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Enter Missile Park, where 'time bombs' hold secrets



By [Nick Miller](#)

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this article refers to people who have died.

In the [galleries of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art](#) in Melbourne's Southbank, you will enter a dark, mausoleum-like shed - a replica of decaying military structures in the South Australian desert.

The door will close behind you. Light will pinprick through the roof, and there will be the reek of tarry bitumen.

You'll be in there with a family of dark, glass plums on altars, symbols of the First Nations dead, but also seeds for the future.



Yhonnie Scarce is about to open a big new show, Missile Park. SIMON SCHLUTER

“They’re like time bombs, they’re ready to go off,” says sculptor Yhonnie Scarce. “There is information, there are secrets being unearthed and I think the Aboriginal people are just waiting for it to happen. They’re very patient.”

She imagines the sheds disintegrating like shed skin, the plums like hand grenades: stories of her scarred homeland around Woomera, poisoned with nuclear tests, exploited for military operations, raided by colonial ethnographers, exposed into the light.

Scarce smiles at the thought.

“The plums might go ‘Phhhht’. Start popping. I’m a big believer that secrets only remain secrets for so long. You can’t hide forever.”

Her new sculpture, *Missile Park*, lends its name to a retrospective exhibition at ACCA that draws on Scarce’s works from the past 15 years.

Scarce was born in Woomera in 1973 and belongs to the Kokatha and Nukunu people. Her installations, public art and intimate sculptures, often employing blown glass, have often engaged with the impact and legacy of weapons testing, the displacement and relocation of Aboriginal people from their homelands, their exploitation and neglect.

In preparing this exhibition she returned, again, to that land, her birthplace and the wellspring of her art. She soaked in the extreme heat that she loves. She looked with fresh eyes at the straight lines and iron of the military infrastructure and noticed its decay.

The first room of the exhibition is a deeply moving tribute to her family. A century-old photograph of Granny Dinah, her great-great-grandmother, sits in a white frame above a shrine of glass bush plums, a matriarch proudly overseeing her descendants.



Yhonnie Scarce with her new sculpture Missile Park SIMON SCHLUTER

That pride was restored to the image by Scarce. She found it in the Lutheran archives, possibly created by Norman Tindale, the hugely influential ethnographer of the first half of the 20th century. Though he contributed hugely to Western understanding of Indigenous life and culture, Tindale's methods were often exploitative: measuring, sampling blood and hair, photographing without informed consent.

Granny Dinah's photograph was originally taken like a police mugshot, front and side-on. They had removed her clothing. Scarce cropped the image back.

"I wanted to make sure her modesty was restored," Scarce says. "I wanted to honour her... when these kinds of photos were taken it was often without the subject's permission. I wanted to represent her as a really strong Aboriginal woman, who has all these descendants like myself. She's looking over all these kids."

Tindale's story often comes up with her work on family.

"We're getting pretty sick and tired of getting poked and prodded and experimented on," she says.

The nuclear tests and co-opting of her land by the military still hurts.

"I still have moments where I get pretty upset about it," Scarce says. "It's contaminated. But also the continued effects it has had on Aboriginal people, and the secrecy around it, pisses me off a lot. It's an ongoing trauma that's happening but it hasn't been acknowledged properly.

"So many people have died... who knows how many people died, because I hear stories about people disappearing and they're not accounted for. Those nuclear tests were shrouded, they were secret."

Her *Missile Park* is a house of horrors, the home of the military's "dirty little secrets", she says.

"You're sitting there facing these plums that are looking back at you. The viewer is forced to acknowledge that."

[**Yhonnie Scarce: Missile Park**](#), Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, March 27 to June 14, 2021.

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