In counteraction, Watson proposes a more balanced and harmonious relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world, embodied by the ancient sites she visited and chiming with a description of her most recent exhibition at Milani Gallery in Brisbane (2019): "exploring Indigenous strength and resilience in the face of climate change and other pressures". This could not be more pertinent, and poignant, in light of the bushfires recently devastating Australia.

The importance of this exhibition is signified by the considerable support we have received from numerous institutions and individuals. We would be still at the drawing board were it not for the Australia Council and the Australian High Commission in the United Kingdom. At the latter we have benefited enormously from the advice of Alessandra Pretto, Cultural and Public Affairs Adviser, and likewise, more informally, through ongoing conversations with Gaye Sculthorpe, Curator (Oceana) at The British Museum, and Nicholas Thomas, Director of The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Thanks again to Ian Henderson and James Baggaley, colleagues at the Menzies Australia Institute, Kings College London, for enriching our public programme. The insights of Hetti Perkins and Geraldine Barlow, both contributing to this publication have been invaluable, matched by the acumen of Herman Lelie and Stefania Bonelli, responsible for the graphic design. How much we have enjoyed sharing this adventure with those at TarraWarra Museum of Art, especially Victoria Lynn and Anthony Fitzpatrick, Director and Curator respectively, and above all, of course, Judy Watson. Artists like her are rare.

Jonathan Watkins
Director, Ikon
In carbonised silhouette, the leafy fronds of a grevillea circle and lift, arching from a central supporting spine.

A ghostly white form hovers, tracing the edge and volume of a weathered monolith. A standing connection between earth and the heavens.

Blue. Watery blue. Ultramarine, cobalt, Prussian blue. From the depths looking to the surface and bright white of the sky, of clouds. Liquidity. One long breath.

Judy Watson charts connections between the infinite and the intimate: the mysteries of our earth, stars and seasonal cycles; our human relation to culture, ceremony, invention and the environment, and her personal familiar relation to nurture, trauma, justice, healing and renewal. Three interwoven orbits of enquiry, a starting point in for this perspective on Watson’s practice.

The repeated motif of the standing stone is distinctive across this exhibition. Human sites of ceremony and memory, standing stones are found across the globe, sometimes as a single stone, very often a circle and sometimes in long lines, arrays or avenues. They come to us from long ago. In Australia we can speak to those who have a living cultural connection to those who made such sites, in the northern hemisphere this is not the case. Always, there are gaps in our understanding. So we cannot clearly say these places are memorials. We must speculate, pay attention and feel. Standing stones seem to be located in sites that are already significant. The stones have their own quality of energy. Gathered together they form a kind of spatial instrument that links each site with the skies and heavens above. They are places of mystery and wonder.

As a Waanyi woman, of Aboriginal Australian heritage on her mother’s side and Scottish, English and Irish heritage on her father’s side, Watson has long being interested in cultural
and archaeological sites across Australia and throughout the world. This body of work brings both aspects of her heritage together; she has recently explored locations such as The Ring of Brodgar, The Standing Stones of Stenness, Drombeg, Avebury, Castlerigg, Callanish and Stonehenge. Her film standing stones (2020) includes footage from these journeys, layered together with her home country Boodjamulla, and images of Aboriginal cultural material held in collections, such as that of Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the British Museum.

Warm blue skies and sunshine are interlaced with windswept landscapes; wind turbines with the verdant greenery of a water-cut gorge. Culture as expressed in fibre and stone. The flow of water, the flow of time. Human hair in woven earth anointed strands. A label to record something of the distance this object has travelled. Stones reaching from earth to sky, sometimes capped with monumental lintels. When at a more modest scale, the stones evoke a circle of people. As if the ancestors who made these sites were saying, we stood here. We are still here.

What does it mean to touch the past now?

Watson has long been a traveller, interested in the natural world, in learning from others, dialogue, as well as exploring her own culture and history more deeply.

Cosmos

We listen, look and move in circles. As we spin in orbit around the sun, the stars appear to circle above. This light from long ago.

To understand how the universe was created, the foundational physics of mass, the Higgs field was postulated. Deep beneath the mountains of Switzerland and France, like a hidden monolith, scientists from around the globe worked together to build circling tunnels of the Large Hadron Collider and in 2012 announced this monumental particle accelerator had successfully proven the existence of the Higgs Boson, the “God particle”.

Watson’s unstretched canvases hang pinned from the wall, undulating and marked with liquid traces of pigment and ochre. Shades of earth, shades of blue reflecting the core make-up this very special planet. Tiny and spinning in space. At home in one galaxy amongst many. From day to night, summer to winter, flower to fruit and high tide to low. Life. Growth. The sacred geometries.

On Waanyi country, Boodjamulla, the rainbow serpent moves over the ochre earth, through the heavens and waters. The creator of deep aquifers, gorges that cut between high escarpments, billabongs where water-lilies flourish, yams and wild honey. Termite mounds cross the planes, aerial cities echoing the form of the standing stones.

Watson was born in Mundubbera, Queensland. Her traditional country is far north west of Brisbane, where she grew up, two thousand kilometres away.

Murujuga lies further west again, at the edge of the continent, looking out to the Indian Ocean. The standing stones here on the Burrup or Dampier Peninsula date back 30,000 years, to before the last ice age. Murujuga is now the site of expansive liquefied natural gas facilities. Here people created over a million petroglyphs detailing hunting methods, the sea and animal life – including the image of a thylacine or Tasmanian tiger not seen on the mainland for thousands of years. In this landscape of monumental fragmented and scattered iron-rich rock, the stones were erected in lines along ridges and in groups at gathering or ceremony sites. These stones have seen continuity as well as great change: rising and falling sea levels, industrial development and sorrow. In 1868 the Yaburara people were decimated in events sparked by the kidnapping of a young woman now known as the Flying Foam Massacre. The Yaburara now look after Murujuga together with the Ngarluma, the Mardudhunera, the Yindjibarndi and the Wong-Goo-Tt-Oo, all closely linked to the site. Traditional owners still sing to the ancestors whose culture is recorded here and have commemorated those whose lives were lost in the darkness of this meeting of two cultures.
More recently created, the egg-shaped “circle” of standing stones Wurdi Youang, is estimated to date back 11,000 years. Located on Wathaurong country, the site is west of Melbourne, in the southeast of the Australian continent. At the equinox and solstices significant stones align features in the landscape with the setting sun.

The existence of these sites of learning and ceremony is not broadly known or celebrated in Australia. Murujuga was protected for a time by its remoteness. Wurdi Youang too was perhaps miraculously overlooked, while other stone structures in the area such as dwellings were reassembled into stone fences by European settlers as Indigenous peoples were “cleared” from their land – whether through disease, massacre or relocation to distant mission settlements. Extensive stone aquaculture systems are only now being studied.

We look to the stars, the passage of the sun. And order our days, our crops, the lifecycles of the creatures we live with and rely upon. We give thanks. We share stories of how the world came to be. To understand and nurture cycles of growth.

Law
Respect

Speaking of the standing stones sites in Australia, Watson says, “Where they are placed is powerful. You are changing the country by bringing the stone to that place. Many of the sites are already very powerful. We also have Uluru and other geological formations, they are natural phenomena, but you can feel their power and presence.”

Some stones stand, already in in the landscape. We only need to be with them.

After these experiences, it became important to Watson to travel through her father’s ancestral country – England, Scotland and Ireland – to visit standing stone sites there. Some were relatively humble, lesser known, she notes, “You could see where the sheep liked to rub against the stones, even where dye used to mark the fleece had rubbed off. They were very
much a part of the landscape." Other places she travelled to such as Stonehenge were iconic and much visited. "They were all beautiful places to be", she tells me, and "you could see why people wanted to spend time there, why it perhaps was already an important and sacred site even before the stones were raised."

Compared to Australian sites, those Watson visiting in the northern hemisphere were developed more recently. Stonehenge, the extensive and most well known Neolithic stone circle complex, was developed in phases. Whilst earlier a burial site, the first significant construction began around 5,000 years ago. Stonehenge is known for its complexity and scale, with individual stones commonly weighing around 25 tons. The enormous vertical stones are in many instances topped with horizontal lintels and at the very centre is a distinctive horseshoe of five of these massive trilithons. Astronomy and ceremony were clearly profound drivers in the development of the site.

Watson says, "When you touch the stone you can feel the energy within."

Across this suite of paintings the motif of the standing stone recurs. Most often we see a single stone delineated in white. Look closely and this field is spacious, like a cloud, a series of spiralling fire whirls suggest movement, order and rhythm.

Whilst some of the stones float over ochre, others occupy a field of ultramarine or blended shades of blue. They are ungrounded and ghostly. Located around the walls of the gallery, they encircle us and have a presence.

sentinel (n.) 1570s, from Middle French sentinelle (sic.), from Italian sentinella «a sentinel». OED says «No convincing etymology of the It. word has been proposed,» but perhaps (via a notion of «to hear», from Latin sentire «feel, perceive by the senses» (see sense (n.).) 8

Perhaps the most common sense of the word sentinel is related to the idea of watching over or guarding. Standing stones seem to do so, but also to work with us to amplify our senses. Deeply related to the movement of the heavens, the earth and the seasons they allow us to extend our observations from the earth outwards into space as well as marking paths through time — moments, as well as years. They are often closely adjacent to burial sites, and in some instances are also burial mounds themselves. Such sacred sites mark the cycle of life and death, the divine movement of the planets, the daily return of the sun.

As Watson conveys through these hovering white forms, the standing stones are deeply mysterious. They occupy the juncture between the human realm of culture and ceremony and the divine orbit of the cosmos. The stars and planets turn without us, but through such sites we can reach out to understand them. Whether the stones are simply found and stood to a vertical, or more painstakingly chiselled, honed and moved to these special places, we seem to have sought a place for them as envos, positioned to reach for the sky, whilst being firmly of the earth.

Culture

The sinuous form of the rainbow serpent Boodjamulla — creator of worlds — is suggested by the twined bush string in Watson’s painting standing stone, kangaroo grass, bush string (2020). This painting also layers the form of the standing stone together with the distinctive silhouette ofThemeda triandra or kangaroo grass, outlined in ochre.

Kangaroo grass was a staple of Aboriginal people across the country, who would scatter seed as they travelled — sometimes casually and sometimes in ceremonies of care and increase — then gather, grind and bake as needed. This is just one of an array of techniques Bruce Pascoe describes in his book Dark Emu through which a dynamic mosaic of sustaining landscapes were carefully shaped and nurtured over thousands of generations, “Even though it was convenient for many European settlers not to acknowledge the evidence of an Aboriginal agricultural economy, there were [...] some who speculated on what circumstances had produced this ‘gentleman’s park’”. 9
It is sometimes hard to see what we aren’t looking for, what we don’t expect to find. Old suppositions can be overturned, new ground found. Created.

In opening *Dark Emu*, Pascoe explains, Baiame, the creator Spirit Emu, left the earth after its creation to reside as a dark shape in the Milky Way. The emu is inextricably linked with the wide grasslands of Australia, the landscape managed by Aboriginals. The fate of the emu, people and grain are locked in step because, for Aboriginal people, the economy and spirit are inseparable. Europeans stare at the stars but Aboriginal people also see the spaces in between where the Emu Spirit resides.

The word culture itself has grown from the cultivation or tilling of the soil; what it is to care for and honour the earth – as well as each other. Through culture we encode and pass on knowledge. Watson’s great-grandmother Mabel would have made bush strong from human hair and plant fibre. Like DNA, the spiralling form of the string, creates a strong rhythm and spiralling relationship between people and the natural world.

If its hair from the body I have seen that woven into objects which might be neck-pieces or hair-string skirts. If I see those objects in museums, I often think, “Could that be my ancestors’ hair woven in there?” So you think of the DNA that goes into these objects [...] you have the DNA from that person, if it comes from the hair, you have the DNA of the person who is doing the weaving, pushing the fibres along the leg. That then captures their sweat and their skin and then you’ve got the person weaving it, [...] when I think about these objects going across to museums, I think about the old people hiding in them, they are there, they are still there. They’re very potent, any of these woven forms are carrying that DNA.

Watson uses a liquid wash of carbon black to outline the form of the bush string, and considers this in relation to the fires that burnt across Australia in late 2019 and early 2020:

It’s painted with a carbon black, so that immediately takes you to the burnt out image of what fires do to trees and vegetation. That’s very present within what we’re seeing at the moment. There’s a lot that has been lost and will be lost, but within that there’s always resilience and regrowth. Where there was a silence before suddenly the insects are coming back and the birds. Of course some species will not return. However, the plants, those little ferns that were in hidden places are starting to come back.

Watson’s great-grandmother Rosie narrowly survived a massacre at Lawn Hill station, her body afterwards marked by bayonet scars. Some things are passed on to us directly, in the blood, in our DNA. Watson did not learn of this part of her grandmother’s story through her mother or grandmother; we inherit silences also. Some things are perhaps too terrible to speak of. We learn, and are asked to learn, to speak as well as not to speak. To bridge these gaps is a precarious and sensitive thing, perhaps painful. Watson describes elsewhere in this publication how Rosie and a friend escaped the melee seeking safety in the water where they survived beneath the surface, breathing with the aid of a reed.

How long would we wait beneath the surface? Wanting to draw in a clear breath, wondering about the fate of loved ones. Imagine looking up through the water as if through a lens, to the light and air. Nothing would ever look the same afterwards. Imagine, simply closing your eyes and feeling the water around you.

**Nurture**

New life, after loss.

Some cycles repeat, and we need them to do so. They were once beyond our capacity to imagine changing or effecting: another dawn, seasonal regrowth, the passage of water through the atmosphere or land, the behaviour of fire. We now know our actions are having a profound impact upon these things. And some cycles we hope never to see again, they are human, entirely ours to repeat or avoid – patterns of disregard, invisibility and annihilation.
We can change these things too.

And so we remember, there are stories to be told.

Nurture is not separate from trauma. Watson encourages us to be aware of the earth, its cycles and the sustenance it offers. She reminds us of how this has been approached across cultures as well in her own maternal lineage, the Waanyi are known as running water people. Many of Watson’s works appear peaceful, but contain coded reference to familial trauma. This connection to her personal history is intimate, yet is tied to us all. Massacre and war are ongoing. International legal frameworks around human rights and the responsibility to protect are constrained. Climate change is causing massive ecological and human disruption. We must look clearly at the past to navigate the future.

I think about the old people hiding in them, they are there, they are still there.

One of the most swiftly and evidently harrowing works in the exhibition, salt in the wound (2008) is an installation of human ears cast in wax and nailed to the wall. As is the case across Watson’s practice, there is a connection between beauty and unease. The ears are shown in scattered constellation, as if to suggest the walls or the base architecture of the gallery was alive and listening, perhaps embodied with a quality of knowing. However, these ears are ragged; they do not grow from the wall, but are nailed to it. We can easily imagine the “flesh” we see beneath the outer ear – the structure of the auricle and lobe – as torn or cut from the body. Watson made this work after coming upon an 1883 account of the owner of Lawn Hill station having “40 prs of blacks ears nailed around the walls, collected during raiding parties after the loss of many cattle speared by the blacks”. Although Watson was well aware of the devastating sequence of frontier massacres and shootings she describes, her reaction as she read,

I listen and hear these words a hundred years away
that is my grandmother’s mother’s country
It seeps down through blood and memory and soaks into the ground
The actions here – of listening, looking and feeling – of memory soaking and seeping are key to the genesis of Watson’s work. What do they mean to us an audience, near to these events, or far from them? Do they connect us to the blood that continues to be soaked into the earth? How can consciousness and a caring attention be a part of finding justice, even when the losses of the past continue to cut deep? In Australia we face, the key question of whether this energy should be directed towards a reconciliation with our past. And we cannot forget the continuing injustices of this moment in time. To survive is powerful, and yet painful. And this pain can be passed on through generations.

How do we grow beauty together with awareness? See wonder in the world without looking away from buried stories? Sometimes the bones are not so far from the surface.

At the centre of standing stone, ochre, net, spine (2020) the white form of the standing stone seems to glow and gently pulsate. The vegetal “spine” is based upon the fronds of the bunya pine, iconic in Queensland for its nuts which sustained vast intertribal gatherings, feasts and occasions for ceremony.

The spine is a recurring motif in Watson’s work, relating to strength and sustenance:

The spine is a metaphor for the backbone, the strength that Aboriginal women are to our families. My grandmother and her brother and baby sister were taken from Riversleigh station by her mother, Mabel Daly. They travelled many kilometres to another pastoral property. They were running away from the police who used to take the lighter-coloured children. Nan, my grandmother, said her mother used to catch fish in the rivers. “She gave us the flesh off the backbone, she gave us the best of what she had.”

Indigenous families were dismembered, controlled and disempowered over generations in Australia, in processes enabled by state and federal legislation. Watson offers a window onto the painful impacts upon her own family in the series of prints and publications under the act and a preponderance of aboriginal blood, both of which draw upon archival documents relating to her family history. These documents date to the 1930s and 40s, and reveal the bureaucratic focus on what proportion of Aboriginal blood someone coming under the act might have. Blood as a by-word for control. They make evident the power wielded over Aboriginal families who had to seek permission to buy land, marry, vote, receive a pension, move about the state, visit children or have them educated.

Her careful cursive hand on lined paper is beautiful. The reply comes typed and stamped on letterhead.

Sir

Much has changed, but these patterns are deep set and continue today. The endeavour to heal continues. In 2017 Indigenous leaders from around Australia met and, as the culmination of an extensive consultation process, released the Uluru Statement from the Heart, addressing the people of Australia directly:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. [...] This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples [...] This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.  

This important and gracious document aims to build a bridge between the past and a new future, it calls for the establishment of a Voice to Parliament and a Makaratta Commission.

Makarata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.
Two luminous circles float over the indigo ground of two moons, trooper’s buttons 2020, like a pair of full moons. Watson sought out the buttons as she undertook research towards this exhibition, this body of work, curious about the metalwork made for export from Birmingham in the UK, where Ikon is the first exhibition venue for this exhibition. “What might tie back into the history of my family?” she wanted to know. The native police, whose uniforms would have been embellished with these buttons, were amongst those who pursued Watson’s great-great grandmother Rosie, almost killing her together with so many of her people. But Watson does not see the circular form of the buttons as entirely grounded in the pain of the past.

Whilst acknowledging the past Watson also seeks to nurture beauty and energy. These glowing white spheres speak of the possibility of distinct worlds coming together, co-existing, as if in shared orbit. Perhaps we are looking here at two mirrors, two different lenses to the world, instruments allowing us to see more clearly, to see further, to see to the horizon, to examine distant stars, or make sense of the quiet of the space in between. Could this be the blueprint for a vast and mysterious observatory, a device allowing us to search for an elusive particle, anticipate a celestial event, enact a ritual of renewal? An invitation to feel beyond what we can see?

1. www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/how-the-higgs-boson-was-found-4723520/
4. Ernie Dingo discusses the Flying Foam Massacre on its 150th Anniversary, from a standing stone site within the larger Murujuga complex: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgWzJhk32VU
7. Ibid.
8. www.etymonline.com/word/sentinel
10. Ibid., p. 1.
13. Ibid.
15. www.ulurustatement.org/the-statement
16. Ibid.
standing stones, ashes to ashes 2020
standing stone, kangaroo grass, red and yellow ochre 2020
standing stone with spines 2020
standing stone, grevillea 2020
standing stone, ochre net, spine 2020
dugong bones 2020
standing stone, open cut ground  2020
spot fires, our country is burning now 2020
two moons, trooper's buttons 2020
heartstring
Judy Watson in conversation with Hetti Perkins

HP  String is a recurring motif or reference in your works and, as Geraldine Barlow observes, when “one fibre joins another; fragile threads are made stronger when entwined. Women are traditionally the string-makers. Fibres are rolled up and down the leg to bind them together, with the small hairs being picked up and becoming a part of the string.” It seems that this is also a way of understanding your artistic practice, and how your own personal story becomes part of your family’s history.

JW  String is not just vegetable fibre, it could be hair from the body. It can be material fibre that has been worn on the body. It collects all the DNA from the hair of the person who’s making the string – rolling it up and down on their leg and capturing the hairs and particles of skin – and then from whoever wears those hairstring objects. Whether it goes into a museum collection or somewhere else, it’s gathering all that community with it. It’s like the old people are travelling in those objects.

The DNA of those people, their resonance, is still in the object. You can feel it when you look at it or when you touch it. The first thing I thought when I saw some of those objects was, could that have been my grandmother’s, great grandmother’s, great great grandmother’s hair within those objects? And further back, my great great grandfather as well.

HP  It’s interesting, as Geraldine also observes, that the structure of the string echoes the double helix of the DNA pattern. The string metaphor leads us to talking about the process of creating the exhibition for Ikon and subsequently TarraWarra Museum of Art and the Australian tour.

JW  I’m creating a work right now for the Gallery of Modern Art | Queensland Art Gallery Water exhibition which has string in it and whorls of water.
I remember being very struck by a work you did where you referred to the whorls made by the hairs on the head of a newborn baby and, in more recent works, how those patterns can refer to melting snow. It’s one of the characteristics of your work, the simultaneous expression of the “big picture” and the “small picture”. A deeply personal, observational practice.

During your recent visits to England, Scotland and Ireland, what sort of “string” have you been making? What have you been gathering and binding together?

The conceptual idea underlying the trip was looking at ancient sites in the region, specifically stone sites: stone circles or standing stones. I also revisited The British Museum and The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. My idea was to have images of standing stone forms – shadowy or very ghostly presences – and the floating of Aboriginal cultural material across the top. It’s a layering of experiences and a layering of understanding of what is culture.

I took photos and video of the stone sites, but also of people interacting with them as something familiar in their “backyard”. You get people picnicking on them, leaning against them, sheep rubbing against them and leaving the dye-print of their wool on the stones. People would come to them, interact with them, photograph themselves, and then the next wave of people would come through. It’s very different to many of our sites in Australia, like Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill Gorge) in north-west Queensland. There are sites there that are really important, that you are not allowed to photograph any more. That’s come about through the community making that decision because it’s part of a living culture. Whereas with the English sites, they’re very much part of the tourist landscape — and very young in comparison to Australian sites.

And then there’s my collective memory in terms of my mum’s Aboriginal side of the family. And dad’s side, the Scottish, English and Irish side, as well. Thinking about that coming down the line of generations and how all of that cultural memory comes into a collective space which is myself, my body as the artist. I’m then transmitting this data in the same way as all the data and DNA that’s been collected by the Aboriginal cultural material. Sometimes those objects have been in overseas museums longer than they were in their own country, even though the cultural memory is much, much older in the place where they were made. It’s really important if they can be repatriated and seen by people from those communities. I’m interested in all of those stories and the way they rub up against each other, like string. For example, I was looking at some woven objects in Cambridge a few years ago and, when I unpacked them, I couldn’t believe there were thirteen or so hairsting skirts. I thought why are there thirteen? There were small ones, and large ones. How did whoever collected these get them? Did they ask the women and the young girls to suddenly drop them and take them? Were they collected after a massacre? Were they given in exchange for mission dresses? Were they exchanged for money or other goods? To have that number from a community of thirteen young girls and older women, it made me very sad actually.

All objects have a degree of cultural intimacy but certainly those objects are especially personal, intimate objects considering their role in community life.

Absolutely, they have been taken from the body. And there’s something those objects are transmitting to you. I was trying to enfold them and understand them and I feel like they were part of that exchange as well, that exchange of information. How do they feel, having been taken from their place of origin and from the people who wore them, into the dark spaces in museums?

Your work about the trafficking of objects includes breastplates or gorgets, and even human remains.

Guye Sculthorpe sent me links to all of this information and it’s really interesting. There was a person whose name was Agnes Dorothy Kerr (c.1870–1951) who was the Matron of Burketown Hospital, Queensland. Basically, she was a bone collector. Of course she wasn’t the only one, there were plenty of people doing that type of thing. She was colluding with various curators to get all of this material for the Wellcome Collection in London – a different life from being the Matron of a hospital.
For instance, Kerr donated the skull and breastplate of King Tiger of Lawn Hill Mines. King Tiger’s skull has gone back to the National Museum of Australia and the Waanyi authorities are going to decide where it should be reburied, but the breastplate is still at the Wellcome Collection.

HP I wonder if she bequeathed her own skeleton to the collection ...

JW It’s bizarre. All this correspondence stopped when the war broke out. It’s very much a case of skulduggery. People say to her that they know that people don’t want to have their bones taken. And yet, she and others talk about doing it by stealth.

With all of this correspondence, it would be great to do an artist’s book in the same way I did a preponderance of aboriginal blood (2005) and under the act (2007).

HP We, as Aboriginal people, talk about the ongoing effects of colonisation and the evidence of that through state sanctioned actions like the atomic testing at Maralinga and the Stolen Generations. Also the actions of people like Kerr speak volumes about what colonialism is about and the relationship between subject and oppressor which enables activities like hers. When you go into those collections you don’t know what you will find.

JW At Cambridge, they’ve changed their practice because they were letting me handle objects with my bare hands. Previously you had to wear gloves and sometimes that is for good reason as there might be arsenic or formaldehyde or whatever they used to preserve objects — you probably don’t want that on your skin — but not when it’s stone tools and things.

HP It makes sense if it’s people from the community of origin to not wear gloves because you’re putting your DNA on that object.

JW Māori people talk about the fact that the pounamu (jade) needs that human touch or embrace and crying over to be kept alive. I think it’s the same with other cultural material.

HP You’ve said in drawing the works, you literally draw them to you.

JW In looking at those drawings later, I can remember doing the drawing. I know I remember the object much more because of that transmission of the eye down the line of the arm to the pencil on the paper. So, even if I was to touch that drawing, it would shoot back a strong memory flash of the object and so I really like going back to those early drawings and thinking about them. It’s like a cry from the object to me and back again, we’re talking to each other, it’s a conversation.

HP And how did you feel when you were looking at those different stone formations and other sites like the henges, the barrows, the ley lines in your travels?

JW I was interested in how I would feel in those places. And, the same as you would find in many sites in Australia, every time I think this is a great place to sit and look at the view, it’s really safe — that’s where you often find stone tools and midden sites. Often the sites for the ancient standing stones and stone circles were very similar and very beautiful. I had the chance to sit, do a bit of drawing, photography and filming, and really just be in the place. It was a really good matrix for my journey across the country to places as far north as the Orkney Islands, the Hebrides, and a few sites in Ireland.

HP It’s interesting to think of England from an Aboriginal perspective, of the coloniser’s country being crisscrossed with significant and enduring signs of spirituality.

JW I’ve always been interested in ancient sites where there’s water, springs, ancient sources. During a residency in Italy, I met some people who were looking at magnetic sites around the world when I was at this site near Castellina in Chianti. We were talking about the fact that later churches were built on pagan sites and about our trade routes or “highways” that went through Aboriginal Australia going from well to well, connecting water sources — they were talking about it in a European context. After they left, I was standing where there was an Etruscan tomb and it had two Tuscan pines planted on it — they were used as markers —
and an incredible storm came across but, between the pines, it was really still. It was very potent.

At the Ness of Brodgar on the Orkney Islands, I met archaeologists who were working on a dig and saying how they wanted to get to the really old sites. In Australia and other places too, that’s the history I’m really interested in as well as contemporary history. I really want to know what comes first and then come up through the levels gradually.

HP Your process of research reflects the making of the work itself, applying all the layers and then rubbing it back to see what is revealed. And layering your very delicate mark making. And even the ground underneath the work makes an impression on this flayed skin that is your canvas.

JW I will have ideas set in my head about what I want to do and I’ve got all the collected material but then the work has a conversation with me. I’ll try and push forward and it’ll push back and so it will really be what will transpire once I engage with the work and the work tells me what to do! It’s got to feel right in my gut and that’s why some things take a long time. I did a trip back to our Waanyi country last year that will also translate across into the work I’m making: Boodjamulla, Riversleigh, connections with my grandmother’s story, my mother’s, my great great grandmother’s.

HP How do you feel when you’re on Country?

JW Fantastic, it is such a beautiful experience to be there, but also our country is so incredible. The subterranean blue-green water, the verdant palms, all the wildlife in the area, the bush birds, the animals. This time I was noticing a lot of scar trees and photographing those. It’s dried up a bit as it has everywhere. Century Zinc has taken a lot of the water, and drought and climate change have come to bear in those areas as well. There are so many sites across the Gulf of Carpentaria that used to have beautiful springs running in the 1800s and 80% of them are no longer working due to interference by people and animal stock and other causes.

There was a story about Lilydale Springs where my grandmother — my grandmother Grace Isaacson or Camp as she was known previously — used to go when she was little. She asked her mother, Mabel Daly, “How are Lilydale Springs?” when she saw her again, and her mother Mabel said “Oh, the Rainbow [Rainbow Serpent, or Boodjamulla] dried it up”. They found out a person on the property had actually dynamited the springs trying to get more out of them. And that is just such a common story where there’s interference.

It is such a delicate balance of that water bubbling from ancient sources up through the limestone, sandstone, all those layers to reach the top surface. It’s the same water that dinosaurs were drinking from. It’s connected underground to systems a long way away and to have that balance struck down for some futile short term gain, which they are definitely going to lose, is such a common story not just in Australia but across the world. It’s irreversible.

I’m making work about water as a weapon. I heard a lecture by Lisa Beaven about how water was redirected to surround towns in Europe to push a whole community into submission. That is exactly what’s happening with the Murray-Darling where water has been re-routed and it’s making communities die. The water’s not sustaining country and therefore it’s not sustaining the culture and the people — and that’s deliberate genocide. It’s water as a weapon.

During frontier violence, many of our waterholes were deliberately poisoned. Now many of our river systems and bodies of water are poisoned by agricultural, domestic and industrial contaminants leaching into them.

HP Speaking about weapons, what is your interest in the manufacture of firearms in Birmingham?

JW In the work pale slaughter, 2015, I was looking at the use of weapons in massacres and a list of weapons that were imported into Fremantle during the colonial era. I’m interested in which ones might have originated in Birmingham and also things like buttons on the Native Police uniforms, badges, belt buckles. There are so many different overlays of stories between Birmingham and the whole process of colonisation in Australia.

HP How does the history of colonisation relate to your family in particular?
Nan said that she started working from the age of five or six, when she was taken to Morestone Station from Thorntonia. Her mother, Mabel Daly, had run away with Nanna from Riversleigh Station. The police were coming and taking children away. Mrs Donaldson, who was the manager’s wife on the property, used to warn the women so they would hide the children. Nanna remembers being hidden on a number of occasions, but she ended up being taken to Morestone Station. Apparently the lady there wanted a little girl to teach how to work and that’s what Nanna did from five or six, until she then went to the next property.

As a ward of the state?

Yes, and her mother too, Mabel Daly, she worked on a lot of properties and Rosie [the artist’s great great grandmother]. Rosie escaped a massacre at Lawn Hill and that was told to me by Ruby Saltmere and Shirley Macnamara, who are our relatives, at my grandmother’s funeral. I then read about it in Tony Robert’s book Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900 and it comes up again in Timothy Bottoms’s book Conspiracy of Silence: Queensland’s Frontier Killing-Times. And somehow, a bit like the drawings, hearing about it at my grandmother’s funeral and then reading the story later, suddenly it pierced me. And that’s when I made salt in the wound, 2008, with Yhonnie Scarce; casting people’s ears with beeswax and making a windbreak like the one my great great grandmother hid behind: it’s a very fragile thing, it’s hardly a barrier.

Rosie was bayonetted through the upper body. And then she and another girl used reeds to breathe through while they hid underwater with stones on their bellies to escape the troopers. Once again, such a fragile thing. Who would have thought that just a reed would be your passport to survival, something to breathe through to evade the murderous intents of the police and people from the surrounding properties — anyone who considered the blacks a nuisance.

Much of our culture and history is passed to us orally or visually, often through art. I’ve always responded to stories, I was studying literature while I was studying visual art. The visualisation of a story has always been very much part of me.
40 pairs of blackfellows' ears, lawn hill station, part of salt in the wound 2008
the witness tree 2018
**List of Works**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Courtesy</th>
<th>Photo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>standing stones, ashes to ashes</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Earth, acrylic, graphite on canvas</td>
<td>229 × 181 cm</td>
<td>The Artist and Milani Gallery</td>
<td>Carl Warner</td>
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<td>two moons, trooper's buttons</td>
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<tr>
<td>resistance pins</td>
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<td>192 × 180 cm</td>
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<td>pituri bags</td>
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<td>blackfellows' ears, lawn hill station, part of salt in the wound</td>
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<td>Cast beeswax</td>
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<tr>
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Judy Watson
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4 March – 31 May 2020
(with Yhonnie Scarce)

Looking Glass
TarraWarra Museum of Art, Victoria, Australia
21 November 2020 – 8 March 2021

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Ikon Board: Councillor Kate Booth, John Claughton, Professor Helen Mignan, Sawoda Kinch, Oliver Longmore (Chair), Jenny Loynton, Harminder Randhawa, Nick Smith, Victoria Tester.

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