

Yhonnie Scarce and Judy Watson's work in *Looking Glass* draws a paradoxical sense of life from historical atrocities.

# Traumatic reflections



Installation view of *Looking Glass: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce*. Andrew Curtis

**Declan Fry** is an essayist, critic and proud descendant of the Yorta Yorta.

As you approach the TarraWarra Museum of Art, the first thing you notice is the building's solid, indestructible quality. Despite the clean Modernist lines and angles, its structure yields the sense of something organic. At the entrance hangs Wurundjeri elder Aunty Joy Murphy's donated Bunjil feather, symbolising the eagle who created the Wurundjeri Country upon which the museum stands.

In conversation with Kokatha-Nukunu artist Yhonnie Scarce, whose work appears alongside Waanyi artist Judy Watson's in the exhibition *Looking Glass*, I wondered whether the Earth's sense of timelessness and infinite yielding might help to explain events such as the nuclear testing at Maralinga – a traumatic history Scarce explores in her work using hand-blown glass – or uranium mining in her home state of South Australia.

The Earth is indestructible, at least in the sense that destruction is a measure of fragility bestowed by our anthropocentric focus. And yet human impact on the planet is undeniable. It's a paradox with which humanism has long grappled: what it means to be both part of and severed from the ecologies we inhabit.

Scarce's *Cloud Chamber* is one of a number of works about the nuclear tests Australia permitted the British government to carry out in Maralinga during the 1950s and '60s. Glass yams – inert, calcified – dangle from the ceiling, reminding the viewer of lakes of vitrified sand and other effects of nuclear radiation, as well as the glass shards used to decorate the graves of the artist's people at Koonibba Mission Station. The

yams' tumescence is curiously alive: look closely and you can see them faintly swaying, a vertiginous mushroom-cloud shape. They feel simultaneously contained and opaque: the light falls and dies on their surfaces.

A comparable sense of paradox and attenuated life defines the bush plums of *Fallout Babies*. The plums form a collection of hypotheses and questions, unknowns. With their slender, tapered stems, they recall funeral vases awaiting wreaths. Made – like most of Scarce's work here – using hand-blown glass, the breath involved in their creation echoes the winds spreading nuclear fallout over Anangu Country, poisoning mob and settler alike. A photo of infant graves taken by the artist at Woomera Cemetery – antiseptic black-and-white – reminds the viewer not only of those whose loss is memorialised, but of those who never were.

In *Only a mother could love them*, glass bush plums sit atop a rusted medical trolley, recalling children born without limbs. Solid and opaque, each contains a hole, suggesting a way in; yet they contain only darkness. *Nucleus* arranges glass bush plums on top of tables, each pocked with apertures and openings, topped by umbilical-cord-like stems. Some of these holes are faintly burnished black, as if they had imploded outwards, their bodies wrinkled with wound-like crevasses.

Another variation, *Hollowing Earth*, features uranium glass bush bananas. Like *Nucleus*, these yield a tactile, violent impression – their trailing slender stalk-like tips seemingly about to melt and run off the table.

"Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color," Maggie Nelson writes at the opening of *Bluets*, her poetic meditation on the end of a relationship and the colour blue. Judy Watson needs no convincing: blue recurs throughout her work, representative of salt water and matrilineage.

*blue notes* features various objects – a phantom imprint of Australia, a "confirmed Covid-19 deaths" headline, the loping hills of an ECG heart readout – all limned through what appears to be calligraphic strokes of blue paint. In fact it is cyanotype, a photographic printing process developed in the mid-19th century.

Afterimages recur in Watson's canvases: in *spot fires, our country is burning now*, fires are rendered as weather patterns, ghost reliefs of native flora placed mutely at the centre. To the left, the hottest part of flame – a burst of blue exploding outwards – is seemingly ready to consume the delicate palimpsest of native flora and fauna.

Watson's film *invasion*, one of three recordings in the exhibition's sole video installation, experiments with similar concepts of layering, as different films play simultaneously to create distortions and unusual interactions. *invasion* documents the artist's trips to England, Ireland and Scotland in 2019 with her family. Videos of standing stones are overlaid with a string object from the Gulf of Carpentaria, along with objects such as grevillea, kangaroo grass and gumbi gumbi.

The string reminded me of Boodjamulla, creator of Waanyi Country, that slinking rainbow serpent whose gigantic presence opens Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*: "The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity [...] The water filled the swirling tracks to form the mighty bending rivers spread across the vast plains of the Gulf country." The film *boodjamulla wanami* feels like an even more direct visualisation of this scene, defined as much by sound as by image; bird calls echo, asserting the presence of other lives in the trees, and the staccato rhythms of water can be heard slapping the canoe's body as it floats along Lawn Hill Gorge.

One of the exhibition's most provocative pieces, *40 pairs of blackfellows' ears, lawn hill station*, dares the viewer to confront Australia's ongoing history of colonial violence. Hammered into the wall with rusty nails, the work is based on the grotesque pastime of settler Jack Watson: a wealthy, educated man, Watson nailed 40 pairs of Aboriginal ears to his slab hut homestead in Lawn Hill on Waanyi Country, proudly displayed for the benefit of visitors.

The audience is implicated in this macabre scene, forced to make sense of its galvanic brutality. Some of the earlobes are grouped like secret sharers: two side by side; three or four communing in a corner. Each faces out as though listening in on the viewer. If the eyes of the *Mona Lisa* follow those who view them around the room, these ears are poised to overhear their whispering audience. What might they hear? Shame, guilt, disbelief, disgust?

*standing stone, grevillea* contains patterns that recall netting or mesh. In *standing stone, ashes to ashes*, the scales repeat, but this time in ochre; I was reminded of boot treads imprinted in earth, or the relief of tyre tracks. The work is overlaid by mottled and blotched sunburnt effects, with Watson "dancing" on her canvases to tread the colour in.

In *standing stone, ochre net, spine*, the "spine" is based on the bunya leaf, reminding us of generational resilience within the artist's family, as well as of the re-emergence of plants and animals after bushfire. Its dusky presence corresponds also with Scarce's work, recalling the shadows left by the atomic blast in Hiroshima, the one-dimensional life reliefs captured on walls, like an impression left behind after closing your eyes to ward off a flash bulb's glare. ●

Looking Glass: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce is at the TarraWarra Museum of Art, Victoria, until March 8.



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