

In spite of colonisation

Yhonnie Scarce

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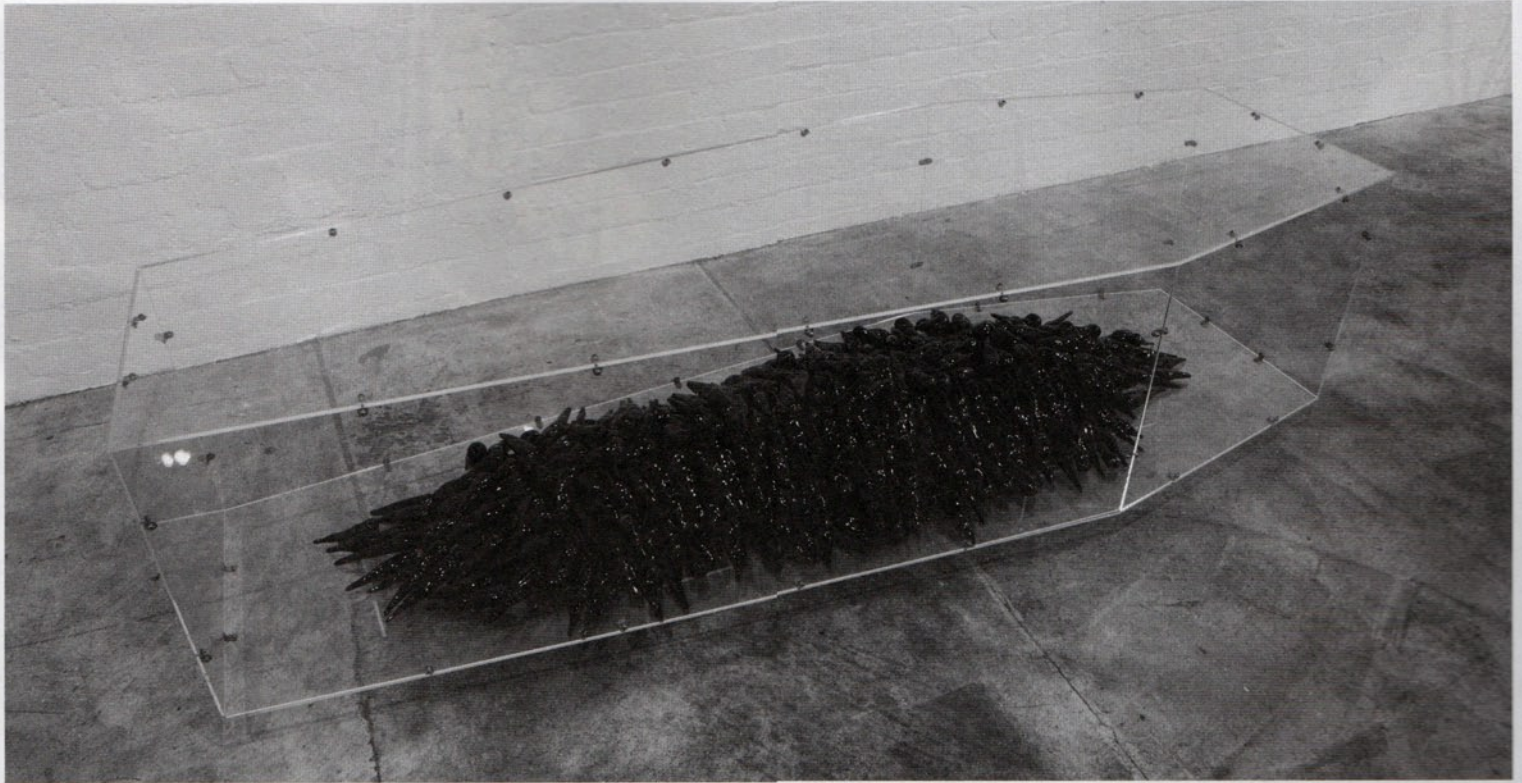
Every indigenous person living, breathing, walking, working, sleeping, loving, dying today, has a personal history replete with two centuries of colonisation, filtering down through communities, families, land and time. Those of us whose ancestors were relocated, dispersed, governed, defined, constrained search through the records: the broken words and promises; the fractured languages; the trampled, eroded, hewn, concreted lands; the shrinking, evaporating, polluted lifeways and waterholes, for elemental connections, arteries, heartbeats.¹

Yhonnie (pronounced you-ah-nee) Scarce was born in Woomera—arguably one of the country's most contested sites. Appropriated from the Aboriginal word for spear thrower, the name of the area was chosen as an apt descriptor for what was to become a weapons' research facility and defence area. Established in 1947, the land appropriated extended from South Australia to the West Australian coast, an area twice the size of Tasmania. Woomera is also known to many as a site of incarceration for asylum seekers—proffering an uncanny parallel with Scarce's investigation of the containment of Aboriginal people, including her own family members. Scarce descends from the Kokatha people from the Lake Eyre region to the north of Woomera, and from the Nukunu people from the south on the Eyre Peninsula. Her itinerant upbringing, part of the indigenous diaspora that has impacted on every generation since contact, has resulted in her living in Hobart, Melbourne, Alice Springs and Adelaide and while she is now based in Melbourne, home is South Australia. Scarce is the first Aboriginal student to have graduated with a major in glass from the University of South Australia. For Scarce the medium of glass, prized for its artisanal associations (particularly in South Australia with its impressive lineage of glass artists), becomes her arsenal. Glass—as window, lens, mirror and vessel—is her armory.

Her honours year in 2004 saw Scarce research the forced removal of Aboriginal people from country, and works produced during this period include *Oppression, Repression (Family Portrait)* now in the National Gallery of Victoria collection. This work positions Scarce's own family history (implicated through photography and found objects—in this instance pickling jars) within a national picture of deceit and dysfunction. Adorning each jar is a specimen of endemic fruit, each blown in transparent white glass. In 2007 the Art Gallery of South Australia acquired *What they wanted*, a solemn installation of fifteen obsidian coloured hand blown glass figures, each hung by a white cord, in the form of a cross. This work has in recent years been installed in conversation with the AGSA's colonial art collection in the Elder Wing of Australian Art, in proximity to the display of paintings by Robert Dowling and Benjamin Duterrau depicting Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The hanging figures in *What they wanted* make explicit reference to the recurring tragedy of black deaths in custody and to the role of the church and mission in colonial invasion. (Scarce prizes a rare photograph of her great great grandfather holding her great grandmother photographed outside the Lutheran church and mission at Koonibba near Ceduna on the Great Australian Bight.) The title of this work, *What they wanted*, was recently revisited by Scarce as the title for the work undertaken as part of her residency at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia in the USA in September 2012. The use and re-use of this title represents return fire on our history of political buck passing and the pandemic denial of the treatment of Aboriginal Australians. The "they" in the title employs a type of reverse

anthropology—a return of the gaze that enables a counter 'othering'. Her return to this title signals to audiences the baneful and relentless vestiges of colonisation. In her most recent work, Scarce's figuration, represented through found photographs, objects and hand blown forms, has been refined into a strong visual signature where vitreous bodies have taken on the resemblance of indigenous plants. Selecting plants that bear edible fruit such as the bush banana or silky pear (*Marsdenia australis*) and desert or long yam (*Ipomoea costata*), Scarce recreates these forms in opaque and lusted glass. They become synecdoche for the Aboriginal bodies that have been, in Brenda Croft's words above, "relocated, dispersed, governed, defined, constrained". The fruit that Scarce selects is found in arid, inland parts of the country—in other words—in Scarce's own country. The desert yam, gathered by Aboriginal people for millennia as a staple form of sustenance, is a recurring form in the major installation titled *Burial Ground*, made for *Deadly: In-between Heaven and Hell* staged at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute as a part of the 2012 Adelaide Festival. In this installation, Scarce employed the potent strategy of mass accumulation—two hundred and twenty four hand blown yams, representing every year of settlement since 1788, read like a scar on the transparent surface. Scarce employs blunt historical data to counter the mythologies of the past. The plinth, along with offering a silent platform for viewing the glass forms, suggests a mortuary slab or medical barouche. This architecture of grief and loss—where the plinth becomes funerary pillar—and her use of repetitive, minimalist gestures, connects Scarce's work with memorials including Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin. Scarce eschews the seductive naturalism of glass (exemplified historically by nineteenth century glass artists Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, for example) in favour of a memorialising and ritual minimalism, one used didactically in the Holocaust museums that Scarce visited on a research trip in 2008. To contemplate *Burial Ground*, which was acquired by the Art Gallery with its numerical coda (a black body for each year of invasion) is to recognise the dearth of memorials that acknowledge our violent past. (There are exceptions to this amnesia and they include the public work of Fiona Foley and *The Aboriginal Memorial*, two hundred hollow log coffins/*lorrkon*, marking two hundred years of colonisation made by forty three artists from Ramingining in Arnhem Land and facilitated by Aboriginal curator Djon Mundine, for the 1988 *Biennale of Sydney*. *The Aboriginal Memorial*, now stands as a sentry at the new entrance to the National Gallery of Australia.²)

In *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, made for the Art Gallery of South Australia's exhibition of contemporary art from South Australia, *Heartland*, blown glass forms in the form of the bush banana or silky pear are installed within laboratory flasks. Scarce's title is drawn from Warwick Anderson's 2002 account of this nation's racial agenda³—one that underpinned the University of Adelaide's testing on Aboriginal Australians living in the remote regions of South Australia. Not too long ago, in the name of science and nation, Scarce's relatives were subjected to medical scrutiny in the belief that colour could be bred out and whiteness cultivated. In these works the blown form of the desert fruit, also employed in the precursory work *Not willing to suffocate*, carries the power and the burden, of the body and the land. The vitreous forms made for scientific use reference the pseudo-science of phrenology and the racial mania that incarcerated Aboriginal people. This hybridising of hand blown 'native' glass and introduced glassware alludes to the practices of miscegenation that lead ultimately to today's "Stolen Generations". Furthermore, by containing the plant forms within the found scientific glassware, the reality of the containment of



Aboriginal people is underscored—a containment experienced in medicine, anthropology, history and museology. Scarce's work can be seen to perform a *caesura* or rupture in the broader context of Aboriginal art. Her work is frequently cited as breaking with tradition and her use of glass is seen as a deviation from more widely experienced urban art forms and also from desert painting traditions. Scarce's work however springs from a lineage—one of dispossession and resistance—and while Billie Holiday's lament *Strange Fruit* has been frequently invoked by, or in reference to, Aboriginal artists, (Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley, Vernon Ah Kee and Julie Dowling) in Scarce's oeuvre it finds eerie apprehension;

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.*

*Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁴*

Scarce's strange fruit are full of anguish, heartbreak and beauty; her abiding interest in endemic plants and bush foods offers a kinship with the painting and sculptural practices of artists, particularly women, living in desert communities. Comparisons can be drawn, for example, with the reiterative mark making and recurrent subject matter of Pintupi painter, Yakultji Napangati, who frequently depicts a site known as Yunala, the name given to a rock hole and soakage west of Kiwirrkura in the Gibson Desert in Western Australia. Yunala is also the name given to the bush banana, evoking the rich associations endemic in Aboriginal culture. This multivalence can be found in Scarce's practice too. Her gathering occurs not in the desert but in the glass-making studio, where sand is transmogrified in extreme heat and under duress. Scarce collects molten glass from the furnace to form bush foods—for nourishment and recovery. These acts of gathering, like those of her ancestors, involve risk, danger and generosity.

Blood on the Wattle is the title of Scarce's work made for *Personal Structures: Time, Place, Existence #2*, an official satellite project of the 2013 Venice Biennale.⁵ In this work, the acrylic transparent plinth or barouche found in *Burial Ground* is inverted to become a coffin, one that contains three hundred yams blown in dark glass. Each hand blown yam is formed by breath and fire, with the artist gathering glass in the searing furnace. Through the repetition of the brittle, ambiguous bodies within the casket, Scarce conjures the relentless impact of colonisation and the litany of abuses suffered by Aboriginal people. Her insistence on the title of Bruce Elder's publication,⁶ which chronicles the massacres and maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788 as the title for her own work, underscores that this mass grave is far from aesthetic 'fabulism'. *Blood on the Wattle* will be exhibited inside the Palazzo Bembo on the grand canal—in a city that has its own history of colonisation and conquest—one where glass plays a major part. Venice, and its celebrated glass blowing island of Murano know that glass can be deadly.

Notes

¹ Brenda Croft, 'Missing' written for the exhibition *Shards*, featuring work by Nici Cumpston, Yhonnie Scarce and Judy Watson, SASA Gallery, University of South Australia 2008. Croft's invocation speaks to the resilience and struggle for repatriation that fuels the practice of many contemporary Aboriginal artists

² <http://nga.gov.au/AboriginalMemorial/history.cfm>

³ Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002

⁴ Performed by Billie Holiday, written by Abel Meeropol in 1937

⁵ Initiated in 2002 by the artist Rene Rietmeyer, this year's *Personal Structures* is curated by Dutch curators Karlyn De Jongh and Sarah Gold

⁶ Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: massacres and maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788*, Sydney: Child & Associates, 1988

Yhonnie Scarce participated in *Personal Structures*, Palazzo Bembo, 55th Venice Biennale, 1 June–24 November 2013