

# 'Glass baby' wins Indigenous prize

Stephen A Russell

For contemporary artist Yhonnie Scarce, her practice comes at a high price.

Indigenous art sales are soaring overseas, with 2019 a blockbuster year in which Sotheby's auction house moved its annual Indigenous art auction from London to New York to capitalise on the surge of interest in the US.

But most of the artists are still doing it tough, despite a new Australian law designed to siphon a fraction of art resale income back to the creators.

And the Kokatha and Nukunu woman's chosen medium, glass, is expensive in more ways than one. "It's something that you have to give a lot to financially, emotionally and physically," she says.

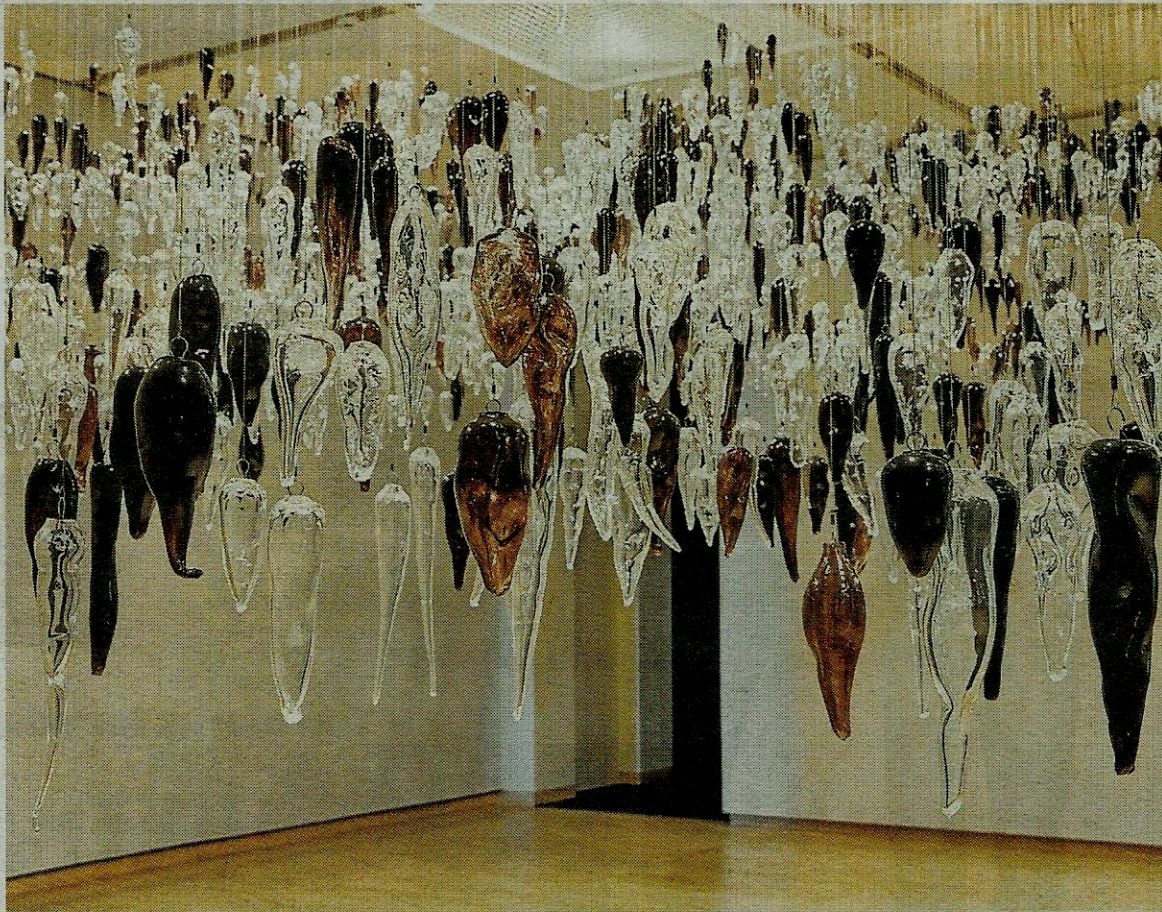
Scarce has just been announced as the second recipient of the Yalingwa Fellowship. Named after a Woiwurrung word meaning both "day" and "light", the \$60,000 cash prize will deliver a considerable boost to her practice. The award, funded by a partnership between TarraWarra Museum of Art, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, and Creative Victoria, supports Indigenous artists living and working in Victoria.

Perched on a bench in a glimmering green and gold dress outside TarraWarra, looking out over rolling hills, rustling pepper trees and glinting water, Scarce is humble and grateful.

She says taking up the baton from inaugural recipient and career-long inspiration Destiny Deacon has amplified her joy. "To be up in there with her is quite an honour," she says. "I've been practising for nearly 15 years and she's been there pretty much from the start as an amazing mentor for me."

Deacon gave Scarce the nickname "glass baby", which she wears as a badge of honour, but it took a while to embrace the medium. Born in Woomera and raised in Adelaide, Scarce took up glassblowing at the University of South Australia before moving to Melbourne in 2008 to do her masters at Monash University.

Glass ultimately got under her skin despite its technical challenges and financial impost.



Indigenous artist Yhonnie Scarce (below) is known for her hand-blown glass yams. Photo below: Tiffany Garvie

"It has this nature of enticing you in a very deep and meaningful way because it makes you work really hard for it, so you have to respect it."

Her signature works are intimately scaled yams. "I blow bush food to represent Aboriginal people and different elements of who we are," Scarce says.

Just as effective deployed in larger works, they sat alongside blown-glass bombs marking the Brits' atomic testing in Maralinga in *Strontium 90*, her contribution to the 2018 Sydney Contemporary.

They also adorn the nine-metre high cylindrical walls of *Absence*, a sculptural collaboration with Melbourne architect firm Edition Office that sits in the NGV garden. It celebrates Indigenous ingenuity in the face of the lie of Terra Nullius.

The Yalingwa prize means Scarce can conduct further research in countries that better memorialise their difficult histories, citing Berlin as a great example.

"Australia doesn't have enough in terms of acknowledging the frontier war and Aboriginal people," she



says. "I call Berlin the memorial city. I love how they acknowledge [their history] openly."

Musing on the emotional toll taken by her work, Scarce says the award is also much-needed validation. "This fellowship is amazing to acknowledge that all artists work really hard. Because I'm off in my own little bubble and I don't know what the hell is going on, sometimes it's nice to know that people are interested in what you're doing."

Veteran artist Deacon says the recognition that had been afforded her by the inaugural Yalingwa was priceless.

"It was the first time I won

anything and it gave me confidence and time to think," she says. Reflecting on the expense of an artist's path, she adds, "The money was helpful too."

An influential multidisciplinary artist who embraced reclamation by coining the term "Blak" in the early '90s - "They used to call us black c---s, so I took the 'c' out of black."

Deacon's trailblazing career will be recognised by a retrospective at NGV Australia opening March 27. She also received an honorary doctorate from La Trobe University late last year and hopes Scarce will benefit from a similar Yalingwa bounce.

"The more support and amplification, the better," Deacon says. "I'm glad things are changing for the better. I just want to keep making work and showing it, to keep communicating ideas and stories."

Scarce agrees. "It's always a privilege to live and work on someone else's country. You've got to be thankful for what you have, where you are and who you meet, particularly Aboriginal people."

## Funding boost for arts writing

Nick Galvin

*The Age* will significantly increase the depth and range of its arts criticism and reviews thanks to a grant from The Copyright Agency and the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas.

The additional funding of \$150,000 will be shared between *Nine's* metropolitan publications and News Ltd's *The Australian*.

The grant will result in an additional 100 reviews of Australian work in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* covering visual arts, theatre and books. This comes on top of the mastheads' long-standing commitment to the arts.

"It's important for any serious newsroom to cover the arts properly and this includes criticism," said *The Age's* group executive editor James Chessell.

"This excellent initiative allows the *Herald* and *Age* to increase the breadth and depth of its arts criticism, especially in some of the less high-profile fields.

"We are very grateful the Judith Neilson Institute and The Copyright Agency came up with this idea in the first place and then decided to partner with us. It will be great for the arts community and great for our readers."

Copyright Agency chief executive Adam Suckling said informed arts reviews and criticism were vital to the success of Australia's creative industries.

"It helps audiences engage with new work, facilitates the conversation about who we are and what we value and provides a form of feedback both positive and challenging for creators. It makes us all better people," he said.

Judith Neilson Institute executive director Mark Ryan said the initiative was part of the institute's commitment to supporting quality journalism.

"Coverage of Australia's arts scene is important and our support will generate more reviews and criticism, not just for Melbourne and Sydney audiences but across the country," he said.