

## YHONNIE SCARCE

Born 1973, Woomera  
Lives and works in Melbourne  
Represented by dianne tanzer  
gallery + projects, Melbourne

On a clear Perspex plinth in a stark white gallery lies a delicately rendered mass grave. Small hand-blown black-glass forms are piled atop each other, lumped together, layers obscuring those beneath. This is Yhonnie Scarce's powerful work *Burial ground*, 2011, realised for the Adelaide Festival exhibition 'Deadly: In-between Heaven and Hell' (2012) and now held in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), Adelaide. Powerful in its impact but also its subtlety, for the way it speaks to both the anonymity of death and the individuality of life, for its elegant form belying a grave subject. Tess Allas has described it as: 'a work of contradictions ... hauntingly beautiful and overwhelmingly traumatic.'<sup>1</sup>

For Scarce, a Kokatha and Nukunu woman from South Australia, the passing of time in colonised Australia is paramount. Each of the 224 sculpted forms of *Burial ground* counts the years since 1788, and stands for the genocide of Aboriginal Australia; other works, such as the 2009 and 2010 iterations of a gridded *Burial ground* and the 2007 work *What they wanted*, also in the AGSA collection, similarly treat the glass forms as both multiples – the culmination of time – and units, like the second hand of a clock. *What they wanted* features fifteen hand-blown black-glass figures arranged in a crucifix formation, each with a white cord around its neck. The effect is dramatic in its play of delicate material against the tragedy of the history it draws on. Like many of Scarce's works, *What they wanted* is 'unapologetically confronting ... it screams of the price that colonisation and Christianity can have on Indigenous communities'.<sup>2</sup>

Keenly aware of her material, Scarce encases her forms in a range of containers, effectively heightening the sense of fragility. In *Oppression, repression (family portrait)*, 2004, in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, black-and-white photographs of the artist, her mother and her grandfather are inserted into discarded commercially manufactured glass jars, a hand-blown fruit form embellishing the lids. Frequently employed in Scarce's work, these

forms reference indigenous fruits – the bush banana, bush plum and the long yam – and relate to her upbringing in Alice Springs, while also symbolising the human body. In *The collected*, 2010, frosted-glass forms are filed away in wooden drawers and in *The day we went away*, 2004, clear-glass forms are crammed into a suitcase. These works speak to a less obvious but equally traumatic history of Aboriginal segregation and assimilation, government policies that facilitated the disappearance of people. As Daniel Browning has said of Scarce's work: 'if we see through a glass "darkly", we see things as they really are.'<sup>3</sup>

In Italy in 2013, featuring in the 55th Venice Biennale satellite exhibition 'Personal Structures: Time, Space, Existence', Scarce's work *Blood on the wattle*, 2013, the visual cousin of *Burial ground*, further inters the object with near 300 blown-glass bush yams arranged in a Perspex coffin, again drawing deeply on the tragedies of Australian history and tracking the passing of time while determining space. This work shows that Scarce is both direct and uncompromising but generous in allowing 'us the physical space in which to grieve, the emotional space in which to heal and the intellectual space in which to grow'.<sup>4</sup> JS

**Personal Structures: Time, Space, Existence,** Palazzo Bembo, Venice, 1 June – 24 November 2013; **Heartland: Contemporary Art from South Australia,** Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 21 June – 8 September 2013.

- 1 Tess Allas, 'Yhonnie Scarce: Fragile histories', in Renee Johnson and Fulvia Mantelli, *Deadly: In-between Heaven and Hell*, exhibition catalogue, Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute and Adelaide Festival, 2012, p. 56.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 55.
- 3 Daniel Browning, 'Yhonnie Scarce: A glass darkly', *Yhonnie Scarce*, exhibition catalogue, dianne tanzer gallery + projects, Melbourne, 2011, unpaginated.
- 4 Allas, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

*Blood on the wattle*, 2013  
292 pieces of blown glass, Perspex, steel,  
aluminium, fabric, 60 x 210 x 70 cm  
Courtesy the artist and dianne tanzer gallery +  
projects, Melbourne

*Oppression, repression (family portrait)*, 2004  
Blown glass, commercially manufactured glass jars,  
photographs, dimensions variable  
Collection National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Courtesy the artist and dianne tanzer gallery +  
projects, Melbourne