

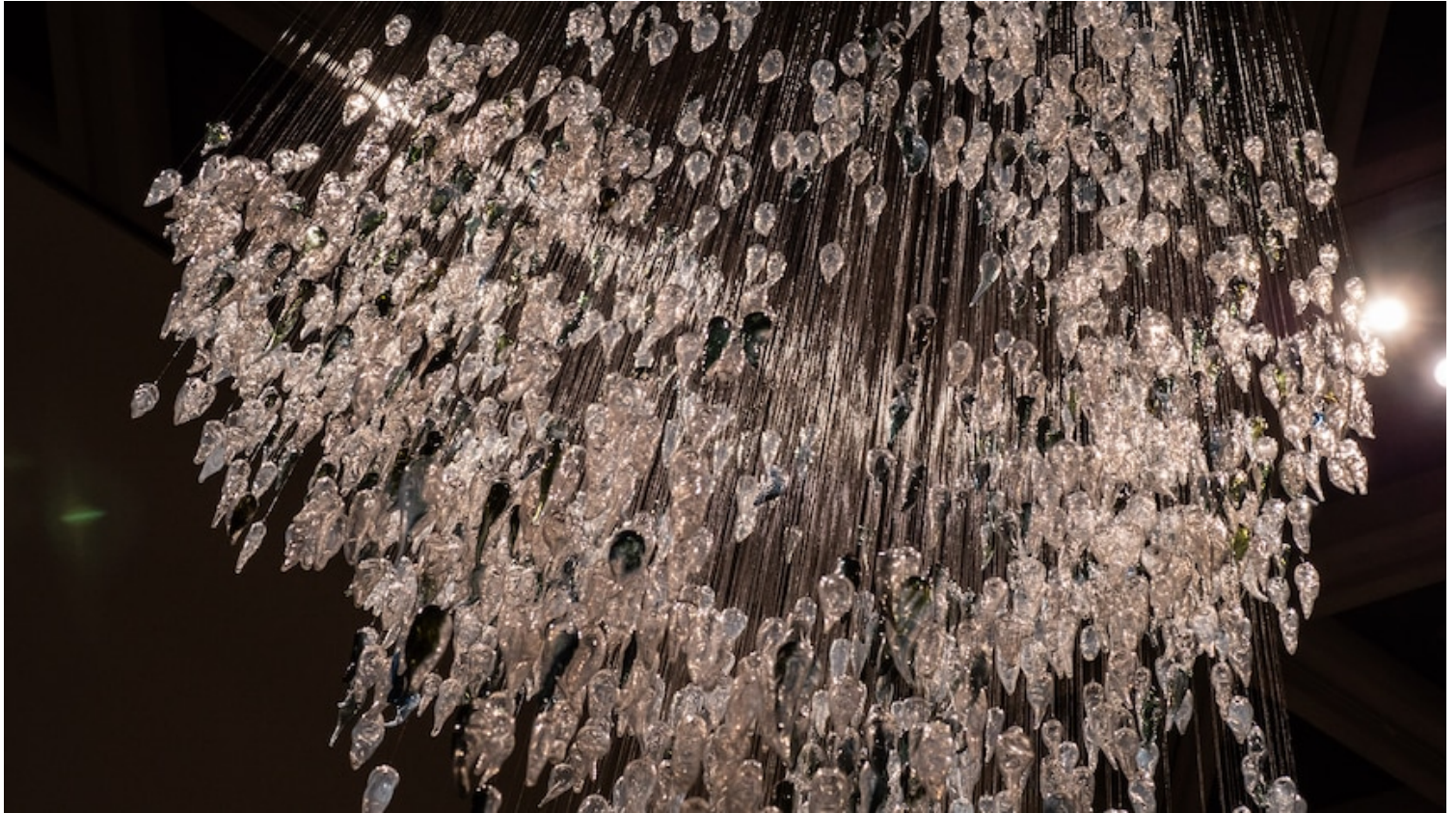
# Yhonnie Scarce's luminous glass artworks exhibited at Art Gallery of WA

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ABC Radio Perth

/ By Emma Wynne

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Thunder Raining Poison features 2,000 hand-blown glass yams by Yhonnie Scarce. (ABC Radio Perth: Emma Wynne)

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Two floors of a Perth gallery have been filled with large-scale glass works that depict nuclear fallout, the impacts of uranium mining and intimate family history.

In the largest survey of work by Yhonnie Scarce, a Kokatha and Nukunu artist from South Australia, the Art Gallery of WA has brought together pieces that include two 2,000-piece hanging glass works.



Yhonnie Scarce hopes the exhibition sheds light on Australia's history and the treatment of Aboriginal people. (Supplied: Janelle Low)

Scarce, who was born at Woomera, has explored the impact nuclear testing that was conducted there in the 1950s has had on Aboriginal people.

"I've been returning to my birthplace of Woomera for quite a while now," she said.

"I'm interested in the issues that are related to the nuclear tests that happened in South Australia, which is undertaken in the Woomera prohibited area, and has affected a lot of Aboriginal people throughout South Australia.

"A lot of them are my family, and people in my family, they have been affected genetically, because of those tests as well."

## **Dark beauty**

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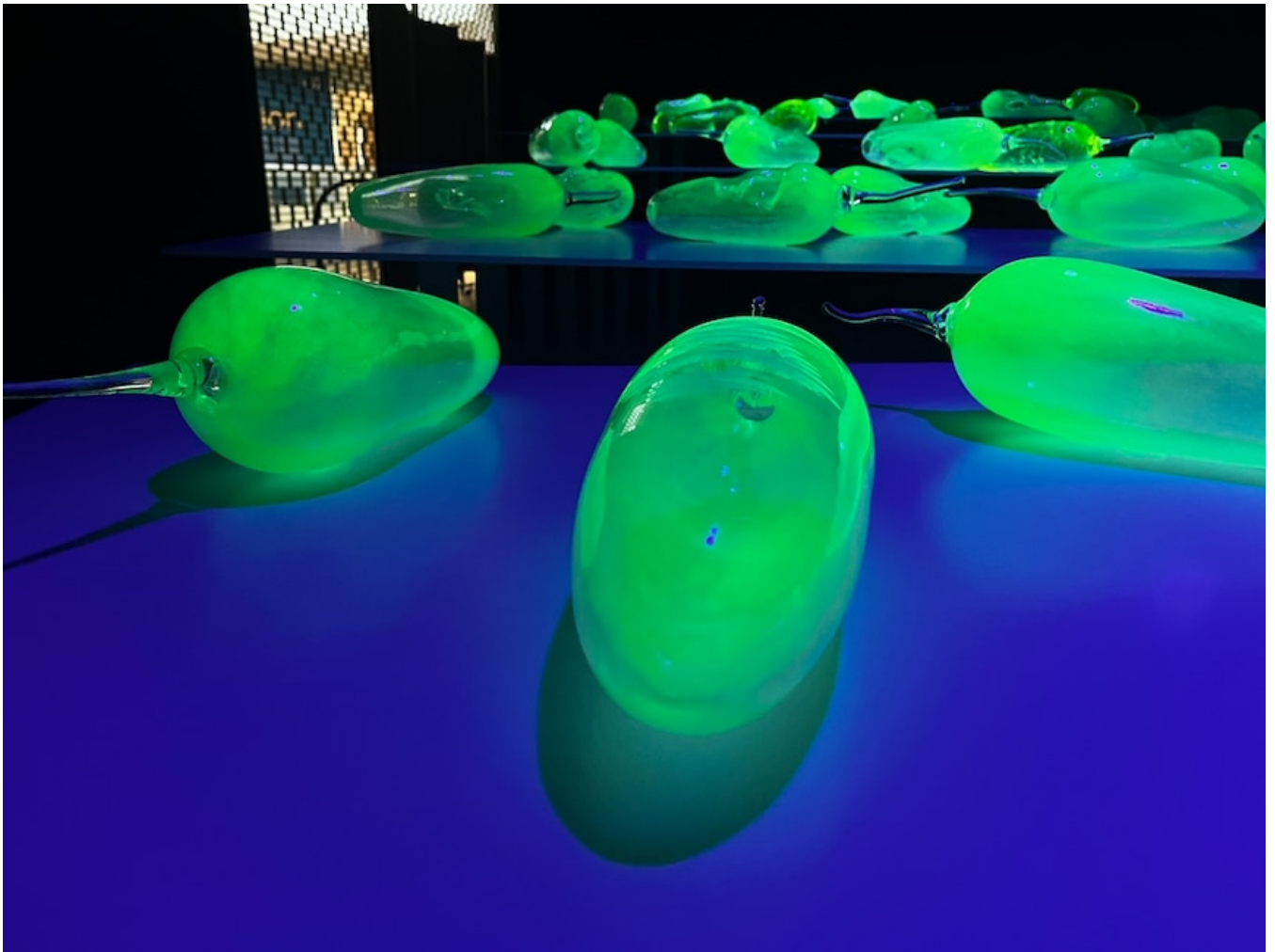
The cloud works are made up of thousands of hand-blown glass yams meticulously arranged to form clouds and droplets.



Thunder Raining Poison features 2,000 hand-blown glass yams.(ABC Radio Perth: Emma Wynne)

Scarce said another work, Fallout Babies, aimed to raise attention on the high numbers of stillbirths and infant deaths that occurred in Woomera in the aftermath of the testing.

It features groups of glass bush plums, of varying sizes, in hospital cribs, in front of large-scale photographs of the graves of the children they represent.



Hollowing Earth uses uranium glass and bush bananas to reference the ongoing impact of uranium mining. (ABC Radio Perth: Emma Wynne)

Scarce says the striking beauty of the dark-themed art is deliberate, even though visitors sometimes mistake her cloud works for chandeliers when they first see them.

"I think that's the beauty of glass, it's really good at tricking people because they are beautiful objects," she said.

"Every single glass object that's in the exhibition represents Aboriginal people, so I want them to be beautiful, but at the same time, it's addressing really dark history.

"And I think these people need to be held accountable for what they've done, because it still affects us as Aboriginal people today."



Fallout Babies uses glass bush plums to represent infant deaths and stillbirths. (ABC Radio Perth: Emma Wynne)

## Family influence

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Family is the other major focus of her work, where she explores the impacts of colonisation but also celebrates their survival and achievements.

Her work *Remember Royalty*, that has recently been acquired by the Tate Modern in London and was loaned for the exhibition, features large-scale portraits of her family raised high in the gallery, where visitors can look up and learn about their stories.

All of her grandparents and great-grandparents were born on missions in South Australia, and photographs of them have been printed on large pieces of fabric and hung high on the walls.

"It was about honouring them," she said of the placement.

"[I wanted] them to be large enough for people to look up to them rather than look down.

"Most of the time Aboriginal people can be, sort of, frowned upon.

"So it was about telling people that I consider not just my family, but all Aboriginal people, royalty, and should be honoured as well."



In the Dead House uses glass pieces to represent the story of bodies which were desecrated.(ABC Radio Perth: Emma Wynne)

An important part of Scarce's work is bringing to light hidden histories, like the story of coroner William Ramsay Smith, who ran the Adelaide mortuary in the early 1900s and is believed to have been involved in the illegal sale the body parts of Aboriginal people, some of which are still in institutions overseas.

Scarce has recreated the mortuary, with 30 flayed glass bush bananas representing the corpses, and incorporated a smoky white colouring.

She said the exhibition might lead to strong emotions and hopefully, a focus on stories that had been hidden from view.

"There might be some tears, there might be some anger as well, I think," she said.

"With the clouds, when I created them initially, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were upset because they didn't know about the story, it was kept quiet and kept secret.

"But I really hope that it educates people about the history of Australia, and its treatment of Aboriginal people."



Death Zephyr features hand-blown glass artwork.(ABC Radio Perth: Emma Wynne)

## **Tough assignment**

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Art Gallery of WA Indigenous programs head Clothilde Bullen, who curated the exhibition, said it had been one of the most complex of her career.

It included hanging 2,000 pieces of glass in the correct position.

"There's been nothing like it," she said.

"We were obviously worried about breakage [because] glass is such a fragile thing, but actually we didn't have losses and all of the work has remained intact, which is astonishing."

Ms Bullen said it was a perfect time to bring Scarce's work to Western Australia, where it hadn't been seen much.

"Yhonnie and I have been friends for a really long time, and we have talked very much about pulling together a really large ensemble of her work for a really long time," she said.

"We thought that perhaps it was a timely moment to show it in Western Australia, West Australians have not really seen a lot of Yhonnie's work.

"Particularly given world circumstances currently, and some of what Yhonnie speaks to is about nationalism and about the threat nuclear destruction and kinds of really serious sort of topics, so it felt really timely."

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