

From Maralinga bombs to bailer shells: the artistic alchemy of Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce

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Indigenous artists Watson and Scarce reveal layers of historical, cultural and personal gravitas behind immersive exhibitions

“The shadows that appeared on the wall were like bodies hanging from nooses,” says artist Yhonnie Scarce.

She is talking about a moment at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2017, during the installation of her piece *Death Zephyr*; a nuclear cloud created from thousands of hand-blown glass yams, roughly the shape of inverted teardrops, suspended from the ceiling.

“When I saw them, I had to leave the room for a moment,” she says now. “Shadows are really important in my work. But that threw me.”

For much of the past decade, Scarce has been researching the 1950s and 1960s British nuclear testing program at the remote desert locality of Maralinga, South Australia. A cold war project, the tests had a devastating effect on the local Maralinga Tjarutja people, the military personnel who were involved with the project, surrounding non-Indigenous communities, and the country itself. In some places, the explosions turned the dirt into glass.

Scarce has a personal stake in the story. The toxic clouds travelled across Kokatha country – her grandfather’s country – and the stories about their after-effects rippled through her family. “I had family stories of my aunties, my mum’s cousins, being children just outside

of Ceduna” – a five-hour drive from Maralinga – “and their nappies being singed by the chemicals,” the Kokatha and Nukunu artist says.



📷 Yhonnie Scarce, *Cloud Chamber* 2020 – installation view. Photograph: Andrew Curtis

Scarce has made three of these glass-yam cloud artworks drawing on her research. *Thunder Raining Poison* (2015) examined the blasts in relation to rainfall. *Death Zephyr* looked at weather patterns and wind. The third in the triptych, *Cloud Chamber* – a direct reference to an apparatus used to track uranium particles – made its debut late in 2020 at Tarrawarra, a winery and art gallery in the regional Victorian town of Healesville.



📷 Judy Watson, grandmother's song 2007. Pigment and pastel on canvas. Photograph: Natasha Harth

Speaking to Guardian Australia shortly after the opening of the exhibition, titled Looking Glass, Scarce says Cloud Chamber, comprising 1000 glass yams, is smaller than she had intended. Her work was disrupted by the pandemic: she was supposed to be in Birmingham in the UK, researching the Frisch-Peierls memorandum – a 1940 report to the British government from two physicists explaining the technical possibility of a nuclear bomb – and Cloud Chamber was supposed to debut at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery. When the pandemic truncated her residency there, she “had to rethink the way the cloud was going to be represented”.

Scarce shares billing at Tarrawarra with Waanyi artist Judy Watson. Watson works across mediums but her most striking pieces are her prints and paintings – huge canvases saturated in startling shades of blue and ochre. She takes often apparently innocuous items from her family history and her country in the Gulf of Carpentaria – a shell, a stone, two buttons, a collection of pins, a few sprigs of grass – and draws attention to their significance by isolating images of them in a wash of shifting colour.

“I talk about blue being the colour of memory,” Watson says. She also speaks of water as a “conduit” for “the subterranean, dreams, the subconscious”.

“Water has a memory. The nature of it is that it seeks out where it’s supposed to go. People are really surprised by floods [for example],” she says. “But it’s because the water’s always been there, and it knows where to go.”

Much of her work has focused on her matrilineal history, but in the past few years she had spent time in Scotland, her father’s ancestral homeland, examining other kinds of sacred sites – standing stones, ley lines – along with artefacts from her home country housed in museums, and bringing these into her work, too.



📷 Judy Watson Standing Stones, Gumbi Gumbi, Stone Tool (2020): earth, graphite, pastel, acrylic, cotton on canvas. Photograph: Carl Warner

“I’ve described Judy and Yhonnie’s work as a ‘tender trap’,” says curator Hetti Perkins.

She calls the two artists “alchemists”: “The way that they use elemental mediums – the natural pigments, water, sand, earth, fire – and they create these incredibly beautiful works that talk about country, but they are *of* country. It’s like country speaking.”



📷 Yhonnie Scarce, Only a Mother Could Love Them (2016) installation view, Strontium 90, This is no Fantasy, Melbourne, 2016. Photograph: Janelle Low

Together, their works tell a complex story of family, country and loss with a disarmingly magical aesthetic. At the entrance to the show at Tarrawarra are some of Watson's most personal paintings: *Two Halves With Bailer Shell*, and *Grandmother's Song* – the spectacular freshwater blues anchored by the outlines in white of Boodjamulla Gorge, shells, native vegetation. “The bailer shell form, I see as a vessel for women,” says Watson. “Every time I use it, and often when I have female forms, I'm thinking about the matrilineal Aboriginal line in our family.”

Opposite is Scarce's *Only A Mother Could Love Them* (2016): the blown-glass bush plums that sit atop a hospital trolley are battered, full of holes, a colour somewhere between bubbling petrol and burnt steel. On the wall behind them is a huge photograph of headstones in a cemetery. Tiny teddy bears sit beside some of them, representing the children who died as a consequence of the bombings.

“All the bush food I make represents Aboriginal people or culture or cultural practices,” Scarce says. “The majority of the time, the yams, for me, represent the deceased.”

Scarce says that even in Woomera, where she grew up, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children were born with deformities or died at birth, and locals “always blamed it on the weather”. “But then with further research, you discover that some of those remains were removed and sent to the UK because they were looking for Strontium-90, which is the substance that is found in bones of people with radiation sickness,” she says.



📷 Yhonnie Scarce with her artwork, *Cloud Chamber* 2020. Photograph: Andrew Curtis

“It's incisive, forensic intelligence and creativity in dealing with the history of this country,” says Perkins, of the artists' work. While she acknowledges that the *Alice in Wonderland* reference in the exhibition's title is a common one, the curator says both artists are engaged in a practice of “looking at the reflection, challenging that reflection, as well as casting a new reflection back to audiences about the history of our country”.

They have collaborated together, too: after Watson learned about her grandmother's survival of a massacre in the Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) area in the late 19th century, she worked with Scarce and other artists and members of her family to create 40 Pairs of Blackfellows' Ears, Lawn Hill Station (2008) – lifelike sculptures of ears, based on the gruesome talismans collected in the late 1800s by a stockman, which are nailed to the wall of the Tarrawarra gallery.



📷 Judy Watson: 40 Pairs of Blackfellows' Ears, Lawn Hill Station (detail). Photograph: Andrew Curtis

In an essay accompanying the exhibition, Perkins writes: “In their art, Watson and Scarce reveal the ‘big picture’ – this meagre, unimaginative and abusive relationship to ‘land’ – peeling back the thin disguise of nationalist clichés to expose the shortsightedness of the rapacious exploitation of Country for a quick profit.”

It is also a practice of remembering the things that modern-day Australia would prefer to forget.

“I think this country is really good at forgetting these issues, because they don't want to address it,” says Scarce. “It's easier to brush it aside than it is to actually acknowledge what happened.”

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