

THROUGH THE 'LOOKING GLASS' AT TARRAWARRA MUSEUM OF ART

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Top:
Judy Watson, *standing stones, ashes to ashes*, 2020, earth, acrylic, graphite on canvas, 229 x 181cm; courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane; photo: Carl Warner

Bottom:
Yhonnie Scarce, *Death Zephyr*, 2017, installation detail view, 'The National 2017: New Australian Art', Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2017; hand-blown glass vases, nylon and steel armature, dimensions variable; courtesy the artist and This Is No Fantasy, Melbourne; photo: © AGNSW

Opposite:
Judy Watson, exhibition installation view, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2020; © Ikon Gallery



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'Looking Glass', which recently opened at Healesville's TarraWarra Museum of Art after eight months of closure, couples two Indigenous artists whose practices uniquely capture the metaphysical nature of Country as the corporeal embodiment of ancestors. The titular looking glass references an otherworldliness that evokes the Dreaming. Curator Hetti Perkins has selected artists Yhonnie Scarce and Judy Watson whose influence on their respective media emulates the Aboriginal relationship between culture, community and Country. Perkins describes the exhibition as an 'alchemy of elemental materiality'.¹ Between them, Scarce and Watson cover all elements of Country.

That the exhibition was born of a collaboration with Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, United Kingdom, lends a particular significance to the spiritual nature of place. Watson, whose matrilineal family are the Waanyi people of north-west Queensland, and whose patrilineal heritage is Scottish, English and Irish, describes a duality of identity that includes both the colonised and the coloniser. Watson underwent a research trip to the United Kingdom in 2019 to visit ancient sites of pre-historical significance, including standing stones, circles and hill figures across the British Isles.

In 'Looking Glass', Watson has overlaid the shadowy presences of these sites, rendered in ochres, charcoals and pigments, with Aboriginal cultural objects and Australian plants in a layering of our understanding of culture and place. The world-renowned Stonehenge and other locations are heritage-listed and lauded as the origins of a great civilisation, while many Aboriginal sites are disregarded or destroyed.² Watson's *standing stones, ashes to ashes* (2020) addresses this in the context of the recent Australian bushfires. The environmental crisis we now face has only recently come into consciousness for many Australians, but has been a longstanding concern for Aboriginal people who have witnessed the degradation of the land and its people since colonisation.

This lack of status attributed to Aboriginal sites and histories is shared by Scarce's subject matter. European equivalents of atomic disasters such as Chernobyl are well established in popular culture,³ but the purposeful nuclear destruction by the British of Emu Fields and Maralinga between 1956 and 1963 is not widely known. The human and environmental consequences are ongoing.

In addition to the colonial relationship between the United Kingdom and Australia, Birmingham held a particular significance for Scarce whose work has focused on the intergenerational impacts of these nuclear tests that took place near her birthplace of Woomera. Scarce's medium, a fission of earth, air and

fire into glass, echoes the very effect of this testing on the earth at Maralinga, where sand crystallised under the extreme heat.

During her residency (which was cut short due to the global pandemic but which she hopes to resume in 2021), Scarce began researching materials held at the University of Birmingham including documents related to the research of German physicists Otto Frisch and Rudolf Peierls. Frisch and Peierls developed the first technical exposition of a nuclear weapon under the supervision of Australian physicist Mark Oliphant. Scarce's *Cloud Chamber* (2020) is comprised of hundreds of hand-blown glass yams in the formation of a dispersing nuclear cloud, imitating the effect the explosion had on the land and its inhabitants as the mist of radiation drifted over them.

'Looking Glass' suggests reflection but also a reality check. Scarce and Watson's works are a mirror of our times, in the most literal sense, and offer insight into a world turned upside down. They reveal an uncomfortable paradox: this alternate universe of destruction and genocide is in fact reality. It is our shared history. 'The people are still within the

objects,' says Watson. 'They reflect back our perception and pull people into our world of understanding.'⁴



1. Hetti Perkins as quoted in a TarraWarra Museum of Art media release announcing the exhibition, 14 September 2020.

2. To name a recent but not isolated example, two 46,000-year-old Aboriginal rock shelters were destroyed by mining giant Rio Tinto at Juukan Gorge in Western Australia. See Nick Toscano and Hamish Hastie, 'Rio Tinto blasted ancient Aboriginal caves for \$135m of iron ore', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 2020: www.smh.com.au/business/companies/rio-tinto-blasted-ancient-aboriginal-caves-for-135m-of-iron-ore-20200807-p55jia.html, accessed 3 November 2020. More recently, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews defended the decision to cut down a sacred 350-year-old Indigenous tree for a Victorian highway upgrade. Members of the Djab Wurrung Heritage Protection Embassy have been protesting the decision since 2018. See Sian Johnson and Sarah Jane Bell, 'Victorian Supreme Court order puts Western Highway works on hold after felling of tree on Djab Wurrung country', *ABC News*, 27 October 2020: www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-28/western-highway-works-on-hold-after-supreme-court-order/12820806, accessed 3 November 2020.

3. Take for instance, the recent television miniseries *Chernobyl* (2019) which follows the 1986 nuclear disaster in the titular Ukrainian city and the clean-up efforts that followed.

4. Judy Watson in conversation with the author, 20 October 2020.

'Looking Glass: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce' is currently on view at TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, until 8 March 2021. From 2021 to 2023, 'Looking Glass' will tour Australian museums and galleries supported by NETS Victoria.

