

JUDY WATSON *experimental beds*

ABOUT *experimental beds*

by NOREEN GRAHAME

African Americans were extended none of the rights proclaimed in the 1776 Declaration of Independence. Its primary author, Thomas Jefferson, stated in the historic document, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” That the enslaved population was denied these rights remains a contradiction between Jefferson’s words and actions.

Judy Watson is an Indigenous Australian artist who grew up in suburban Brisbane. She is a Waanyi woman whose matrilineal family is from northwest Queensland. Watson’s patrilineal family is of European descent.

In 2009 Watson visited the University of Virginia where she saw Jefferson’s architectural drawings in the exhibition *Thomas Jefferson’s Academical Village: The Creation of an Architectural Masterpiece* curated by Richard Guy Wilson. She returned to UVA’s Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection as an artist-in-residence in 2011, funded by a grant from the UVA Arts Council.

Watson felt that “having learned something of Jefferson’s history, interwoven with relationships with his white family and African American enslaved women and children also considered to be part of his blood family, I decided to use these architectural drawings as the bones for a series of works that investigated these relationships.”

During her residency Watson visited Monticello to augment her research. Leni Sorensen, an African American Research Historian, showed her the gardens and inadvertently gave her the title for her suite of etchings. Sorensen explained Jefferson’s practice of experimentation with seeds and plants he sourced from Europe to China. From the American continent, seeds were planted from those collected by the Lewis and Clark expedition. Seeds from plants that had originally arrived with enslaved people from the Congo were also planted in Monticello’s vegetable gardens. Jefferson assess the crops for their usefulness and for their adaptability to Virginia’s climactic conditions and Sorensen described the gardens as Jefferson’s “experimental beds.”

For Watson this was the perfect title for her body of work. It also encompassed “Jefferson’s pursuits across the cultural divide ‘between the sheets’ with the enslaved woman, Sally Hemings, whose descendants are both Jefferson’s and Hemings’ family.” This union between a white man and a black woman, resulting in children of mixed descent, is reflected in Watson’s own family in Australia, where the matrilineal line of her family is Australian Aboriginal, and the patrilineal line is white European.

At Monticello, Watson also met an archaeologist working at the Mulberry Row dig and photographed some of the artifacts unearthed that day. In her etchings, Watson incorporates drawings from these photographs as well as drawings of artifacts in Montello’s collection and of vegetables grown in Jefferson’s “experimental beds.”

Watson was given access to Jefferson's architectural drawings of the Academical Village by the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library. She commenced the initial transfer of Jefferson's architectural drawings and other visual material onto etching plates in September 2011 with Basil Hall Editions in Darwin. Plates and proofs were sent to UVA for her residency at UVA in October 2011, where she worked with Professor Deane Dass and advanced printmaking students on fleshing out the proofs. The plates were returned to Watson in Brisbane for further work and then sent back to Basil Hall Editions for proofing and editioning.

The project was co-published by the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, Judy Watson and graham galleries + editions in Brisbane. The suite has been acquired by a number of private and public collections in the United States and Australia, including the Library of Congress.

JUDY WATSON

experimental beds (2012)

6 color etchings

Published in editions of 20 on Hahnemühle paper

10 suites numbered 1/20 - 10/20, 10 singles numbered 11/20 - 20/20

70.0 x 54.0 cm, from zinc plates 49.5 x 37.5 cm

29.10 in x 21.25 in, from zinc plates 19.5 x 14.75 in

PRICES UNFRAMED

experimental beds 1 \$1,800

experimental beds 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 \$1,500

experimental beds suite \$8,000

To purchase, please contact the Kluge-Ruhe Collection at 434-244-0234 or kluge-ruhe@virginia.edu.

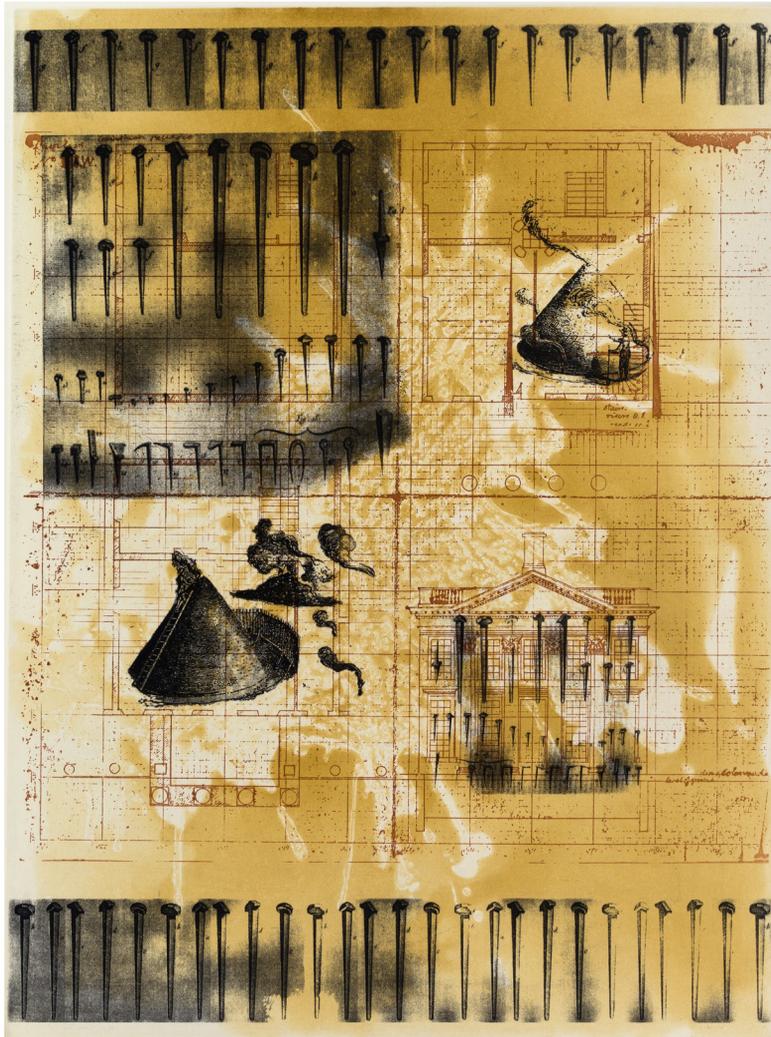
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experimental beds 1 (2012)
3-plate etching with chine collé

The left profile is that of Aboriginal artist and activist, Richard Bell, with whom Watson shared a studio in Brisbane. The right profile is that of Lindsey T. Jackson, an African American woman, who Watson knows from Brisbane but who has family in Virginia. Vegetables including squash are from Monticello's "experimental beds". Archaeological finds incorporated in the etching include a cowrie shell, a ring and a coin with an unknown figurehead on obverse. Hair-like threads appear as connecting lines here. Hair carries DNA and is often seen as a trace of somebody's presence or absence. The architectural drawing is of *The Rotunda, First Floor Plan*.



experimental beds 2 (2012)
3-plate etching

Jefferson kept meticulous records over many years covering activities on his properties. One industry was the lucrative nailery staffed mainly by ten to sixteen year-old enslaved boys. James (Jame, Jamey) Hubbard was typical of boys who worked in the nailery, starting his working life at age eleven in 1794. In 1802 his occupation in Jefferson's 'Farm Book' is registered as Charcoalburner, and Jefferson paid him a small premium for his efficiency in producing charcoal and for his round-the-clock monitoring of the kilns. Nails and kilns from the era are represented in this etching. After attempting twice to escape from his enslaved position, Jefferson sold "his rebellious slave." The new owner placed a 'Ran away' advertisement in the *Richmond Enquirer*. When Hubbard's whereabouts were discovered, Jefferson paid for his return to Monticello and had him "severely flogged in the presence of his old companions, and committed to jail." No record of Jame Hubbard exists after 1812. The architectural drawing used here is *Pavilion No. III W. Corinthian Palladio*.



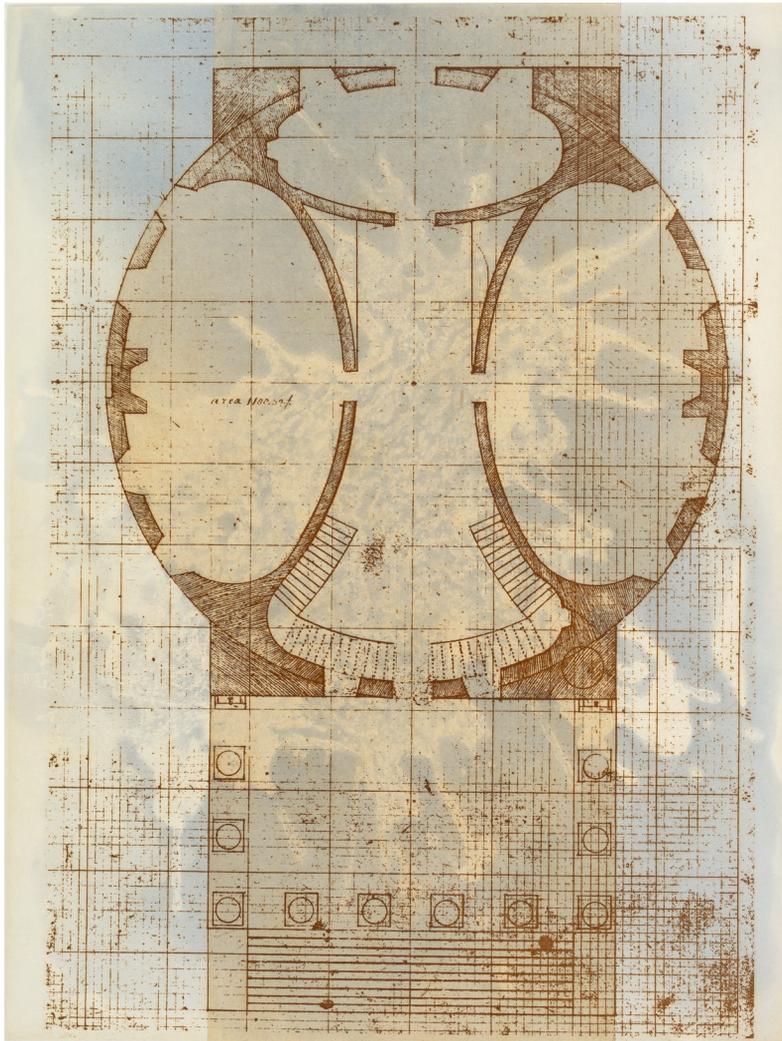
experimental beds 3 (2012)
3-plate etching

The drawing, which forms the centerpiece, is of elk antlers collected by Lewis and Clark during their expedition. They now hang in Monticello's Entrance Hall. Artifacts referencing slave presence include nails from the nailery, a bucket handle, shards of pottery and hooks and fasteners from slave women's dresses. Hooks and fasteners allude to the sexual exploitation of enslaved women by white men on plantations. These images are overlaid with the drawing of *Pavilion VII W. Doric Palladio*.



experimental beds 5 (2012)
4-plate etching

At Watson's solo exhibition, *waterline* (2011), held at the Embassy of Australia in Washington, DC, she met Eve Ferguson, an African American woman. The shape at the top center was inspired by the back of Ferguson's hair. The left profile is that of Aboriginal artist and activist, Richard Bell, with whom Watson shared a studio in Brisbane. The right profile is that of Lindsey T. Jackson, an African American woman, who Watson knows from Brisbane but who has family in Virginia. Vegetables including squash are from Monticello's "experimental beds". Artifacts referencing slave presence include nails from the nailery, a bucket handle, shards of pottery and hooks and fasteners from slave women's dresses. The architectural drawing used here is *Pavilion No. III W. Corinthian Palladio*.



experimental beds 6 (2012)
2-plate etching with chine collé

The architectural drawing is of *The Rotunda, First Floor Plan*.

COVER:

experimental beds 4 (2012)
2-plate etching

The centerpiece is Thomas Jefferson's drawing of the *Library, Elevation of the Rotunda*.