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JUDY WATSON

Across Country: Waterlines

Abstract

This visual essay is an edited transcript of a presentation delivered by Judy Watson given in the 2021 symposium “Grounded in Place: Dialogues Between First Nations Artists from Australia, Taiwan, and Aotearoa.” The artist speaks of her Waanyi Country, near Boodjamulla National Park (Lawn Hill Gorge) in north-west Queensland, Australia, and discusses a number of her artworks that reflect her ongoing investigation into water, massacres, and connections to Country.

Keywords: *Indigenous Australian art, Country, connections to water, massacres, colonisation, Waanyi, First Nations art*

Bookended by photographs of Boodjamulla National Park, this visual essay explores a number of works I have created over the years that respond to the themes of water and unspoken violence.¹ Growing up in Brisbane with my immediate family, I was aware of my Waanyi ancestry and was always in contact with my extended family from north-west Queensland. Later in life that I found out more about my culture and Country. My art practice has been a way to connect to this history and the stories of my people.

boodjamulla wanami



Figure 1. Judy Watson, *boodjamulla wanami*, 2019. Still from a single-channel video, sound, 5:41 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

This is a still from a video of Boodjamulla National Park (Lawn Hill Gorge)—my ancestors' Country—in north-west Queensland (Fig. 1). I wish we had learnt more about Aboriginal histories and other histories of places when I was growing up. A lot of my work takes me into a space of wanting to know what happened before and revealing the layers and history of what lies beneath.

massacre inlet

massacre inlet (Fig. 2) refers to the name of a place in the Gulf of Carpentaria. There are many place names in Australia that are indicative of the massacres that began with first contact and colonisation that occurred across our Country. My great-great-grandmother's survival of a massacre at Lawn Hill meant that her descendants continued her line.



Figure 2. Judy Watson, *massacre inlet*, 1994. Pigment on canvas, 192 x 138 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

a picnic with the natives—the gulf



Figure 3. Judy Watson, *a picnic with the natives—the gulf* (detail), 2015. Pigment and acrylic on canvas, 204 x 180 cm. Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. Photograph by Carl Warner. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

a picnic with the natives—the gulf (Fig. 3) is a work based on the charts of explorer Matthew Flinders, used when he was circumnavigating parts of Australia. It shows the land near the Gulf of Carpentaria. I did some research on massacres across Australia and discovered that there were many in the Gulf of Carpentaria. These

scattergun motifs are not placed exactly on those massacre sites, but as many as these took place, if not more.

waterline



Figure 4. Judy Watson, *waterline*, 2001. Pigment on linen, 224 x 118 cm. Collection of Moree Plains Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

I've always been interested in bodies of water and their connection to Country. Water is cleansing, purifying, rebirthing. Putting your head under water, listening to subterranean sounds deep within the belly of the water . . . Water is delicious

to swim through, submerge into, and float on. Water is a conduit that connects me to fluid thinking and imaginative ideas. *waterline* (Fig. 4) takes us back to our Country and to a story based on my family history. My great grandmother Mabel caught a fish for her family. My grandmother Grace said: “She gave us the flesh off the backbone, she gave us the best of what she had.” It includes an image of a spine, which is, for me, a symbol of the resilience and strength of Aboriginal women trying to hold Country and culture together and keep their families safe.

spine and teeth (mundirri banga mayi)



Figure 5. Judy Watson, *spine and teeth (mundirri banga mayi)*, 2019. Synthetic polymer paint and graphite on canvas, 262.5 x 181 cm. Collection of Art Gallery of South Australia. Photograph by Carl Warner. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

spine and teeth (mundirri banga mayi) (Fig. 5) is looking at Aboriginal cultural material from my Country and then floating this across the surface. I call blue the colour of memory; it features in a lot of my work. Through the materials I use and the events I reference, I'm trying to retrieve and bring back some of the past to make sense of my present. We all need to pay respect to those who came before us, and we need to continue their work and look after this Country and keep our environment healthy and sustainable for our children and future generations. We must protect our wetlands and cultural resources.

Water is a precious jewel. Water sustains us, feeds our families and our environment. We must all be responsible for its protection and look after our *wanami* ("water" in our language). Water is healing and restorative, not to be wasted, but rather valued as our most important wellspring. Water is a living being and we all need it to sustain life on this planet.

Water is also a weapon. During the Frontier Wars, waterholes were deliberately poisoned and now that poison is seeping out through agricultural runoff, mining, and fracking, with contaminants leaching into our river systems. In 1990, in our Waanyi Country in north-west Queensland, I saw healthy springs bubbling up from an important creek. The next time I saw them, the springs were not visible and the creek was barely running.

string over water (walkurrji kingkarri wanami)

My Aboriginal grandmother once asked her mother about a spring she remembered as a child. Her mother told her that "the Rainbow dried it up." This is a reference to Boodjamulla, the Rainbow Serpent, an important ancestral creator. *string over water (walkurrji kingkarri wanami)* (Fig. 6) directly evokes the generative power of Boodjamulla, with the string indicative of the shape and movements of the serpent. The white pastoralists on the property dynamited the spring my grandmother had asked about in order to get more water.



Figure 6. Judy Watson, *string over water (walkurri kingkarri wanami)*, 2019. Acrylic, graphite, pastel, and watercolour pencil on canvas, 261 x 180.5 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. Photograph by Carl Warner. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

boodjamulla wanami



Figure 7. Boodjamulla, Lawn Hill Gorge, 2019. Photograph courtesy of Judy Watson

In our Waanyi Country, the water in Lawn Hill Gorge is blue-green (Fig. 7). This subterranean water flows up from Barkly Tablelands. The water comes to the surface through fissures in the limestone; it's as ancient as the dinosaurs. Beneath some of Australia's islands, a freshwater lens occurs where fresh water floats on top of the denser salt water, sustaining life. Oil spills, unsafe sewerage, and contaminants are compromising these sources of fresh water.

Eighty percent of the springs throughout the Gulf of Carpentaria that were active during early colonisation are now dried up. Why is water being taken from communities that have so little water? Why is water being sold off? Where is the water for the farmers in the communities? And why are we giving our water away when everybody should have water rights, not just billionaires?

Judy Watson was born in Mundubbera, Queensland. Her Aboriginal matrilineal family is from Waanyi Country in north-west Queensland. The artist's process evolves by working from site and memory, revealing Indigenous histories, and following lines of emotional and physical topography that centre on particular places and moments in time. Spanning painting, printmaking, drawing, sculpture, and video, her practice often draws on archival documents and materials—such as maps, letters, and police reports—to unveil institutionalised discrimination against Aboriginal people. Watson has participated in many international and national exhibitions and her work is held in numerous major collections. In recent years, she has completed several major public art commissions across Australia.

Notes

¹ Guest editors' note: This visual essay is based on a presentation by Judy Watson in the 2021 "Grounded in Place" symposium. She speaks of her Waanyi Country, near Boodjamulla National Park (Lawn Hill Gorge) in north-west Queensland, Australia, and discusses a number of her artworks that reflect her ongoing investigation into water and connections to Country. This visual essay was transcribed and edited by Sophie McIntyre and editor Evie Franzidis and revised by the artist.