

"You've got so many sites around Australia that are thousands and thousands and thousands of years older than the pyramids or Stonehenge ... Why don't people have a deep respect for our country and our culture?"

"I think it comes down to an irreverence of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal people," Watson says.



on uses natural materials in her work, including mud, ochre, resins and tree sap.

(plied: Jo Anne Driessens)

Scarce is also interested in monuments and memorials, having visited sites of loss and destruction around the world including Chernobyl, Fukushima, Wounded Knee and Auschwitz, as part of a collaborative project with the artist Lisa Radford.

"[Those visits made me] question what Australia is doing in terms of acknowledging frontier wars and massacres of Aboriginal people," says Scarce.

"There's still a long way to go and for me, it's not moving fast enough."

Frustrated and impatient with the lack of acknowledgement, Scarce sees her own work as a memorial to Aboriginal children whose lives were damaged or cut short by nuclear testing.

'The true history of Australia'

Perkins writes in her exhibition essay that the artists "poignantly remind us how the pursuit of the Great Australian Dream is not what it seems".

"This exhibition is about Australia's secret and dirty war — a battle fought on many fronts from colonial massacres to Stolen Generations; from the Maralinga atomic bomb tests to the climate emergency."

Watson says: "I think the great Australian dream is a dream. And it won't be realised until people confront the past and confront the true history of Australia."



Black luster glass bush plums of Scarce's *Only a Mother Could Love Them* (2016)
embryonic, misshapen, dented and punctured. (Supplied: *THIS IS NO*
ASY/Janelle Low)

Scarce says growing up in Australia, people were uninterested in knowing about this history.

"It's easier to forget about than it is to think about the racism towards Aboriginal people, but also [to think about] how resilient we are and how culturally strong we are," she says

"It shouldn't be a secret. We're here and we're not going anywhere. But I wonder how different things would be if we actually started talking about it."



... large part of who we are, that practice of culture and gathering food ... but sadly in northern Australia, the majority of those foods were probably poisoned," says Scarce.

by Arts: Sia Duff)

Scarce, who teaches at the Victorian College of the Arts, describes herself as a "conduit ... some sort of vessel to channel the stories of ancestors".

That conduit is to younger Aboriginal people and her Aboriginal artistic community, as well as to the wider Australian community who may not be aware of Aboriginal history.

"I feel like art is a really powerful way to tell those stories because not everyone is going to read a history book."

This year, [Scarce was awarded the Yalingwa Fellowship](#) (a Victorian Government program designed to support outstanding contemporary Indigenous art and curatorial practice) with the panel recognising her important contribution to making art about the "rarely discussed sides of our history".

Resistance Pins

Perkins has worked with Watson for many years, having curated her into the 1997 Venice Biennale (alongside Emily Kam Ngwarray and Yvonne Koolmatrie) and says that her canvases, which are hung unframed, sometimes look "like she's just peeled back a bit of the country, like the skin of the land".

The curator describes both the artists' works as elemental and connected to country, and there are works in the exhibition about our threatened environment, including Watson's *Spot Fires, Our Country is Burning Now* (2019/2020) and Scarce's *Hollowing Earth* (2016-17).



on is a long-term environmentalist and made this work (*Spot Fires, Our Country is Burning Now*) during the devastating 2019-2020 bushfire season. (*Supplied: Milani Gallery/Carl Warner*)

Perkins says one of the main things that was on her mind when she wrote about "the Great Australian Dream" in the exhibition essay was the urgent need to address climate change.

"The 'Great Australian Dream' is not about getting that quarter of land and putting your house on

it. It's about the country and treating the land like it's sentient, it's the ancestors, it's corporeal."

"Judy and Yhonnie's work serves as a kind of reminder of how much we have to lose."

The exhibition takes its name from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, and Perkins says from an Aboriginal point of view, sometimes she feels like we're at the Mad Hatter's tea party in a topsy-turvy world.

"You've stepped into another world where the rules of the game have changed, and obviously, it's [the story] about power, who has the power and being powerless," she says.

"How do you fight back? I think that they [Watson and Scarce] do that with their work and they do it in a way that is really smart and really strategic."

Towards the end of the exhibition are two glass display cases filled with lines of small, unassuming objects, cast in bronze and porcelain. These are Watson's Resistance Pins.



ce and Watson's work is about our past and our present; both a memorial and a
o arms. (*Supplied: Milani Gallery/Andrew Curtis*)

The variously shaped pieces reference hat pins, early awls, and small tools that were used in the Kowanyama area in Queensland to prise apart pandanus fruit.

Women's rights campaigner [Emma Miller famously used a hat pin to dismount the police commissioner](#) from a horse at the 1912 Black Friday strike in Brisbane.

"Something like a hat pin, something so beautiful and fragile [wielded so much power] ... Imagine what other resistance pins could do," says Watson.

Looking Glass: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce is showing at TarraWarra Museum of Art (Victoria)

until March 8 before NETS Victoria tours it around Australia.