

IKON

Exhibition Guide

Judy Watson

4 March – 31 May 2020

First Floor Galleries

Born in Mundubbera, Queensland, Judy Watson derives inspiration from her matrilineal Waanyi heritage. Working from site and memory, Watson reveals Aboriginal histories and traces lines of emotional and physical topography that centre on particular places and moments in time. Her practice often draws on archival documents and material to unveil an unceasing and institutional discrimination against Aboriginal people. Hetti Perkins, curatorial advisor on this occasion, explains that the artist is concerned essentially with Australia's "secret war" - a battle fought on many fronts from colonial massacres to Stolen Generations.

Including new paintings, video and sculptural pieces, this is Watson's most comprehensive international exhibition to date. A number of works have been made in response to visits she undertook to see English, Scottish and Irish sites of prehistorical significance – including standing stones, circles and hill figures at Stonehenge, Avebury, Hebrides and Orkney. Watson states:

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.

Watson's paintings consider a more balanced and sustainable relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world, chiming with a description of her recent exhibition in Australia: "exploring Indigenous strength and resilience in the face of climate change and other pressures".

The first work seen in the exhibition, *spot fires, our country is burning now* (2020), directly references recent events. Red spiral forms remind us of the Australian bushfires – all of the paintings in this gallery were made during the disaster. In Watson's process of painting, the pigment is washed, pooled, brushed, scrubbed and pushed around the canvas.

At times, the work is on the studio floor, allowing the artist to pour water on and tread colour in, an act referred to as “dancing”.

Her background in printmaking is invoked in the use of “ghost nets” – fishing nets that have been abandoned or lost in the ocean – placed on the canvas and sprayed with pigment to leave an impression. Watson will also hang the canvas on the studio wall, where she projects and draws objects, including Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda Triandra*), found in endangered grasslands of Australia, and “bush string”, created by the artist using traditional techniques. The carbonised silhouettes of these objects, so closely bound to Aboriginal language and cultural practice, signify the closeness of their extinction.

There is something cartographic about the resulting paintings, which look like landscapes, with creeks, streams and rivers, seen from above. Barely visible beneath the work *standing stone, kangaroo grass and bush string* (2020) are the phrases “water as weapon” and “poison chalice”. This refers to the use of water by colonial forces for the dispossession and massacre of Aboriginal people. Watson’s grandmother was born in Waanyi country in North West Queensland, an ancient limestone and sandstone landscape, where Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill Gorge) provides water for various wetlands supporting Australia’s wildlife. The ongoing industrialisation of Aboriginal land, and the impact of climate change, is placing the country’s river system, and the communities and cultures it supports, under great stress.

Blue is significant for Watson who associates the colour with memory. She has used indigo in a series of Shibori works and also references the traditional trade routes of pigments around the world. Here we see how the canvas has been gathered, squeezed and pressed to bond with the pigment. The works contain singular, paired and repetitive forms, which again reference specific objects, including a pair of buttons (c. 1830) worn by mounted police recruited from a British military regiment to suppress and massacre Aboriginal people. The slender, bone-like objects that appear in the vitrines and paintings are referred to by the artist as “resistance pins” – utilitarian and deceptively delicate objects, such as sewing awls, used by women for survival as well as activism.

Some of the paintings contain stitches contributed by members of Watson’s family and colleagues. In their stitching circles, they share stories of resistance and protest in an attempt to suture the wounds of the past. Watson observes:

Art as a vehicle for invention and social change can be many things, it can be soft, hard, in-your-face confrontational, or subtle and discreet. I try and choose the latter approach for much of my work, a seductive beautiful exterior with a strong message like a deadly poison dart that insinuates itself into the consciousness of the viewer without them being aware of the package until it implodes and leaks its contents.

In the video entitled *invasion* (2020), Watson imagines the arrival of Boodjamulla – the ancestral rainbow serpent in Waanyi culture – to the contemporary British Isles.

Filmed during her travels in summer 2019, it focuses on the standing stones, which act as sentinels, bearing witness to marauding forces and cultural invasion. The stones are mirrored by the wind turbines, that eerily turn through the landscape, evoking ancient and modern energy fields and questions relating to climate change. The film is overlaid with the cultural artefacts stolen from Aboriginal people in British museum collections, including human bones, hair and skin.

An installation, entitled *40 pairs of blackfellows' ears, lawn hill station* (2008), contains sculptures of ears cast in beeswax. This is a reference to the actions of Jack Watson (no relation to the artist) a wealthy, educated man who nailed forty pairs of ears of Aboriginal people to a slab hut homestead, a display he would show proudly to visitors. This brutal act took place in Lawn Hill in Waanyi country, the area inhabited by Watson's ancestors.

Opposite, the video work *the witness tree* (2018) deals with the Myall Creek massacre of unarmed Aboriginal people on 10 June 1838 when some of the perpetrators were brought to justice. The site is annually visited by descendants of both the victims and perpetrators who acknowledge historical and ongoing trauma.

Judy Watson's exhibition is supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and the Australian High Commission in the United Kingdom.

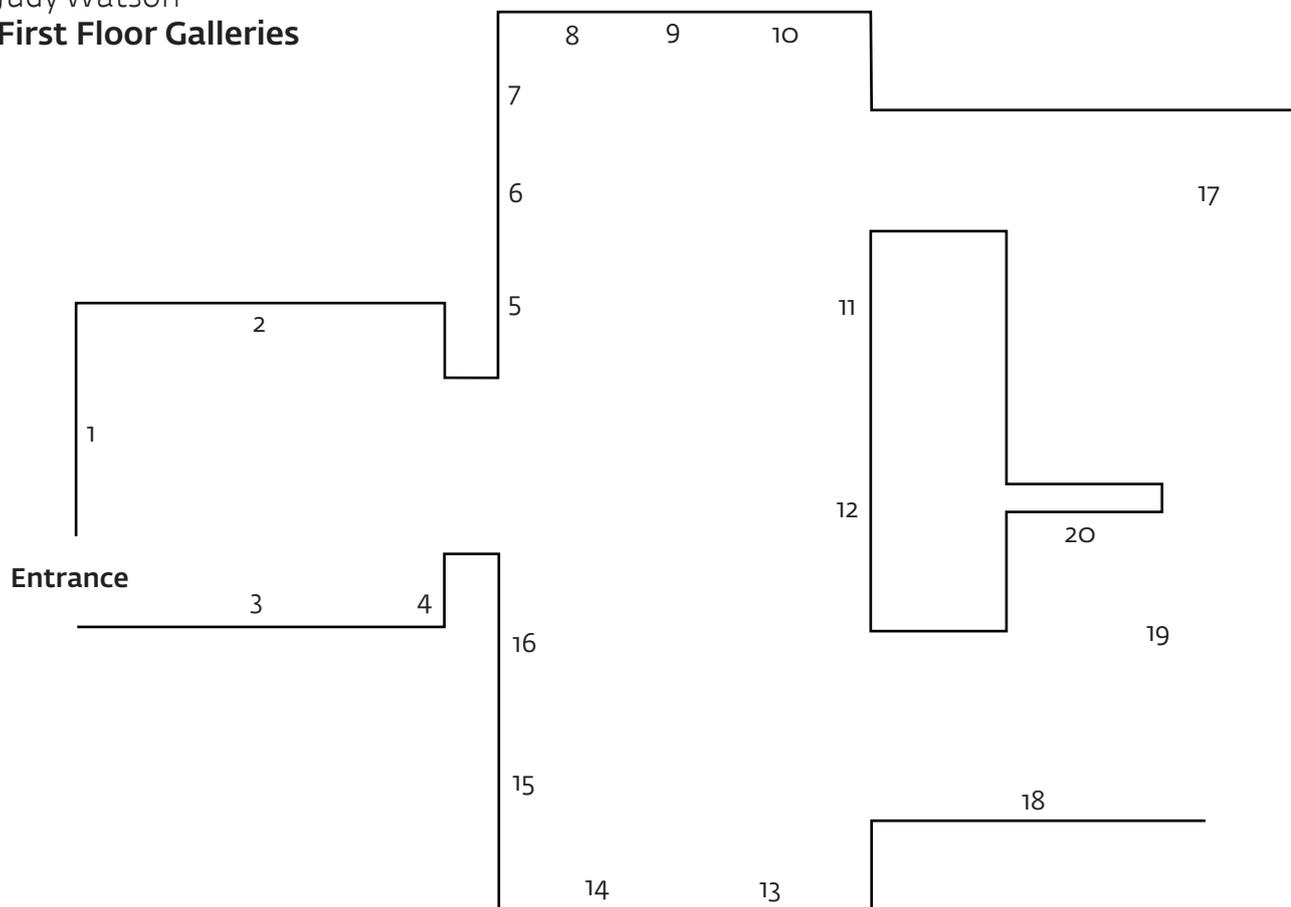
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1. spot fires, our country is burning now, 2020
Acrylic, pastel, graphite on canvas

2. standing stone, kangaroo grass, bush string, 2020
Acrylic, graphite on canvas

3. standing stone, kangaroo grass, red and yellow ochre, 2020
Acrylic and graphite on canvas

4. skullduggery, 2020
Artist's book

5. resistance pins, 2020
Acrylic, graphite, indigo on canvas

6. resistance, 2020
Pastel, acrylic, indigo on canvas

7. two moons, trooper's buttons, 2020
Acrylic, graphite, indigo on canvas

8. pituri bags, 2020
Acrylic, indigo on canvas

9. dugong bones, 2020
Acrylic, graphite, indigo on canvas

10. standing stones with sutures on indigo, 2020
Acrylic, indigo, pastel, china graph pencil, cotton on canvas

11. standing stone with spines, 2020
Acrylic and graphite on canvas

12. standing stone, grevillea, 2020
Acrylic, aquarelle and graphite pencil on canvas

13. standing stones, gumbi gumbi, stone tool, 2020
Earth, graphite, pastel, acrylic, cotton on canvas

14. standing stone, ochre net, spine, 2020
Acrylic, graphite on canvas

15. standing stone, open cut ground, 2020
Earth, acrylic, graphite on canvas

16. standing stones, ashes to ashes, 2020
Acrylic, graphite on canvas

17. invasion, 2020
Single channel video
Video editing: Josh Maguire
Sound design: Greg Hooper

18. the witness tree, 2018
Single channel video, four channel sound
Video editing: Maria Barbagallo
Sound design: Greg Hooper

19. resistance pins, 2018
Cast bronze with patina finish

20. 40 pairs of blackfellows' ears, lawn hill station part of salt in the wound, 2008
Cast beeswax