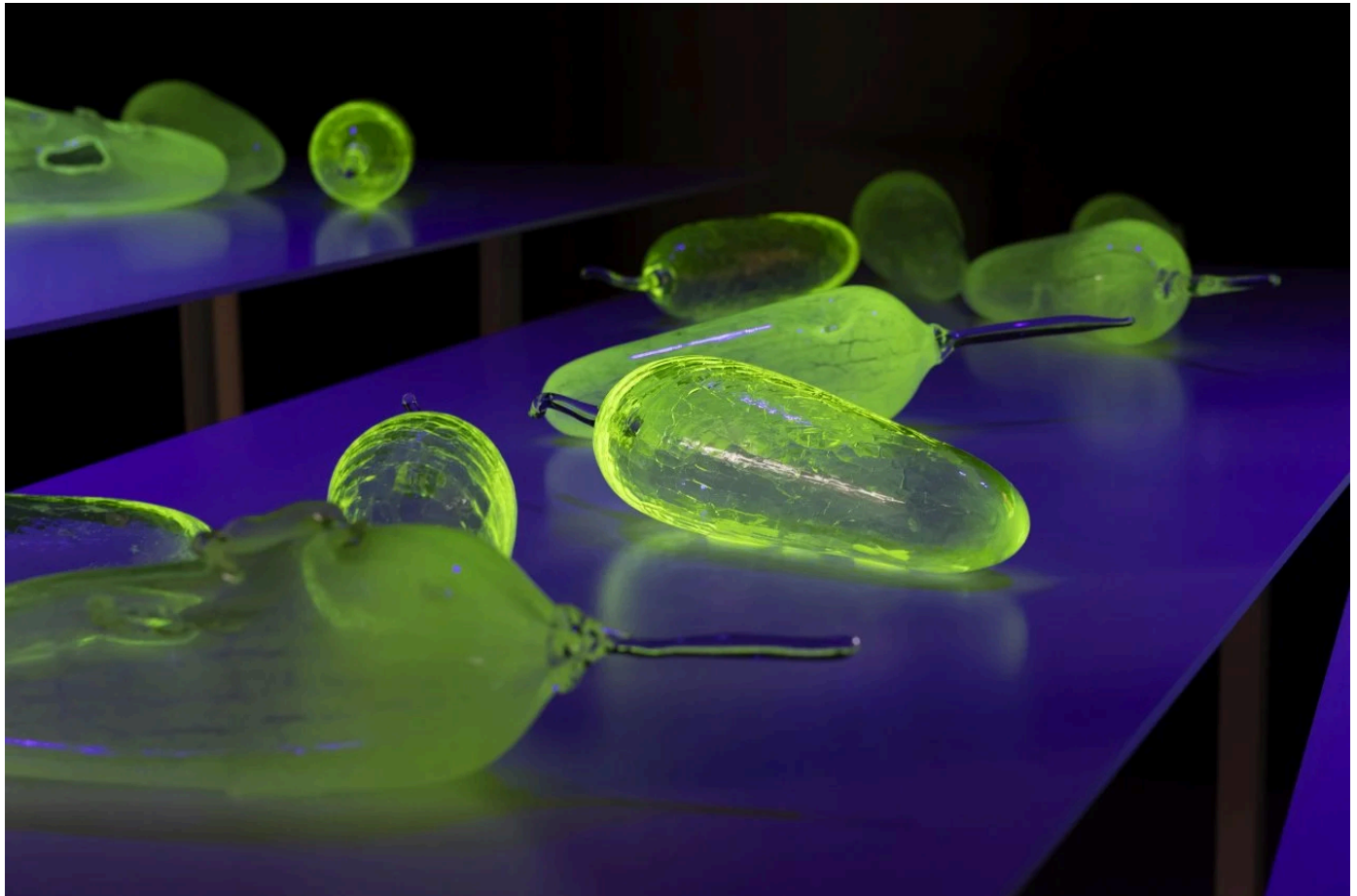


EXHIBITION

The largest retrospective of Yhonnie Scarce's work to date, *The Light of Day* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, illuminates a sinister history. By *Cass Lynch*.

Yhonnie Scarce's *The Light of Day* at AGWA



Death Zephyr, part of the Yhonnie Scarce retrospective exhibition *The Light of Day* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

CREDIT: BO WONG / AGWA

At 7am on October 15, 1953, a plutonium bomb mounted on a steel tower was detonated above Emu Field, a wide clay pan on the lands of the Kokatha people. Named Totem 1, the 9.1 kiloton-yield explosion turned the desert sand to glass and sent a radioactive cloud 4.6km high into the morning sky.

An unusual lack of wind shear meant “the cloud preserved its identity to a remarkable extent and was clearly visible even after 24 hours” (*Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia: Volume One*, 1985). The cloud hung over the field for a day, dropping plutonium slag and ashy debris before moving north-west across the continent, drifting over Townsville and dissipating somewhere above the Pacific Ocean.

Looking up in the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), 2000 twisted raindrops hang suspended on steel wire. Yhonnie Scarce's sculptural artwork *Thunder Raining Poison* (2015) is a chandelier of cobalt blue and clear glass yams, the desert bush foods arranged in the shape of an atomic plume. A shaft of light streaks through the metal strings, and gives the impression of speed or movement, like crystal knives dropping from the sky. The glass yams tinkle and clink as they knock against one another, moving gently in the air-con of the quiet gallery.

The artwork is patently not-alive, an inanimate thing composed of common industrial materials, but it hovers with monochromatic menace. The radioactive cloud that hung motionless over Emu Field in 1953 is present here in the gallery, crystallised via Scarce's artistic practice into a prismatic projection from memory, archive

and Country. It is one of many artworks that reveals Scarce's skill and fortitude at bringing unacknowledged histories out of the shadows and into the cold light of day.

Brought together by Wardandi and Badimaya curator Clothilde Bullen, *The Light of Day* is the largest retrospective exhibition of Scarce's work to date. Artworks composed of glass, fabric, ceramic and metal reference themes of colonisation, science, kinship and poison. It is accompanied by a new monograph on Scarce containing photographs, essays and poems.

Scarce's artworks crystallise moments in the cultural archive of her Country, combining sand, fire and breath to bring transparency and form to dark histories that fester in the Australian psyche.

Scarce belongs to the Kokatha and Nukunu peoples and was born at Woomera, South Australia, a town built to service a military testing range established after World War II. The range exists to this day and has expanded to become the Woomera Prohibited Area, a mosaic of nuclear exclusion zones, missile ranges, mining tenements and space observation sites. The area contains the nuclear test sites of Emu Field and Maralinga, where from 1953 to 1963 the British government conducted 12 major and hundreds of minor nuclear tests, out of sight of an under-informed Australian public. The Australian government gave the British government permission to test nuclear bombs in inland South Australia, likely because the desert area was considered "the middle of nowhere" to the powers in Canberra. However, the arid mulga scrublands are the centre of the world for Maralinga Tjarutja, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara, Antakirinja Matu-Yankunytjatjara, Arabana, Gawler Ranges and Kokatha peoples, where land is the keeping place of their cultures. These Indigenous peoples, along with settler citizens, scientists and military personnel, were all affected by radioactive fallout from the tests. Scarce grew up hearing about the nuclear tests from family and observing its dark legacy in community.

Upstairs is a second yam chandelier artwork, *Death Zephyr* (2016). While *Thunder Raining Poison* is poised above the viewer, here we are level with the plume, trapped with it under a low ceiling. This plume isn't hovering neatly but breaking up, with stray yams moving off from the main cloud and dissipating outwards. It contains darker colours in the glass as well, cobalt blues deepening into coal black. This artwork captures the sinister drift of a nuclear cloud, carrying poison for days after the initial blast. *Death Zephyr* creates shadows on the ground like the scattering of ash and debris. Downstairs and upstairs the two chandeliers work together: the immediate and then the long-term effect, the apocalypse and then the drift.

Off the gallery concourse is a darkened room emitting strange light. *Hollowing Earth* (2016-17) is an arrangement of 42 glass bush bananas sitting on display tables lit by UV lights installed above. The glass is tinted with uranium dioxide pigment that makes the bananas glow and cast milky, eerie shadows against the tabletops. The artworks glow green because the electrons in uranium move excitedly in the presence of ultraviolet light, creating luminescence as they jostle on a quantum level. The glowing fruits are in bad shape compared with the yams of the chandeliers. The football-sized bananas have ruptured and split, appearing to have burst from within, their skins peeled and withered back. While uranium pigment is only weakly radioactive, their glow feels like a warning. The injured bananas give the impression of bomb craters in the earth, but also organs or cells that have lost their integrity under radioactive bombardment and are falling apart. Here again the artworks seem alive, like they could take a breath in front of you, revealing Scarce's skill at capturing in glass wounds that struggle to heal.

The title *Hollowing Earth* references the great deal of earth-moving required to extract uranium ore from the ground. In a scenario of grim serendipity, the largest known deposit of uranium in the world is in the same region as the British nuclear tests. The Olympic Dam mine borders the south-east corner of the Woomera Prohibited Zone, 500 kilometres east of Maralinga and Emu Field and 70 kilometres north of where Scarce was born. Olympic Dam's uranium deposit is 350 metres below the surface and it exports uranium concentrate to electric utilities around the world.

Scarce's ancestral Country is a place where significant pathways of recent world history intersect. There has not only been nuclear testing in inland South Australia, but also invasion, colonisation, indentured service, child removal and massacre. *Remembering Royalty* (2018) offers glass gifts to family members whose portraits are printed on sheets and linens. *In The Dead House* (2020) presents sliced glass bush bananas on a metal operating

table, referring to South Australian coroner William Ramsay Smith, who sold the body parts of Aboriginal people to collectors overseas. In *Servant and Slave* (2018) black glass plums appear like desert mice in mid-escape as they smash free of porcelain cups, embodying the vibrancy and resilience of Aboriginal women in the face of indentured servitude. Bush bananas, plums and yams root these huge histories in place, acting as conduits as Scarce explores the intersecting worlds of ancestors, memory, scientific ambition and invasion. Her storying oscillates effortlessly between the global and the local.

With 92 protons and 146 neutrons, natural uranium is a massive element, originating in supernovas that had the extreme heat and density required to bind so many protons and neutrons together. These uranium molecules drifted into the stellar disc of debris that surrounded our sun as it grew, and 4.6 billion years ago it soaked into our planet's rocky mass as it accreted and formed. This uranium sits in the Earth's crust, sinking down and moving up as chemical and geomorphological processes churn in deep time. It's only in the past 100 years that uranium has been dug up, enriched and vaporised in nuclear bombs, sending uranium molecules into the air again, suspending poison between the stars and the sand. Scarce's artworks are tied to this transitional period for uranium, where the atomic arms race amplified the impacts of empire already present in South Australia and created conditions that have irreversibly devastated land, people, plants, animals and spirit.

The stars are present in *Missile Park* (2021), where three burnt tin sheds, dark and monolithic, loom in the entry foyer of the gallery. One of the shed doors is open, and inside is a grey table with three rows of black glass bush plums. The shed blocks out almost all the light of the gallery, but the roof is pitted with tiny holes and the pinpricks of light are suggestive of a night sky. With the door shut, the viewer enters a timeless space, the glossy surface of the plums reflecting starlight, the bodilessness of it suggesting a return to a shared beginning of things. When the door opens again the framed light falls like a bright pupil on the dewy lustre of the bush plums, changing them from galaxies to eyes looking out as nuclear winds cook and blister the world outside.

In an era of contested histories, Scarce's artworks crystallise moments in the cultural archive of her Country, combining sand, fire and breath to bring transparency and form to dark histories that fester in the Australian psyche. In the gallery, alert security staff prevent curious visitors from touching the compelling but fragile glass yams. Out in the Woomera Prohibited Zone, bush yams grow that to this day can't be safely eaten.

The Light of Day is showing at the Art Gallery of Western Australia until May 19.

This is Cass Lynch's first piece for The Saturday Paper.

ARTS DIARY

MUSIC **Brunswick Music Festival**

Venues throughout Naarm/Melbourne, March 3-11

COMEDY *Pride in Prejudice*

Playhouse, Meanjin/Brisbane, March 5-9

CULTURE **WOMAdelaide**

Botanic Park/Tainmuntilla, Kurna Yarta/Adelaide, March 8-11

LITERATURE **Cairns Tropical Writers Festival**

Venues throughout Gimuy Wallaburra Yidinji and Yirrganydji Country/Cairns, March 8-10

VISUAL ART *Vincent Namatjira: Australia in Colour*

National Gallery of Australia, Ngambri and Ngunnawal Country/Canberra, until July 21

LAST CHANCE

CULTURE **Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras**

Venues throughout Gadigal Country/Sydney, until March 3