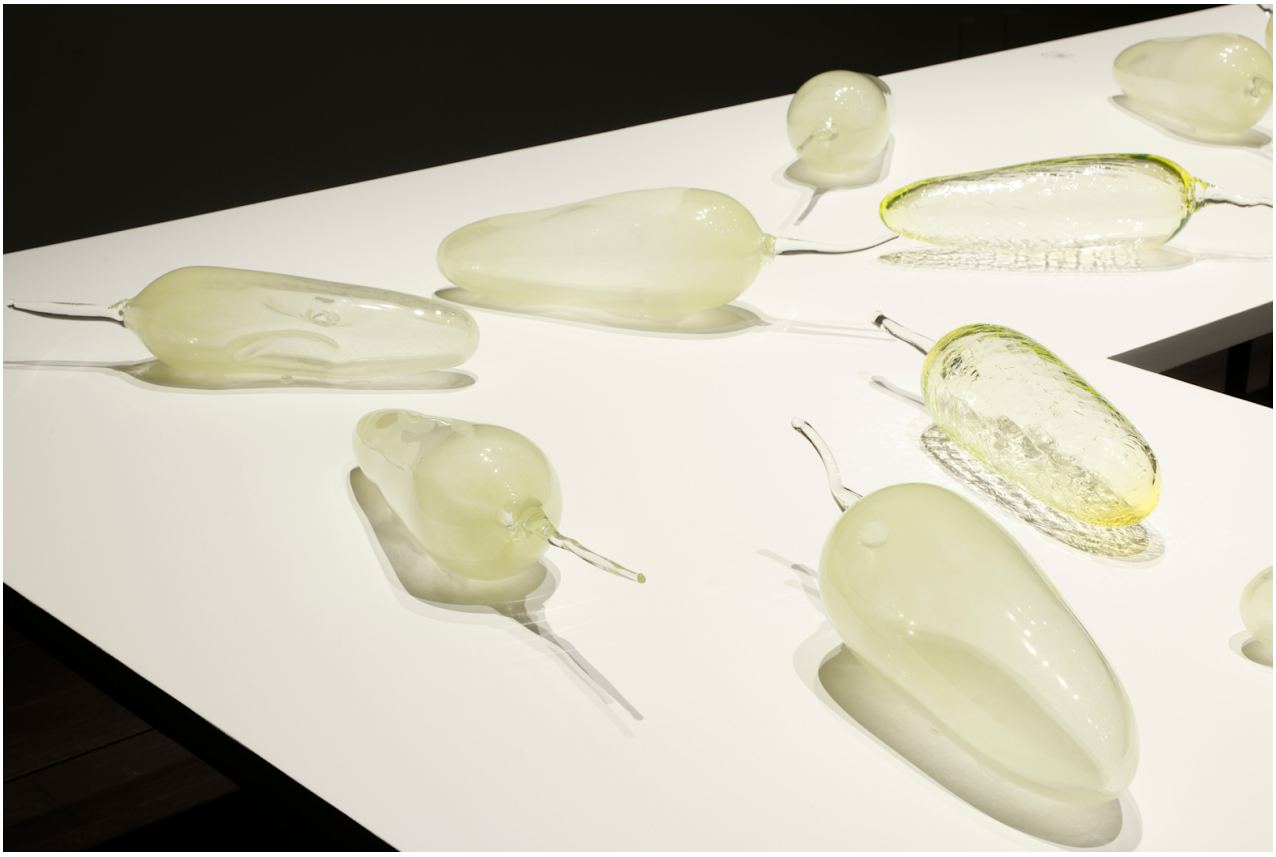
Gazing / Being Gazed At: Responding to the "Voices" of Indigenous Women Artists

tokyoartbeat.com/en/articles/-/echoes-unveiled-artizon-museum-review-en-202508

Mikako Suzuki August 12, 2025

"Echoes Unveiled: Art by First Nations Women from Australia" is on view at the Artizon Museum until September 21. Images provided by Artizon Museum.



Yhonnie Scarce　Hollowing Earth　2017　© Courtesy the Artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY

The Artizon Museum is currently hosting Japan's first large-scale exhibition focusing on art by First Nations women artists, *Echoes Unveiled: Art by First Nations Women from Australia*, which runs through September 21.

The exhibition quietly challenges the very notion of "viewing" art within the museum space. Paintings placed on the floor rather than on walls, bark canvases hung to reveal their true nature—these works invite visitors to experience the dismantling of conventional frameworks long taken for granted.

How might you respond to this challenge? Sociologist Mikako Suzuki offers a thoughtful review of the exhibition. [Tokyo Art Beat]

This exhibition posed a subtle but critical question: What does it mean to *gaze*? The works of indigenous women artists unsettled the gaze within me, unveiling its hidden assumptions and turning it upside down—leaving behind a deep, lingering sense of disorientation. What I had assumed to be a one-way gaze was, in fact, being returned—a moment of reversal that revealed more than I was prepared to see. In that moment, the gaze reversed—and so did the question: *How will you respond?*

These works were not simply beautiful or powerful. They unsettled something fundamental in how I understand the act of seeing itself. It gently but insistently shakes the very structure that separates those who speak from those who are silenced. And in that reversal of the gaze, I came to understand something essential about what decolonization truly means.

In recent years, the idea of “decolonization” has gained growing attention in the academia I belong to. Even after formal colonial rule came to an end, the ways in which we think about and represent the world remain deeply shaped by colonial epistemologies.

What has long counted as “theory,” for example, has often centered on the work of white men from North America and Europe, while knowledge from other regions has been treated merely as sites of study, as illustrative cases, or as background for theory-building. In response, growing efforts are emerging to question how we know and what we teach—challenging the very frameworks and curricula that have long been taken for granted. At the heart of this is a reckoning: Who has been authorized to speak, and who has been made to remain silent?

Decolonization has also had a profound impact on the art world. Decolonial practice is not merely about showcasing artists from non-Western countries and increasing their visibility. More fundamentally, it calls into question the very premises that shape our understanding of art: What counts as art? What constitutes expression? How should artworks be viewed?

This exhibition is woven through with subtle interventions aimed at decolonization—gestures that gently unsettle the very assumptions underlying institutional structures and modes of viewing.

For instance, one of Nonggirrnga Marawili’s work, *Bolngu* (2016), painted on eucalyptus bark, is suspended in space so that both the front and back are visible. This curatorial choice allows viewers to intuitively recognize that what they are looking at is not canvas, but bark.

Similarly, one of Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s works is placed directly on the floor, reflecting her method of painting with the canvas laid flat on the ground.

Such curatorial choices gently disrupt the dominant Western modes of display, which typically involve a framed canvas hung on a wall and viewed frontally.

Another crucial aspect of this exhibition is the question of authorship: *Who is doing the telling?*

Historically, memory and history have so often been narrated—and thus defined—through the voices of colonizers. But the works assembled here are born from a radical reweaving of narrative perspectives: not from the viewpoint of the invaders, but from those who were colonized; not from men, but from women.

In these works, the artists engage with their ancestral lands, their families, the memories passed down through generations, and the ways of knowing and being of their communities—including their stories, narratives, and cosmological systems such as the Dreaming.

As I stood before their works, I felt something beyond words—a heat rising through me. It was the energy of collective anger and of hope. From within the pieces emerged the memory and history of how their dignity, their land, and their very lives had been violated.

I received that anger and that hope—clearly, unmistakably—from each and every work. Judy Watson's *gulf of memory* (2023) is one of the works that left the deepest impression on me. It consists of three pieces of linen dyed in indigo. Through these three cloths, Watson evokes both the past and the future.

The cloth on the left features a map of the Gulf of Carpentaria, a site known for the massacres that took place there—on the very lands where Watson's ancestors lived. The white lines drawn onto the map expose the colonial imposition on the land—how it was invaded, divided, and claimed by force.

In contrast, the central cloth contains no imagery. Instead, a faint, bleeding line runs vertically through its center—evoking a liminal space between past and present, a threshold through which one must pass in order to imagine a future.

And on the rightmost cloth, we see the silhouette of a young girl: the artist's daughter, Rani. If the leftmost panel evokes the past, the rightmost cloth gestures toward the future. The young girl's gaze appeared to symbolize the present generation—the ones who will inherit these histories and memories. In the direction of that gaze, the lingering pain of the past, the difficulty of facing it, and the hope for something new might emerge, all seeming to intertwine.

Facing the past is never easy. And yet, it is only by turning toward the past that we can begin to imagine the future. From this exhibition emanated not just pain or protest, but precisely through them, a quiet force—a strength that gestures toward hope.

I received the hope these works radiated with my whole body—and their anger, I received with sincerity and the humility it demands. As someone born and living in Japan, I feel I must not remain a bystander to this anger. I exist, undeniably, along the extended line of their gaze.

First of all, the discrimination and marginalization of indigenous peoples is not unique to Australia. Here in Japan, too, there are indigenous peoples such as Ainu and Ryukyuan people, whose voices, cultures, and narratives have long been suppressed, silenced, and taken from them.

Beyond the issues within Japan, we must also face the uncomfortable truth that we are indirectly complicit in the harm done to Aboriginal peoples elsewhere. One powerful example of this transnational entanglement is found in Yhonnie Scarce's *Hollowing Earth* (2017), a piece that invites us to reckon with the ways in which our own lives are linked to the ongoing exploitation of Aboriginal lands.

Her work powerfully renders the damage inflicted on Aboriginal land through uranium mining. Her home region, South Australia, is a major site of uranium extraction. As a result, Aboriginal communities there have endured severe health impacts, environmental degradation, and the hollowing out of their ancestral lands.

Much of that uranium, moreover, has been exported to fuel Japan's nuclear power plants (*1). In other words, our own "comfortable and convenient lives" have been sustained by the sacrifices borne by Aboriginal communities—sacrifices of their bodies, their lands, and their lives.

In this exhibition, I found myself repeatedly halted by the sense of being *seen*. It was not a gaze aimed at understanding the Other from a distance. Rather, it was an experience of having my gaze returned—questioned, unsettled, and turned inward.

In their 2024 book, *Ainu ga manazasu (Being Gazed at by the Ainu)*, Mai Ishihara and Yasuhiko Murakami write:

> Perhaps it is precisely this tension of being gazed at that offers the only possible first step toward self-reflection—one that interrupts the unilateral acts of consuming, defining, subordinating, or gazing at others. (*2)

To realize that one has not merely occupied the position of the observer, but has also been the object of a gaze—this, I believe, is the very first step in the practice of decolonization for those of us situated on the side of the colonizer. For those of us living in societies shaped by settler colonialism and benefiting from its legacies—including myself—we must confront the often-unquestioned privileged gaze and latent violence behind the colonizing urge to understand, interpret, or define others. This exhibition, I felt, quietly yet powerfully poses that very question—the one that asks us to reckon with the violence and privilege embedded in the act of seeing.

This exhibition is not merely a site for cross-cultural introduction. It is a space woven through with voices that have long gone unheard—echoes that quietly unsettle our perceptions and sensibilities. A space where multiple voices resonate, inviting us to think and feel what it means to engage with decolonization through art.

Here, we are invited to receive both the anger and the hope carried by these works. We are invited to listen closely to their resonances, to confront our histories, and to ask ourselves how we might begin to redraw our shared futures—upon what relationships, and with what sense of responsibility.

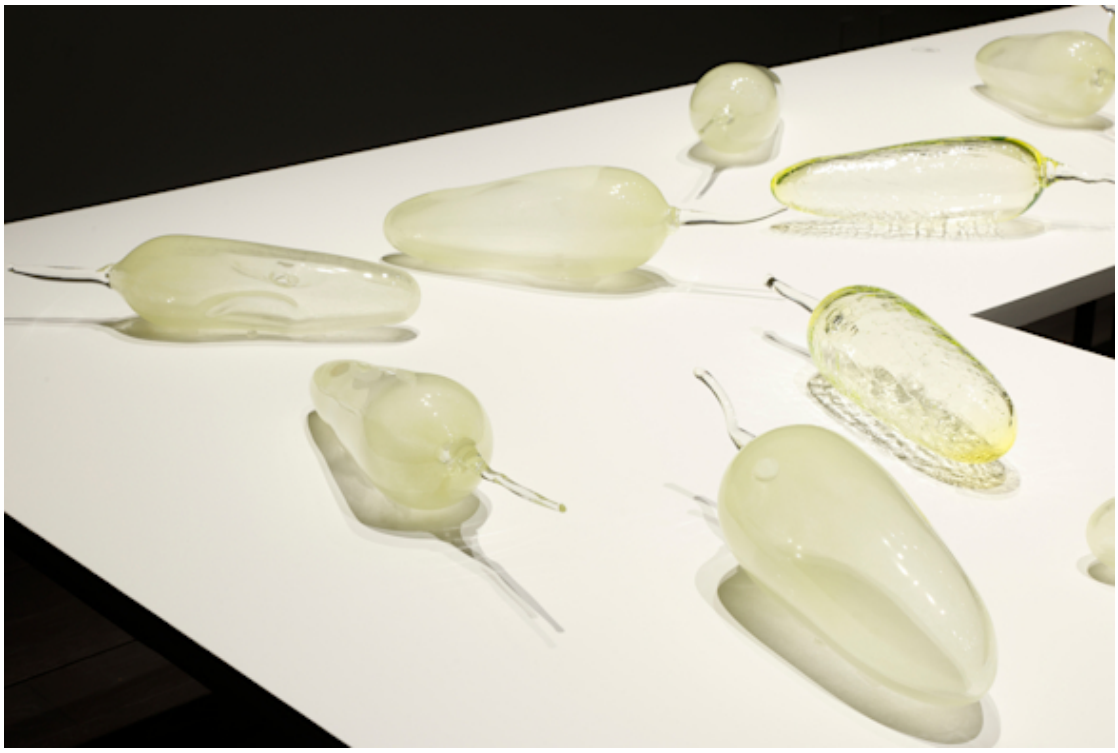
We are invited to respond—a response that begins with listening to the echoes unveiled in these works, and to what they carry: ancestral memories, unsettling questions, silenced voices, and visions yet to be born.
And perhaps that very response is what *responsibility* truly demands.

—And *you*—how will you respond?

*1——Yoshikazu Shiobara, 2017, *Bundan to Taiwa no Shakaigaku* [*Sociology of Division and Dialogue*]. Keio University Press, 2017. Matsuoka, Tomohiro, 2014, “Uran Saikutsuchi kara Fukushima e no Ōsutoraria Senjūmin no Manazashi” [“An Aboriginal Gaze from Uranium Mining Sites to Fukushima”], Yuriko Yamauchi ed., *Ōsutoraria Senjūmin to Nihon: Senjūmin-gaku, Kōryū, Hyōshō* [*Australian Indigenous Peoples and Japan: Indigenous Studies, Exchange, and Representation*]. Ochanomizu Shobo, 2014.
*2——Mai Ishihara and Yasuhiko Murakami, 2024, *Ainu ga Manazasu: Itami no Koe o Kiku Toki* [*Being Gazed at by the Ainu: Listening to Voices of Pain*]. Iwanami Shoten.

Mikako Suzuki is a lecturer in the Department of Liberal Arts, Faculty of Science, Toho University. She holds a double PhD in Sociology from the University of South Australia and Keio University, having graduated as the first recipient of the program in 2020. Her current research centers on sociological theory, with a particular interest in rethinking universality, knowledge production, and the decolonization of theory. She is interested in rethinking universality in ways that critically engage with historical contexts of discrimination and marginalization. Drawing from both global and Japanese perspectives, she is also involved in efforts to decolonize sociological theory. Her recent publication includes "Atarashii Kosumoporitanizumu to wa Nanika: Kyōsei o Meguru Tankyū to Sono Riron [What Is “New Cosmopolitanism”?: Theoretical Perspectives for Living Together Better]" (Koyo Shobō, 2023).

Read All



Emanuele Coccia

May 12, 2025