

Yhonnie Scarce

The Light of Day

Artwork Labels

Ground Floor Concourse

Wall text

Yhonnie Scarce: The Light of Day is the largest-ever ensemble of glass and mixed media works by internationally recognised Kokatha and Nukunu artist Yhonnie Scarce brought together in Australia, as part of the Perth Festival 2024.

Yhonnie Scarce is one of Australia's leading contemporary artists known for her large-scale hand-blown glass installations, as well as smaller, more intimate objects. The artist also makes work that uses vintage found materials such as suitcases and linen, as well as scientific objects such as pincers and beakers.

Scarce's work illuminates the effects of uranium mining and sites of disruption, both internationally and locally – drawing particular attention to the site of Maralinga and the often-invisible impact of nuclear testing affecting Scarce's birthplace of Woomera, South Australia. Her work also makes visible the dehumanising of First Nations' families and communities, who were brutalised without their consent for the sake of scientific research – common during the late 1800s and early 1900s in Australia.

For the first time the artist's cloud series – three massive installations of glass yams referencing nuclear fallout – are on show together, alongside further private and public collection works from around the country and overseas. *Yhonnie Scarce: The Light of Day* is the culmination of decades of work and mastery of the glass medium that few Australian artists have achieved.

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This exhibition spans Gallery 01, concourse, and Gallery 06 (Level One).

Members of Aboriginal communities are respectfully advised that several people mentioned in writing and depicted in photographs in the exhibition have passed away. All such references and photographs in this exhibition have been included with permission by the artist and community.



Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Missile Park

2021

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

Courtesy of the artist and
THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

2023/E072

Standing like monolithic tombs, these three sheds reference the temporary dwellings established by the military at Maralinga in South Australia during the nuclear testing by the British and Australian governments in the 1950s and 1960s. Scarce's extended family were displaced from their homeland following these tests, as were many other Aboriginal people across what is now zoned as the Woomera Prohibited Area, an enormous expanse equivalent to the size of England. Many people died as a result of the tests or suffered the effects of radioactive fallout. Both governments covered up the truth of these events.

For Scarce, “[Woomera] creates a fire in my heart that hasn't been extinguished yet.” This work stands as a memorial to the scores of unmarked graves and to hidden burial grounds. The bush plums, a native food found on

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Kokatha Country, sit quietly inside each shed. For the artist, they are “time bombs waiting to go off.”

AGWA values artist-led information and knowledge sharing. Differences in name, place and language spellings may result from different languages and dialects in use.

Gallery 01

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Scarred

2013

hand-blown glass, Perspex

Private collection.

2023/E068

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Shackled

2006

sandblasted hand-blown glass, metal

Private collection.

2023/E071

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

In The Dead House

2020

hand-blown glass, vintage mortuary trolley

Courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

2023/E064

AGWA values artist-led information and knowledge sharing. Differences in name, place and language spellings may result from different languages and dialects in use.

Wall text

...their charred revelation...

During the development of this work the artist researched what was colloquially known as ‘the dead house’ – a stone mortuary that existed on North Terrace, Adelaide, as part of the old Adelaide Hospital and psychiatric asylum, where Coroner William Ramsay Smith worked in the early 1900s. At that time, it was assumed Aboriginal people in Adelaide would soon become ‘extinct’, so were studied as scientific oddities. Ramsay Smith would decapitate and dissect the remains of Aboriginal people illicitly sending the body parts, including the heads, to universities and museums in the United Kingdom, reaping financial reward in doing so.

During his time as coroner, Ramsay Smith amassed a ‘collection’ of 600 Aboriginal people’s bodies and body parts, including 182 skulls taken from sacred Aboriginal burial grounds. Despite being suspended from coronial duties in 1903 after an enquiry was launched following charges of misusing human bodies, Ramsay Smith was cleared and his work in the mortuary continued.

Through this work the artist challenges the viewer to think about, and humanise, the people whose remains were so unethically and brutally used, and to consider how we might memorialise those people. It poses a question around the pursuit of scientific knowledge, which is not a neutral endeavour, and has historically had severe and at times catastrophic impacts on First Nations people around the world.

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Death Zephyr

2016

hand-blown glass, steel, nylon

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Purchased with funds provided by the Aboriginal Art Collection Benefactors, 2017. 2023/E056

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Wall text

...shrouds of black mist...

In this immersive installation, Scarce has created over 2000 small hand-blown glass yams, with each delicate form representing a person. Configured in the gallery and suspended from the ceiling, the mass of figures appears like a vast, wind-swept cloud moving through the landscape – an eerie presence that recalls the poisonous clouds that rained across Maralinga in South Australia when the British and Australian governments undertook nuclear testing there in the 1950s and 1960s.

The work speaks to the irrevocable damage and displacement that the nuclear testing caused in forcing many Aboriginal families to leave their Country and way of life.

The artist conducted extensive research into her own family history to understand and depict the impact of the nuclear fallout in the region of her birth, and her Custodial Country. The full extent of sickness and death caused by the radiation may never be known, but Scarce has crafted the work into a memorial monument, making visible a representation of the atomic cloud that spread across Scarce's Country like a 'grim reaper', killing many and forever altering people's lives and destroying Country.

On a broader level, the work calls to attention the disregard for human life under the banner of ethno-nationalism that any country is at risk of embarking upon.

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Dinah

2016

hand-blown glass, archival photograph, wood

Courtesy of THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

2023/E069

AGWA values artist-led information and knowledge sharing. Differences in name, place and language spellings may result from different languages and dialects in use.



Please do not photograph this work.

This is a portrait of the artist's great-great-grandmother, Dinah. The photograph was taken without her permission. The artist wishes for you to know who Dinah is but wants to protect her from further disrespect.

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

The Collected

2010

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

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
Purchased, NGV Supporters of Indigenous Art, 2011.

2023/E057

AGWA values artist-led information and knowledge sharing. Differences in name, place and language spellings may result from different languages and dialects in use.

Wall text

...refuses to disappear...

Dinah Coleman is Yhonnie Scarce's great-great-grandmother. The photo of her on the far wall was taken at Koonibba, a Lutheran mission on Wirangu country near Tjutjuna/Ceduna, in the 1920s 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 several works by Scarce that retrieves historical photographic images from the containment of colonial archives and liberates them from their ethnographic gaze. The artist recasts these photographs as treasured family portraits, reclaiming their original intent as scientific evidence of a supposedly 'dying race of people'. *Dinah* is presented as though above a mantelpiece, with hand-blown offerings or gifts sitting below; small bush plums that represent the people who have descended from Dinah across time. Dinah is the grandmother of the artist's grandfather, Barwell Coleman, who is depicted in *Working Class Man (Andamooka Opal Fields)*.

The Collected is a group of hand-blown glass yams, encased in a replica of a Victorian era natural history archive, file and object box. This style of box was used by museums to house objects, including human and animal

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remains as well as photographs and written notes. The artist has placed symbols of her family – the small yams – into the boxes, to evidence how Aboriginal people, through their remains, images and belongings, were once ‘collected’, as though First Nations people were scientific oddities or animals to be studied.

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Oppression, Repression (Family Portrait)

2004

hand-blown glass, tin, inkjet print

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased with funds donated by
Judith and Leon Gorr, 2010.

2023/E400

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Thunder Raining Poison

2016–17

hand-blown glass, wire, metal

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 2016.
This acquisition has been supported by Susan Armitage in
recognition of the 50th Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum.

2023/E051

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Wall text

...a fallout mirage...

The monumental hanging work, *Thunder Raining Poison*, references a nuclear test conducted in Maralinga in 1956, code-named Breakaway. This event culminated in the detonation of a Red Beard fission bomb, which decimated all life within a one-kilometre radius of the bomb blast at ground zero. While it was thought the fallout from the bomb would be small, the uranium and plutonium were dispersed by the wind over a distance of at least 450 kilometres and 11,400 metres up into the air. Its range impacted communities as far away as the Northern Territory, New South Wales and Queensland but specifically impacted the lands and Country surrounding Maralinga and Woomera, where the artist's family lived.

The immense heat generated by the blast transformed the sand around the test site into green glass, representations of which can be seen scattered throughout this work by several green hand-blown glass yams. The level of plutonium that still exists in the soil at Maralinga will still be present at lethal levels in 24,000 years' time. The artist made this significant work as a warning and reminder of humanity's capacity for immense destruction at a catastrophic scale.

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Remember Royalty

2018

archival photographs, water-based ink screen printed on
vintage fabrics, hand-blown glass, vintage objects

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and Tate, with support
from the Qantas Foundation in 2015. Purchased 2022.

2023/E055

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Wall text

...suitcase of breaths...

Four portraits and three accompanying sculptures memorialise the artist's Kokatha and Nukunu ancestors. The black-and-white photographic images are drawn from family archives and show Scarce's great-great grandmother Melba, c1917; her great-great grandfather William, c1920 (Melba's husband); her grandmother Fanny, c1950; and other family members in a group portrait taken at the Koonibba Mission, c1911, where they lived under duress. Each image is enlarged and screen-printed onto a sheet or blanket from a similar era to the original photographs.

The scale of each photograph has been purposefully enlarged to monumental size, symbolising the impact of the generational cultural legacy left to Scarce and the fortitude of the artist's family. The dimensions of the family portraits also serve to address the power imbalance to which the colonised person is subjected. The viewer is positioned to look up at the artist's family with the reverence they deserve, a powerful antidote to the experiences of being looked down upon.

Scarce pairs the portraits with offerings in the form of hand-blown glass objects and found items. The offerings reinforce the idea of the work as a shrine, a place to memorialise and for contemplation.

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As far as I am concerned my grandparents, great grandparents and those people who walked my Country before me, are Australia's royalty.

YHONNIE SCARCE, 2018

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Florey and Fanny

2011

hand-blown glass, cotton

City of Yarra, Melbourne.

2023/E060

In an intimate expression of familial honouring, the names of Scarce's grandmother, Fanny, and great-great-grandmother, Florey, have been lovingly hand-stitched into two domestic aprons. Styled upon those worn by Florey and Fanny when forced to work as domestic servants in the early 1900s, they were custom-made to fit Scarce's shape. "It was important that I could wear them. I felt close to these women, and a strong sense of love for them."

Stories of First Nations domestic servitude are largely hidden and unacknowledged. In this work, 16 hand-blown glass bush plums are concealed. Representing the women's ongoing connection to their culture, the treasured bush food is hidden from the unsympathetic and threatening lens of British society at the time. Yet the stems break through the linen fabric, showing that Scarce's 'two nannas' were not just domestic servants but strong Aboriginal women who could maintain their sense of self and culture in the face of oppression.

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Wall text

anneal this breath

ANNEAL | heat-up and cool down
slowly; soften and strengthen to
eliminate stress that accumulates
through time; forge an open
response to resist and shape-shift
without losing one's essence.

mine and refine this float of molten
landscape raw silica-sand and
limestone sites sliced and stirred
and hot-shop forged we
witness excavations of targets and melts
a redaction of origins of
lives of lands

see what a breath can do

flux and bubble rise to fever-
point and sweat hot flesh on
flesh so carefully laid rested
and hung body-broken

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waits she inhales and
exhales she waits

see what her breath can do

recognise this breath gifted
from Old Ones lessons afloat
in the wake of time a warm
breeze-like dance on shards of
shadow and light navigate
their caress the gentlest of
touch she will hold their breath-
deep for as long as it takes for
as long as it takes to furnace and
shape you a story

see what a breeze can do

a perfect wall of brittle display a
cultivation of whiteness stolen
and displaced she seeks paper
and blood where bodies are
traced she gathers them near this
suitcase of breaths to one day
rest she carries in case in her
case in her

let us see what they can do

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these shimmering dreams not
what they seem a fallout mirage
of epic distortion from
furnace to fission and shrouds of
black mist to poisonous
shards of green-to-black we
bear witness to defiant life to
a mass of destruction to her
fruits her life to her body her
strength her blood

now see what her breath can do

natalie harkin, 2021

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Blood on the Wattle

2013

hand-blown glass, Perspex, steel, aluminium, fabric

Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation:
TomorrowFund, 2014.

2014/0015.a-c

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Only a Mother Could Love Them

2016

hand-blown glass

Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne.
Purchased by the Monash Business School, 2017.

2023/E058

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Gallery 06

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Family Portrait

2008

found alcohol bottles, twine, wood

Courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

2023/E067

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Silence part 1

2014

hand-blown glass, stainless steel

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Purchased 2016.

2023/E052

Silence part 2

2014

hand-blown glass, stainless steel

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Purchased 2016.

2023/E053

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Cloud Chamber

2020

hand-blown glass, metal

TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Victoria

2023/E066

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Fallout Babies

2016

hand-blown glass, acrylic, found hospital cribs

Courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

2023/E070

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

The Cultivation of Whiteness

2014

hand-blown glass, commercial glass (beakers)

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 2014.

2023/E050

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Wall text

...their silence translucent...

Yhonnie Scarce, through her own family's historical lens, has researched the many eugenic practices involving Aboriginal people that occurred during the colonisation era of Australia and beyond, and references these in her work. Three works in this gallery space – *The Cultivation of Whiteness* (on your right), *Silence Part 1 and 2*, and *N000, N2359, N2351, N2402* – each narrate and highlight various dehumanising practices of the early twentieth century in Australia directed at Aboriginal people, who were seen as objects to be studied, experimented upon, and collected.

The idea of eugenics – a now discredited set of beliefs and practices that aimed to improve the genetic material of the human population by selective breeding – was the scientific directive that supported and permitted the horrific treatment of First Nations people, including the Aborigines Acts of Western Australia (1905) and South Australia (1911).

Government endorsed policies and acts enabled the removal of Aboriginal children from their families on the basis of eugenics. This led to what is now known as the Stolen Generations; children removed from their kin, Country, language and cultural knowledge. The numbers

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in the title – N000, N2359, N2351, N2402 – reference the labelling method for the images taken during the Harvard-Adelaide Universities Anthropological expedition (1938–39), in which Aboriginal people were classified according to eugenicist theories of race and intelligence.

The artist's own family members were classified and labelled, but with these works Scarce gives them a voice to talk about an important part of Australian history.

Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Glass Bomb

from the *Blue Danube* series

2015

hand-blown glass, yarn

Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Purchased 2016.

2023/E054

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Target Practice

2010

hand-blown glass, acrylic paint

Banyule Art Collection, Banyule Council, Victoria.

2023/E062

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Nucleus

2021

hand-blown glass

Courtesy of THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

2023/E073

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

N0000, N2359, N2351, N2402

2013

hand-blown glass, archival photographs

Darebin Art Collection, Bundoora, Victoria

2023/E063

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Servant and Slave

2018

hand-blown glass, porcelain

Shepparton Art Museum, 2018 Indigenous Ceramic Award – Winner.

2023/E059

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Aboriginal people were subject to forced labour and indentured servitude. This work explores instances of white female supervisors subjecting female Aboriginal servants to their own harsh forms of violence, while the servants were undertaking work that was largely unpaid. The artwork attempts to challenge popular colonial representations of Aboriginal women (symbolised as the black bush bananas) as inferior, promiscuous, childlike, and unintelligent.

The yams burst from their internment within the Edwardian-style teacups, asserting their right to be present. Scarce, using her breath to pay homage to important women in her life, asserts a new narrative where the black glass fruits, representing the strength and resilience of Aboriginal women, sit whole and poised among cracked porcelain teacups representing a perceived white fragility. The viewer, witnessing this

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moment unfolding, is brought into the shared histories of relationships between black and white women in Australia.

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Working Class Man (Andamooka Opal Fields)

2017

inkjet print, cotton rag, wood, vintage metal bucket, hand-blown glass

Artbank Collection, Melbourne, purchased 2022

2023/E061

This shrine-like installation features an enlarged family photograph from the artist's collection, which becomes representative of celebration and preservation. The photograph, taken on the Andamooka opal fields, not far from Woomera where Scarce was born, captures the artist's grandfather, Barwell Coleman, with his daughter Beverley. The image reinstates the dignity and power of her family at a time when their labour and knowledge was devalued, through stolen wages and the general treatment of Aboriginal people as indentured labour.

Scarce's family now look on assured, resilient and strong, sharing their significant stories in the present. The antique bucket mirroring the one in the photograph is a gift from the artist to her late grandfather. It contains a collection of glass yams, replicas of the precious and sustaining bush foods of the Kokatha and Nukunu peoples. The yams

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also symbolise the fruits of inheritance of culture and knowledge passed down from the artist's grandfather.

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Yhonnie Scarce

Kokatha and Nukunu peoples
born 1973 Woomera, South Australia
works Melbourne, Victoria

Hollowing Earth

2016–17

hand-blown and hot formed uranium glass, tables

Courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

2023/E065

For this work, Scarce pushed glass-blowing beyond its limits by literally breaking each piece's perfect form. Though accidental at first, the artist realised she needed to work with the material properties of the glass and deliberately allowed for sections on each bush banana to burst open into unusual shapes. As journalist Daniel Browning observed, the artist is “on a trajectory of subjecting the medium to as much stress and pressure as possible, in order to ... exhaust it and find all of its meaning.”

Heightened by Scarce's use of uranium granules to colour the glass, the resulting bush bananas – a traditional food resource for Kokatha and Nukunu peoples – appear sick, with their twisted forms, burns and gaping holes, carrying the scars of a contaminated landscape. The work is representative of the artist's beloved Kokatha Country, which has become spoilt due to uranium mining occurring in the region. It challenges us to shift our consciousness towards a greater sense of understanding

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and responsibility to this country's people and our shared landscape.

Please note: The uranium glass used in this work is inert, which means it is not harmful to visitors.

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