JUDY WATSON & HELEN JOHNSON

the red thread of history, loose ends

‘In a way we are putting those loose threads out and hoping the audience will travel across and meet us in the middle.’
—Judy Watson

Engaging with the history of colonisation, the work of Judy Watson and Helen Johnson is defined by truth-telling. Watson is a Waanyi woman based on the Jagera/Yuggera and Turrbal Country of Meanjin/Brisbane, while Johnson is a second-generation immigrant of Anglo descent based in Wurundjeri Woiwurrung Country in Naarm/Melbourne.

Developed over the course of a year, these works are informed by the artists’ regular discussions. Both artists also consider the roles of women in recent history. Matrilineal experience is key to Watson’s work, while Johnson explores the symbolism of women and whiteness in historical illustration and contemporary media alike.

The reference to ‘red thread’ in the title of the project holds conflicted meaning. The anthropologist Ernst Wreschner described ochre as ‘a red thread’ that runs through ‘more than 500,000 years of human history’. Similarly, in a speech to Federation Conference in 1890 the English-born Australian politician Henry Parkes described the ties that bound the colonies as the ‘crimson thread of kinship’. Parkes’ reference, however, was made in relation to Anglo-Celtic bloodlines, and excluded First Nations, Asian and migrant peoples whose labour and sacrifice were integral to the act of ‘nation-building’. In their work, Watson and Johnson explore the ways in which colonial systems of exclusion continue to impact culture and politics today.

Curators: Jaklyn Babington, formerly Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, Tina Baum, Gulumirrgin (Larrakia)/Wardaman/Karajarri peoples, Curator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Elspeth Pitt, Senior Curator, Australian Art.

Judy Watson and Helen Johnson: the red thread of history, loose ends is part of The Balnaves Contemporary Series and a Know My Name project.

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