

## ***A Collaboration with Looking Glass***

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Researchers in the Posthumanities at Flinders are currently exploring other ways of writing art criticism, and the *Looking Glass* show has given us the opportunity to test our approach, in this case to what we are calling *Collaborative More-than-Human Aesthetics*.

For us, the artist—the human—is no longer front and centre, and is not the sole *point of origin* of the work. It is a well-established reflex in mainstream art criticism to focus on individual genius and artist biographies—the much discussed ‘author function’ has not undone this reflex. What we would rather want to insist on is any artist’s necessary collaborations with their materials in particular ecologies that enable the work to emerge as a joint effort.

The two artists in *Looking Glass* are brought together for this travelling show by curator Hetti Perkins, that in itself is the start of a collaborative process creating a larger heterogeneous assemblage. All sorts of human and non-human agencies have to be brought together: funding from various sources (22 organisations are listed in the back of the catalogue), logistical plans, essay-writers, proof-readers, gallery spaces, and of course the arrangement of the art-works themselves. Curation in itself necessarily involves skilled collaboration and the installation of non-human agencies. And to the extent that the curation ‘works’, it too is an achieved aesthetic activity.

Already the texts in the catalogue of *Looking Glass* bring the artists to us as more-than-individuals. The two women are careful to speak of their community origins, what Countries they are from, their biographies and their geographical trajectories. This could be part of what some Indigenous scholars call ‘Indigenous standpoint theory’: positionality and horizontally distributed authority. Country is always in focus, as it runs through these artists and their work. But they are also introduced by the *materials* they are working on or with, and that are working on or with them:

Judy Watson says in conversation with Hetti Perkins (in a text called ‘Heartstring’ in the catalogue):

*...string is not just vegetable fibre, it could be hair from the body...It collects all the DNA from the hair of the person who is making the string—rolling it up and down on their leg and capturing the hairs and particles of skin—*

The clouds from the Maralinga bomb tests moved across Yhonnie Scarce’s grandfather’s Kokatha Country, and at the Breakaway ground zero site, she tells Hetti Perkins:

*...the ground turned to glass from the blasts. It looks like water. The land melted.*

So that the glass she blows, with her own breath, into *Cloud Chamber* (2020) or *Fallout Babies* (2016); the glass, the very material, has continuity with that Country. Maybe the glass asked her to blow it, to keep trying until it became a concept and a form. Maybe the idea came from somewhere else, or maybe it wasn’t linear, but suspended in a simultaneous network? Scarce explores and traces these threads and lineages, including through her artistic residency in Birmingham, UK, a city intrinsic to the invention of the atomic bomb that would later wreak devastation on her ancestral Aboriginal land. She recognises the collision of these parallel worlds, in that England is also the source of the colonisation that set up the possibility for Maralinga being a ‘terra nullius’ within Terra

Nullius in the first place. This parallel is there too in Judy Watson's work where she overlays stone-age European monuments with bush strings that hold deep, prehistoric, and embodied significances embedded into her own DNA.



Image: Yhonnie Scarce, *Fallout Babies*, 2016, blown glass, acrylic and found hospital cribs, dimensions variable, Collection of the artist, installation Flinders University Museum of Art, Bedford Park. Photo: Brianna Speight

### Just describe...

Watson's texts are narrated in the first person, like most artist statements, but her sense of personhood actually seems to be born out of the descriptive narrative. It's not as though she uses written narratives to assert or represent a fixed pre-established position. Instead, the texts describe the *process of finding* a provisional sense of person and place through the composition of artistic sensations, which means she can't not respond to the materials.

If you look, you can see that Judy Watson's artist statements are replete with post-human ideas. These statements appear as extended labels alongside some of her paintings, describing the creative processes that went into composing each work. She recalls the sensations of her working materials, and the involuntary memories that this tactility triggered. She describes tracing the contours of historical artefacts until they form thought bubbles for imagining a different future. She recounts the stories and conversations that transpired in her studio and how they informed her choice of hue and tone.

Watson's *descriptive* artist's statements seem to follow one of the methodological principles of more-than-human aesthetics: Description before Theory. A good description embeds thinking in the ongoing articulation of living relationships. Bruno Latour argues that this kind of descriptive-thinking



is what our new climatic regime needs because it allows us to think about the transformation of life itself, as it is actually happening. We think that what Watson does through description (rather than theorisation) of her practice, is reveal the agency and plurality of an object (namely, string) that is otherwise deemed insignificant, banal and singular. She is also showing us a glimpse of how culture is held and carried between objects. As she describes the various incarnations of the string, and as readers and viewers we are able to witness a transformation of a 'mere' object into a life-force:

Image: Judy Watson, *standing stone, kangaroo grass, bush string*, 2020, acrylic, graphite on canvas, 246 x 181 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane, Photo: Carl Warner

### So many threads...

Who could know how plural string could be? It weaves and binds multiple agencies, meanings, experiences:

1. String as object: "String is not just vegetable fibre..."
2. String as gender, tradition: "Women are traditionally the string-makers..."
3. String as family, culture: "It collects DNA from the hair of the person who's making the string – rolling it up and down on their leg..."
4. String as porous, story-teller: "Whether it is going into a museum collection or somewhere else, it's gathering all that community with it..."
5. String as corporal, visceral: "The DNA of those people, their resonance, is still in the object. You can feel it when you look at it or when you touch it..."
6. String as refusing linear time: "The first thing I thought when I saw some of those objects was, could that have been my grandmother's hair, great grandmothers, great, great grandmother's hair within those objects? And further back, my great, great grandfather as well."
7. String as aesthetic, as metaphor: "I'm interested in all those stories and the way they rub up against each other, like string."

### What can glass do...?

Glass, also, is multiple, but in a different way. It is not just fanciful for us to say of Scarce that 'the glass asked her to blow it'. The glass's appearance and malleability *speak to her* of its potential to meld with the human artist's feelings and memory and history. They collaborate with each other towards an achievement that is the work-to-be-done. They cannot ask either too little, or too much, of each other. But just what each might be capable of. And once the collaborative creative process

is begun, it cannot be reversed, just like you can't un-blow a glass creation. It either 'works' or it doesn't.

To give glass agency in this way is to treat its liveliness as real, as Jane Bennett did in her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. A thing may not have the 'full' intentionality of a human subject, but it will always be able to surprise us. This way of thinking reverses the death-drive of a certain kind of objective materialism, where the things of the world are treated as either dead, or about to be dead, as they are turned into resources. The precious objects that Scarce has created are vibrantly alive in the way the aesthetic, par excellence, makes possible: the glass is *transformed into other forms* (a bomb, babies); plays of lights and colours, made for what human eyes are capable of seeing, flickering as you move around the objects.



Image: Yhonnie Scarce, *Only a mother could love them*, 2016, hand blown glass, 25.0 x 15.0 cm diameter each (variable sizes - approx.), Monash University Collection, Purchased by the Monash Business School 2017, Courtesy of Monash University Museum of Art, Courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

## Public responses...

Now the curator has come and gone and completed the installation that is another collaboration within these 'white cubes'. There is a set of collective feelings now in place, including the good will of these two artists to let their work be looking glasses to each other. The curator has gone through a collaborative process with the artists, the objects, the gallery staff, the white walls, until the hang is deemed a success. Then the public is let in.

Some of the (white) public might remain perplexed by an exhibition that is quite similar to a commercial gallery show. They pull themselves up if they find themselves wondering, 'would that Judy Watson go with my pink sofa in the sitting room?', treating it as a mere decorative commodity. No, these things are not for sale. You have to find another way to 'get into' the show. And one of these ways is quite like the way in which the artists introduced themselves, with personal stories. Over drinks and canapes at the opening, one visitor is overheard saying, 'My grandfather worked on the rockets up at Woomera...'

Dig deep enough and your personal story could become a settler narrative, fraught with conflict and collaboration. The cruelty of dispossession and forgetfulness that enabled inherited wealth to flow from the land, leaving Country, and countrymen and women, bereft. Breaking things up into

commodities makes that forgetfulness easy, like parcels of land fenced and bought and sold.

Look at yourself as you look at Looking Glass.

Another more thoughtful visitor ushered some of his own post-human energy into the exhibition. He was musing on Watson's artist statements, kind of wishing that he was engaging with her artworks in the studio rather than the gallery; her descriptions made him feel like the real action had already transpired: ('she's probably surfing the flow of post-human energy elsewhere now, while I'm left to passively admire the residue that she discarded on her way through'). So, he started taking photographs of Scarce's biomorphic glass forms, thinking he wanted to stir up his own post-human transformations, as he set his phone-camera into orbit around Scarce's transparent orbs. And it felt like the ground glass of the camera lens and the blown glass of Scarce's work entered into some kind of conversation; an arrangement that seemed to be bringing something new into existence, but something beyond his comprehension ...



Image: Installation view *Looking Glass: Judy Watson and Yhonnie Scarce*, May 2021, Flinders University Museum of Art, Bedford Park. Photo: Brianna Speight

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