

YHONNIE SCARCE

Kokatha/Nukunu

born 1973 in Woomera, South Australia

lives and works in Melbourne

The day we went away 2004

hand-blown glass, found suitcase

42.0 x 46.0 x 37.0 cm

Private collection, New Zealand

The earliest work in the exhibition, *The day we went away* was produced during Yhonnie Scarce's final year at the South Australian School of Art in 2004, where she undertook a major in glass. The medium of glass has continued to lie at the centre of the artist's practice. Scarce has become an expert glassblower and frequently works in collaboration with artisans at the neighbouring Jam Factory in Adelaide. As catalogue essayist Daniel Browning has observed, 'Scarce has almost single-handedly created a medium-based genre of Indigenous art that is without precedent'.

A found suitcase containing a collection of bush bananas, *The day we went away* speaks to the histories of displacement and dislocation related to the removal of Aboriginal children from their homelands and families, and to the experiences of Aboriginal people being sent to missions, to foster families, into domestic servitude, and to work as itinerant labourers. In counterpoint, it might also refer to the suitcases of colonisers and missionaries who imposed themselves on Aboriginal communities, extracting resources as well as exploiting human labour.

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What they wanted 2006–10

hand-blown glass and cotton twine

150.0 x 100.0 cm (overall)

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Shirley Cameron Wilson Bequest Fund 2007

From the moment the British colonised Australia in 1788, settlers encountered active resistance from First Nations communities as sovereign people defending their lands. Known as the frontier wars, thousands of Aboriginal men, women and children were killed in these exchanges, with violent massacres strategically deployed by colonists to eradicate Indigenous people from their Country.

Yhonnie Scarce's practice has a memorial function, exploring the far-reaching impacts and legacies of colonisation, government policies and historical atrocities committed against Aboriginal people. Acknowledging the lack of public monuments dedicated to the frontier wars, *What they wanted* is one of numerous works by Scarce that memorialises First Peoples who were murdered as a result of colonial violence and subsequent genocidal government policies. The cruciform format of the work also alludes to the historical role of the church in these events.

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Burial ground 2009

hand-blown glass

dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

Bush foods, such as yams, bush plums and bush bananas appear repeatedly in Yhonnie Scarce's work, attesting to the abundant and sustaining nature of the land, as well as to the significance of Indigenous ecological knowledge and connection to Country.

In works such as *Burial ground*, and the accompanying *Blood on the wattle (Elliston, South Australia, 1849)* 2013, also in this room, the elongated heart-shaped yam figures are uncannily anthropomorphic. They lie here in memorial to ancestral figures who lost their lives in the frontier wars defending sacred ground. As a resting place exploring the darkest parts of Australia's colonial history, *Burial ground* also refers to ecological destruction – to the devastation of Country – as a direct result of colonisation.

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***The collected* 2010**

hand-blown sandblasted glass, found wooden boxes,
transparent synthetic polymer resin, metal

10.9 x 15.6 x 24.6 cm; 7.4 x 30.7 x 27.5 cm;

13.1 x 33.5 x 27.0 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, NGV Supporters of Indigenous Art, 2011

Yhonnie Scarce spent her secondary and tertiary years growing up in Adelaide, which is renowned as an international centre for cultural anthropology. Significant collections of Aboriginal material culture in institutions such as the South Australian Museum still include the remains of family members and ancestors originally gathered as objects of scientific research. These collections are especially sensitive to Aboriginal people, for whom such artefacts remain disconnected from Country, family and the communities to whom they belong, and are unable to be released as ancestral spirits who might heal and guide First Nations communities in the present.

Scarce's work often incorporates found objects that reference the disciplinary forms of such colonial institutions and their methods of representation, informed by religion, ethnography, medical science, museology and taxonomy. *The collected* encompasses a series of bureaucratic cabinet drawers, which reference the colonial archives, records and ethnographic collections of human and cultural artefacts found in such museums.

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Florey and Fanny 2012

hand-blown glass and found cotton aprons

dimensions variable

City of Yarra Council collection, Melbourne

Family history, and an abiding respect and admiration for her forebears and ancestors, is central to Yhonnie Scarce's work. Nukunu women, Florey and Fanny were Scarce's great grandmother and grandmother respectively. Fanny has appeared elsewhere in Scarce's work, notably in the multi-panelled *Remember Royalty* 2018, first shown at ACCA in 2018, photographed with her partner Barwell in the opal fields of Andamooka. Their daughter Beverly appears in the background with Barwell in *Working class man (Andamooka opal fields)* 2017 elsewhere in this room.

Here Florey and Fanny are represented through the white aprons that were the standard uniform for young Aboriginal girls sent into domestic servitude. Scarce has sewn Florey and Fanny's names into these garments to restore her family members' identity to these otherwise anonymous costumes. Carried in the pockets of these cotton aprons are glass bush plums, relating both to bush tucker and also to the metaphoric umbilical cords of family connection. In this work these women are secretly carrying these bush plums as a way to keep close to Country, as they would have carried language and culture, whilst being constrained and controlled by the uniform apron strings of domestic servitude.

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***Blood on the wattle (Elliston, South Australia, 1849)* 2013**

hand-blown glass and transparent synthetic polymer resin

60.0 x 210.0 x 75.0 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased with funds donated by Kerry Gardner, Andrew Myer and The Myer Foundation, 2013

As white European settlers took up farmlands in remote South Australia in the nineteenth century, they were met by resistance from local Indigenous communities who fought to retain their traditional homelands, hunting grounds and waterholes. Now documented as part of the frontier wars, the 1849 Elliston Massacre was the culmination of a series of reprisal attacks that resulted in Aboriginal people being shot or herded to their deaths over the cliffs of Waterloo Bay, South Australia. Whilst colonial records are limited and underestimate the death toll, recent scholarship confirms that at least fourteen Wirangu people were killed at the site. However, oral histories have circulated since at least 1880 that more than two-hundred Aboriginal people lost their lives at Waterloo Bay.

Yhonnie Scarce's work *Blood on the wattle (Elliston, South Australia, 1849)* memorialises this distressing, and until recently, unacknowledged and contested history. Scarce's Perspex coffin contains four-hundred blown-glass, black bush yams, which stand in for the unknown number of Indigenous people killed at Elliston, and for the many unknown Aboriginal people who have died as a result of colonisation. Seeking to redress the lack of memorials dedicated to the Aboriginal narratives of Australia's frontier wars and massacres, *Blood on the wattle* preceded the public memorial to this event that was eventually established at Elliston in 2017 after much public contestation.

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The cultivation of whiteness 2013

hand-blown glass, painted metal and found glass beakers

60 glass sculptures in 60 beakers

dimensions variable

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 2014

Symbolically deploying the material of glass as both a lens and a mirror, *The cultivation of whiteness* focusses attention on historically racist scientific theories of assimilation. This work is underpinned by the litany of harsh and degrading abuses suffered by Aboriginal people in the name of scientific and medical research, including the practice of eugenics and biological theories in the construction and 'cultivation of whiteness'. These practices also led to the forced and systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families, known as the Stolen Generations, who were placed in white Australian families as a means to 'breed' out their Indigeneity, and ultimately Indigenous people as a whole.

In *The cultivation of whiteness* Scarce presents sixty bush bananas, yams and plums in sixty glass beakers, each bearing an uncanny and disturbing resemblance to embryos, hearts, and kidneys. Extending the length of the gallery walls, these organ-like objects are presented in taxonomic fashion, like an enduring timeline of the continuing legacy of policies and practices that continue to have traumatic repercussions for Indigenous communities today.

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Weak in colour but strong in blood 2014

hand-blown glass, found steel trolleys and medical equipment
dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

First presented at the Biennale of Sydney in 2014, *Weak in colour but strong in blood* is one of several works in the exhibition that critically refers to histories of scientific, medical and anthropological research conducted on Aboriginal people, including harmful and degrading theories and quasi-scientific practices of eugenics, anthropometrics, the blood quantum debate and the racialised ethnographic gaze.

Presented in the 'white cube' of the gallery space, the clinical and forensic environment of Scarce's installation is further emphasised by industrially scaled infirmary curtains and cold steel hospital trollies. Our attention is drawn to collections of glass forms, presented as specimens on display, which are subject to varying degrees of scrutiny, categorisation, contortion and deformation by scientific and medical implements. These 'eviscerated organs', as writer Daniel Browning has referred to them, recall the historical collection and dissection of human remains by colonial museums around the world in the name of scientific and ethnographic research.

The title *Weak in colour but strong in blood* also offers a counterpoint to these troubling and traumatic histories, referring to the strength and resilience of First Nations peoples in maintaining cultural knowledge and identity, and keeping culture strong despite these historical abuses.

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Dinah 2016

inkjet print from archival photograph and hand-blown glass
dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

Dinah Coleman is Yhonnie Scarce's great great grandmother. Her photo was taken at Koonibba in the 1920s, a Lutheran mission on Wirangu country near Tjutjuna/Ceduna, in remote South Australia. The photographer is unknown, but the image coincides with photographs taken by anthropologist Norman Tindale who visited Koonibba in 1924. *Dinah* is one of a number of works by Scarce that retrieve historical photographic images from the containment of colonial archives and liberated them from the restrictive focus of the ethnographic gaze by recasting them as treasured, aesthetic, family portraits.

In these works, the artist makes delicate, hand-crafted glass gifts, or offerings, to her ancestors, in an act of appreciation, reverence and respect. Here Dinah is presented as though above a mantelpiece, in the manner of a family portrait at home, accompanied by a collection of precious bush plums. This act of reclamation serves as an intimate memorial to Scarce's great great grandmother, whilst also affirming the enduring influence and importance of ancestors and family connection to the present.

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***Working class man (Andamooka opal fields)* 2017**

inkjet print from archival photograph, hand-blown glass, found steel bucket

150.0 x 107.0 cm (print); installation dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

Working class man (Andamooka opal fields) is a portrait of the artist's grandfather, Barwell Coleman, pictured with his daughter Beverley – one of a long line of assured, resilient women in Scarce's family – looking on confidently in the background. In search of a better life for his family, Scarce's grandfather worked in various jobs, including as an itinerant labourer, shearer and as a miner. The photo is taken on the Andamooka opal fields, not far from Woomera, where Scarce was born.

The original image of Barwell is enlarged from an intimate family photograph, imbuing her grandfather and aunt with presence and dignity. In this shrine-like installation, Scarce gifts her late grandfather a collection of glass yams, bestowed in an antique bucket, which echoes that in the pictorial field. In Scarce's work, the anthropomorphic figure of the yam attests to the inherent connection between people and country and, equally, to the importance of family networks across country. These precious and sustaining bush foods also refer to Scarce's inheritance of the fruits of her grandfather's knowledge, labour and love of family. As with the accompanying portrait of Dinah, Scarce pays homage to her ancestors, sharing their significant stories in the present.

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***Missile Park* 2021**

zinc sheet, steel frame, earth magnets, bitumen paint, shellac, hand-blown glass

300.0 x 300.0 x 400.0 cm (shed 1, flat); 300.0 x 300.0 x 400.0 cm (shed 2, pitched); 300.0 x 300.0 x 400.0 cm (shed 3, vaulted)

Architectural design: Mikhail Rodrick

Glass blowing assistance: Kristel Britcher

Material fabrication and construction: Corey Thomas, Caravan Studios

Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

Yhonnie Scarce's new commission *Missile Park* continues the artist's research into the British nuclear tests carried out in Australia in the 1950s and '60s. Born in Woomera, and belonging to the Kokatha and Nukunu people, Scarce's extended family were displaced from their homelands after tests were carried out at Emu Field and Maralinga – a region now zoned as the Woomera Prohibited Area. Scarce has returned repeatedly to her birthplace to investigate the effects that nuclear tests and radiation have had on local Indigenous populations and the landscape, much of which remains inaccessible today.

The installation *Missile Park* encompasses three sheds that reference the temporary dwellings established by the military at Maralinga during the height of nuclear testing in the region. Echoing vernacular Australian architecture, each structure houses twenty bush plums, a native food found on Kokatha land. These glass orbs, redolent of Country and sustenance, bear a strange resemblance to both atomic bombs and the umbilical cords of fallout babies. Contained within these dark and tomb like structures, *Missile Park* becomes a memorial to the scores of unmarked graves, to hidden burial grounds, with each plum symbolising a life lost. Glass is a material of particular significance for Scarce: made of silica, or sand, it is derived from the landscape, from the materiality of Country. Silica naturally melts to glass at intense heats – or when struck by lightning or nuclear fission, as is the case with the vitreous landscapes at Maralinga. For Scarce, glass serves as an especially relevant lens to expose and memorialise these histories.

The name 'Missile Park' refers to the public plaza situated at the front of the now closed Woomera History Museum. It contains a collection of rockets and rocket launchers, bombs, target drones, guidance systems, experimental aeroplanes and space junk related to the history of Woomera; a town established at the outset of the Cold War in 1947, specifically for the launching of British experimental rockets, and the development of air and space defence systems. Today, Woomera is still administered by the Australian Department of Defence and continues to operate as a rocket testing range. It also encompasses the Joint Defence Facility Nurrangar, a space-based surveillance and early missile detection facility operated between the Australian Defence Force and United States Air Force, operational from 1969 and decommissioned in 1999. In more recent years, Woomera has also become known (and infamous) for the now closed Woomera Detention Centre, as well as being the proposed future site of a nuclear waste dump.

The idea of *Missile Park*, as the title for Yhonnie Scarce's exhibition, also delineates a much greater area, known as the Woomera Prohibited Area, or Woomera Exclusion Zone. This area extends across remote South Australia, from Woomera to Maralinga, and from Emu Field to nearby William Creek, and back down to the well-known mining sites Roxby Downs and Olympic Dam. The Woomera Prohibited Area now encompasses 127,000 square kilometres, and is said to be equivalent to the size of England or the US State of Florida.

It is in this sense that the idea of *Missile Park* refers to a much bigger 'parkland', and a much bigger history. Extending across the traditional lands of six Aboriginal groups – Maralinga Tjarutja, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara, Antakirinja Matu-Yankunytjatjara, Arabana, Gawler Ranges, and Kokatha, to which Yhonnie belongs, most of the area continues to remain inaccessible to its Traditional Owners. The existence of the Woomera Prohibited Area speaks profoundly not only to the history of the Cold War, atomic tests and war games, but also to the ongoing effects of colonisation of Aboriginal land, the resulting displacement of First People from their homelands, and the impact of government, military, industrial and technical administration.