THUNDER RAINING POISON

Glass has fragility and strength. Beautiful objects floating in light prompt us to learn from the past and move forward with respect.

An installation of 2,000 blown glass yams suspended from the Gallery ceiling. Glistening, reflecting, transparent and opaque. Multiple forms, balanced and overlapping to create a cloud-like structure. At once exquisite and disquieting.

Thunder Raining Poison was created by Yhonnie Scarce, a Woomera-born descendant of the Kokatha people from the Lake Eyre region and the Nukunu from the Southern Flinders Ranges. Scarce uses the medium of blown glass to create work that explores the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people.

In the desert country, clouds are mostly welcome, bringing long-awaited rain to soak the dry earth. The atomic bomb clouds at Maralinga, the consequence of testing undertaken by the British and Australian governments between 1953 and 1963, rained poison on the land, which today remains damaged and unable to sustain life.

The glass yams are symbolic of the Aboriginal people displaced by the poisonous clouds. Yams are an important food source in and lands. Connections to country and traditional ways of living were disrupted by the atomic bomb blasts at Maralinga.

In the far north-west of South Australia bomb tests were conducted by the Australian and the British governments in the 1950s through to the 1960s. The blasts were so hot that the ground turned to glass. The puyu (black mist) exposed the traditional owners to radiation, which caused illness and early death.

Glass-blowing is an ancient craft technique which involves heating the main ingredient, sand, at extremely high temperatures. The maker dips a metal tube into the molten glass and then blows air through the tube to create rounded forms. Today, contemporary craftspeople and artists continue to develop innovative ways to work with glass to create both functional and decorative objects. Yhonnie Scarce is an artist who uses glass in unique ways to explore and express cultural stories associated with her family.

For me it’s about using my breath and using my body to create these objects that refer to culture.

Yhonnie Scarce

In making this large-scale 3D work Scarce was assisted by glass blowers at JamFactory in Adelaide. The creation of the work in the Gallery involved precise planning and careful installation as each fragile piece was suspended in place. The artist’s vision was realised through collaboration.

We can find layers of meaning in Scarce’s work: a personal story of the impact of the atomic blasts on her grandfather’s country; a reminder of past attitudes and their effects on Aboriginal people; a message about care for the natural world; and sand, an enduring part of the desert landscape, transformed into art.

RESPONDING

Describe your first impression of Scarce’s installation. What thoughts do you have about the use of glass as an artistic medium?

Glass has fragility and strength. Write about the layers of meaning you can find in Thunder raining poison. What questions would you ask the artist about how she planned and created the work?

Record the different plants featured in the art you see in the Gallery as part of TARNANTHI. Add to your list as you view works by different artists.

Scarce’s work is made from multiples, in this case hundreds of similar objects. Look carefully at some of the yams. How are they similar but different? How does the use of multiples contribute to the impact of the work on the viewer?

Find out about the craft of glass blowing. You may be able to visit JamFactory, where you can view the glass blowing in action.

Research the story of Maralinga. Write a personal response to the things you have learned about this aspect of Australian history.
MAKING

Record your impression of Thunder raining poison with drawing or photography.

Make drawings of some of the glass yams. Later find out about this and other bush foods. Create your own illustrated poster to show your learning.

After your experience of TARNANTHI use colour to illustrate your understanding of country.

Create your own yam work of art. Use a soft material-like clay, plasticine or dough. You could work with others and make a collaborative installation from your individual efforts.

Experiment with art using multiples. Choose a favourite object and make a number of the same forms. Explore how you can arrange your multiples to create a visually pleasing composition.

Clouds have been an inspiration for many artists. Research the work of artists inspired by clouds or search online for the Cloud Appreciation Society. Make your own cloud-themed art.

GLOSSARY

3D: a work of art with depth, as well as height and width, such as sculpture and installation

craft: an intellectual and physical activity where artists explore the materials and processes to produce unique objects for the purposes of: experimentation with form or function; exhibition; production; and personal or community need. Indigenous cultures draw no distinction between art and craft and, similarly, contemporary culture values the interplay between art/craft, design/craft, the art/designer or the design/maker. The crafted and handmade sit alongside the manufactured design object as part of historical, national and cultural identities

installation: mixed-media constructions or assemblages usually designed for a specific place and for a temporary period of time (Tate online resources glossary)

yam: a potato-like tuber which grows underground or as a climbing vine and an important food in many cultures

RELATED WORKS IN THE COLLECTION


YHONNIE SCARCE
THUNDER RAINING POISON

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North Terrace, Adelaide SA 5000
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www.artgallery.sa.gov.au
www.tarnanthi.com.au

TARNANTHI | Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art
8 October 2015 – 10 January 2016
Open daily 10am – 5pm, FREE ENTRY

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Warning: Members of Aboriginal communities are respectfully advised that some of the people mentioned in writing or depicted in photographs within this resource have passed away. All such mentions and photographs in this resource are with permission.

Note to the reader: Unless otherwise noted, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander words mentioned in this resource are spelled as advised by the relevant cultural authority. Approval for use of ‘Tarnanthi’ has been granted by Kaurna Warra Pintyanthi.

Yhonnie Scarce on Tjarutja country at Taranaki bomb site, Maralinga, South Australia, 2015. Photo: Janelle Low

Cover image: detail: Yhonnie Scarce, born 1973, Woomera, South Australia, Kokatha/Nukunu people, South Australia Thunder raining poison 2015, Adelaide, South Australia, blown glass yams, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY + Dianne Tanzer Gallery. Photo: Janelle Low