

Judy Watson

Waanyi people

born Mundubbera, Queensland 1959

judy with global land, ocean temperature anomalies, baler shell and leaves (jamba, malu, yimbira) 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane,

volcanic soil, synthetic polymer paint, graphite and pastel on canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

A silhouette of the artist floats beneath a global temperature anomalies chart and a baler shell covered by a fringe of leaves. Victorian-era black silhouettes captured the profiles of white colonisers; here Watson repositions and reclaims them to feature some of the women in her family using her signature blue palette. The blue is a reference to Watson's Waanyi 'running water' people and is the colour of memory and dreams. The baler shell resembles a female form and a reoccurring motif in Watson's practice. The baler is used by Aboriginal people as a cultural vessel, as a cup for extracting and drinking water, a receptacle to mix ochre in for ceremony and for emptying water out of canoes. During the 2020–21 covid-lockdowns, Watson visited a local park near her home where she noted the targeted replanting of Indigenous species to shade and replenish the local environment. She gathered various leaves and seeds from the park and brought them back to her studio—echoes of Country, culture, climate change and regeneration.

—Judy Watson, 2022

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joyce with queensland tenure map 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

synthetic polymer paint and graphite on canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

A silhouette portrait of Watson's mother Joyce on Waanyi Country, outlined in indigo, sits atop a historic Queensland tenure map. English placenames crisscross the canvas alongside fissures of red and yellow ochre erupting within the form like brain bleeds—deep scars from the destruction of sacred sites in Country. The white underlying rectangle hangs like a sheet referencing the way Aboriginal people were historically measured and photographed against a backdrop for scientific and anthropological data collection. Netting emerges in the base layer, the blue pigment and other colours pushed into the canvas by the artist's feet stamping and dancing on Country.

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rani with freshwater mussel shells (malu malu) and hoop pine 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

volcanic soil, synthetic polymer paint, graphite, pastel and china graph pencil on canvas

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The artist's daughter Rani, her silhouette saturated in deep indigo, appears like Lady Justice with a blindfold of hoop pine leaves. This ancient plant species dates from the Gondwana era when dinosaurs still existed and were plundered by colonists for their wood. The surrounding malu malu, or freshwater mussels, also known as 'water beef', were an important staple for Waanyi people and are associated with the female form. There are middens of these shells at important sites (including women's sites) along rivers and creeks. In this work they are delineated with fine lines like those incised on wooden cultural containers and utensils seen in museums. Rani represents generations of Waanyi women in Watson's family and reinforces family, cultural knowledge and connections to Country.

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dot with cotton tree string (kunda walkurrji) 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

indigo, synthetic polymer paint, chinagraph pencil,
and graphite on cotton

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

The shadowy form of Watson's paternal European cousin Dot emerges from a blue background. Watson has used the shibori technique (taught to her by Dot) of wrapping and pleating, with the indigo dye sucked into the cotton giving the surface of the work the appearance of rippling water. The faint ochre shadow of cotton tree string hovers above Dot's head, sheltering and protecting her as she holds her head above water. Watson acknowledges both her Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage and identity: 'I'm a product of both the colonised and the coloniser, two cultural frameworks coming together in me.'

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ebony with aluminium toxicity chart 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

volcanic soil, synthetic polymer paint, and graphite on cotton, and canvas

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The thin canvas background has earth danced into it, as though Watson was walking back on Country, while the top cotton layer is soaked with Prussian blue pigment to form a floating silhouette. The sitter is Watson's studio assistant Ebony and surrounding her is an aluminium toxicity chart, one of many that Watson has collected as part of her research on climate change. Aluminium in its raw state, after being mined and extracted from bauxite, has a red ochre colour. This work highlights the ongoing effect of environmental destruction that is deeply felt by many Aboriginal Communities whose sacred sites are still being destroyed and access to Country denied.

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lisa with territory map, boomerangs from lawn hill, burketown and the gulf, and kangaroo grass (jukuli, boodjamulla, munkubayi, badakalina kanba) 2022

Meanjin/Brisbane

volcanic soil, synthetic polymer paint and graphite on canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

Watson's sister Lisa, her face outlined in white, lies under a stem of kangaroo grass. The faint graphite outline of a grevillea is embedded in the background, while the white forms of boomerangs and throwing sticks—from Lawn Hill, Burketown and the Gulf Country—whirl across the canvas. Outlined from Ancestral objects housed in a museum, the iconic boomerang shapes appear like ribs, as though unveiling the skeletal layers of Country. Watson noticed the kangaroo grass growing at the Riversleigh World Heritage fossil site, an important location in Queensland for the study of paleontology. Riversleigh Station, close by, is where Judy's grandmother Grace was born. The images sit atop a historical pastoral map of North West Queensland and together represent a layering of nature, culture and the time immemorial presence of Community in Country.

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broken country, blacks not to be trusted: roth's sketch map north west central queensland 1897

(jamba, burrurri) 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

synthetic polymer paint, indigo and graphite on canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

A map by Dr Walter Edmund Roth dated 1897, northern protector of Queensland Aboriginal people, is overlaid with cotton tree fibre string. The string symbolically asserts Watson's ties to her Waanyi Country and people and can also read as well-worn cultural tracks or trading routes. Undervalued, underrated and seemingly rudimentary, string is one of the most important items in Aboriginal people's toolkits. Made from fibre and sometimes human or animal hair, it is used to make nets, fishing lines, canoes, weaponry, baskets and adornment, its function and symbology is important in this work. By dancing on and pooling the layers of colour and imagery, Watson meshes cultural and historical views across time and place.

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carpentaria petition 1903, signatories, kangaroo grass, feather, cabbage tree palm (badakalinya kanba, wulu, kunda) 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

volcanic soil, synthetic polymer paint, graphite and waxed linen thread on canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

This 1903 petition of complaint about Aboriginal people was written and signed by white men from fifteen stations close to or on Waanyi Country in the Gulf of Carpentaria and sits in the background. Across the danced-in earth floats a white cockatoo feather, found by Watson on her Country. It is like an old writing quill, dipped in ink used by the petition's signatories. Waving kangaroo grass from Riversleigh Station forms a fringe at the top of the work. Fibre from the cabbage tree palm is woven across the bottom right, alluding to the fragility of the windbreak and reeds that saved the life of Watsons's great-great-grandmother Rosie. As a child, Rosie survived a massacre, evading police by hiding behind a windbreak and then going into the water, weighed down by rocks, and breathing through water reeds. This is a powerful work about survival and truth-telling of Australia's history.

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flinder's chart, terra australis 1803 with cotton tree leaf and string (kunda yilaka, walkurji) 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

synthetic polymer paint, graphite and indigo on canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

Images of a cotton tree leaf and string made from the bark of the thin native hibiscus are overlaid on Captain Matthew Flinders' 1803 map charting Australia. Indigo dye and pigments have pooled and been danced into the weave of the canvas. Watson uses the map, emblazoned with the words TERRA AUSTRALIS, to highlight Flinders' voyage on HMS *Investigator* into the Gulf of Carpentaria, close to her Waanyi Country. It was here that Flinders' crew captured two Aboriginal men. One of the men was killed and then sketched by artist William Westall. In his diary, Robert Brown recorded the language of the remaining captive Yolngu man alongside its English translation for his records. Aboriginal language was imprinted onto Country and stories were embedded in the land. The intricacies of words, like the different names describing different bodies of water, show the sophistication of the Aboriginal language. Language connects Aboriginal people to Country.
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Urban Art Projects: Foundry

heartstring (kudulu walkurrji) 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

steel

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

Our strength and resilience underlies the adversity and painful events of colonisation experienced by Aboriginal people and hold Country and culture together. The native hibiscus is a thin multi-trunked tree that grows along the banks of creeks and rivers. Its inner bark provides strong, flexible fibre for string which, is often dismissed and underrated as fragile and unimportant, yet when gathered, prepared, double and triple-twined and woven, is stronger and more tensile than synthetic rope. String has been vitally important for survival on Country for thousands of years. The shadow lines evoke the umbilical cords that connect us to the earth, to our mothers and to each other.
—Judy Watson, 2022

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Collaborators: Sienna Baum, Freja Carmichael, Leecee Carmichael, Otis Carmichael, Madeleine King, Cheryl Leavy, Greg Loccisano, Julie Loccisano, Rikki Loccisano, Kerry Morgan, Brendan Murray, Stacey (Loccisano) Murray, Adele Outteridge. Rick Roser, Damien Watson, Dot Watson, Emily Watson, Joyce Watson, Lisa Watson, Ebony Wilmott.

cotton tree string (kunda walkurrji) 2021–2022

Meanjin/Brisbane

cotton tree fibre

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

Making string can be a communal activity in Community, where people come together to chat, talk and learn. Gathering together to weave enables essential skill-sharing and the transmission of knowledge between young and old, male and female. Woven string is as strong as metal and is vital for use in fishing lines, nets, bags, adornment, as binding for weapons and even in games, this underrated and simple item is an essential part of any individual's survival tool kit. For this work Watson invited family, friends and colleagues, ranging from novices to experts, to make these individual string bundles.

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Daniel Browning, Bundjalung/Kullilli peoples, voice artist

Lafe Charlton, Goenpul clan of Quandamooka people, voice artist

Roxanne McDonald, Mandandanjii/Darambal peoples, voice artist

Joshua Maguire, editor

Ross Manning, Sound recordist

Carl Warner, photographer

Michael Phillips, Graphic design

Michele Helmrich, transcriber

Georgia Boe, transcriber

skullduggery 2021

Meanjin/Brisbane

HD single channel digital multimedia, sound, 00:29:42, 16:9 ratio

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

skullduggery highlights the abhorrent practice of bone hunting and collecting Aboriginal people's remains. The personal letters between Matron Agnes Kerr of Burketown Hospital in the Gulf of Carpentaria and staff at the Wellcome Museum in London reveal the trading of the skull and breastplate of King Tiger of Lawn Hill Mines. Other Aboriginal people's bones were also collected and sent to the museum.

The letters reveal the offensive treatment of the bones, which were regarded as commodities and as a scientific resource and not as the sacred remains of respected human beings. King Tiger, who died on Waanyi Country, is one of thousands of Aboriginal people whose remains were interfered with and plundered for museum collections. The repatriation of Aboriginal people's remains from museum and other collections to community and Country is essential for healing.

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Collaborators: Leecee Carmichael, Otis Carmichael, Rani Carmichael, Sonja Carmichael, Anne Carter, Dominique Chen, Nejmere Cody, Maxine V Cole, Jo-Anne Driessens, Libby Harward, Michele Helmrich, Violetta Horsford, Mary Kelsey, Madeleine King, Edie Kurzer, Cheryl Leavy, Wendy Lyons, Tor Maclean, Mandana Mapar, Louise Martin Chew, Indy Medieros, Dhana Merritt, Cathy Moon, Adele Outteridge, Dot Watson, Joyce Watson, Lisa Watson, Lani Weedon, Ebony Wilmott.

veil of tears 2021–2022

Meanjin/Brisbane

vinyl, synthetic polymer paint, waxed linen thread, calico and muslin

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

The stitching of wounds is part of healing and survival. For this work Watson invited her family and friends to sew painted calico, resembling open wounds, onto seven muslin veils that hang in front of 51 identified Aboriginal people who died in police custody. These 51 people are only a fraction of the formal cases and informal stories of Aboriginal deaths in custody since colonisation. It also highlights the unacceptably high rate of incarceration of Aboriginal people. Those who died need to be recognised and respected—and get justice.

This work and the communal activity it is based on is a part of healing for those directly affected by deaths in custody and for all Australians who need to know about this history. The process of sewing—of piercing and repairing—represents the ongoing trauma of these deaths. It is one of the many psychological scars carried by Aboriginal people in this Country.
—Judy Watson, 2022