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Special Thanks to Bill Bennett, Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects, Frozen Motion Glass, McIntire Department of Art U.Va., and Seattle Art Museum.

I shall stumble over poverty, over policies, and over prejudice, Weary and torn, I stumble, Then bleary and worn I shall rise, From this place where I wait cross legged, Wait, And surprise you by my will

Yhonnie Scarce has solidified her place in the Australian contemporary arts landscape with her use of glass as her preferred (but not exclusive) medium. Armed with a visual language that immediately places her in the company of more established artists such as Fiona Foley and Julie Gough, Scarce investigates and exposes Australia’s bloody history with Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander people. Her fragile glassworks are at once objects of desire and repulsion. They are the most tactile of artworks, yet are imbued with trauma and denial.

Indigenous nuts, fruits and vegetables rendered from hand blown glass are symbolic of the Indigenous peoples of Scarce’s language groups. Scarce’s ‘mob’ hails from the Flinders Rangers in South Australia. This area is a beautiful but harsh desert-scape that produces such sustenance as native yams, bush bananas, and bush tomatoes. Each one of Scarce’s glassworks is an Indigenous person. Each one has a history, a culture and a language. When she overlays an archery-style target onto each bush fruit in Target Practice, (2010) there is no denying her objective, which in this case is to inform us of the massacres (sanctioned and illegal) that her people have endured.

When she places clear glass native fruits into a travellers suitcase in the work The Day We Went Away (2004), we are being asked to remember the forced removal of thousands and thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families over the course of the 20th century. We are also being reminded of the forced diaspora of Aboriginal people from their traditional homelands into government sanctioned reserves and Christian missions. This was a practice that continued until the mid-20th century. The use of clear glass in this instance tells us that once the truth is out, once the stories are told there is nowhere to hide. Scarce reveals our shameful history and serves it up to us on a dish of crystal clarity.

In Burial Ground (2009) Scarce has created 40 individually blown black glass yams and placed them in pairs in four rows of five. These yams are metaphors for the Aboriginal body and talk of the killing times when massacres of Aboriginal people were not uncommon. Right across the continent of Australia, Aboriginal people were slaughtered in an effort to rid the land of “the Aboriginal problem.” They also speak of more contemporary events such as the many “unexplained” deaths in custody of Aboriginal people. Deaths that “piddie society” simply refuses to take on as an issue. These 40 black glass yams are like beating hearts that will never be silenced, that will constantly pump with the blood of the victims of these atrocities and scream at us in the hope of grabbing our attention.

With Untitled (2007) we are faced with four tiny opened caskets. Inside each one Scarce has placed a small glass native flora object wrapped in white twine. Sitting like four silent sentinels these objects of death are possibly Scarce’s easiest-to-read work to date. These caskets scream what Australia can only whisper — that we have suffered dreadfully at the hands of the colonisers; that many of our country’s Indigenous cultures and ways of being have suffered greatly; that Indigenous languages have been all but silenced; that the Indigenous presence was almost wiped-out. Yet hiding underneath the death cloths hides a strong and determined people, re-grouping and gathering strength. We will resurrect ourselves and spring, cat-like, from the forced binding of the ropes of colonisation and as Dr. Romaine Moreton’s poem so eloquently states ‘surprise you by my will’.

—Tess Allas BCA (UoW), MA (USyd)

1 Excerpt from: I Shall Surprise You By My Will; Moreton, Romaine; Post me to the Prime Minister, Jukurrpa Books, 2004

2 Since the first moment of white contact Aboriginal Australians have been seen by the colonial and continuing authorities as problematic and their presence in the landscape as undesirable.
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