Country: Ted Snell

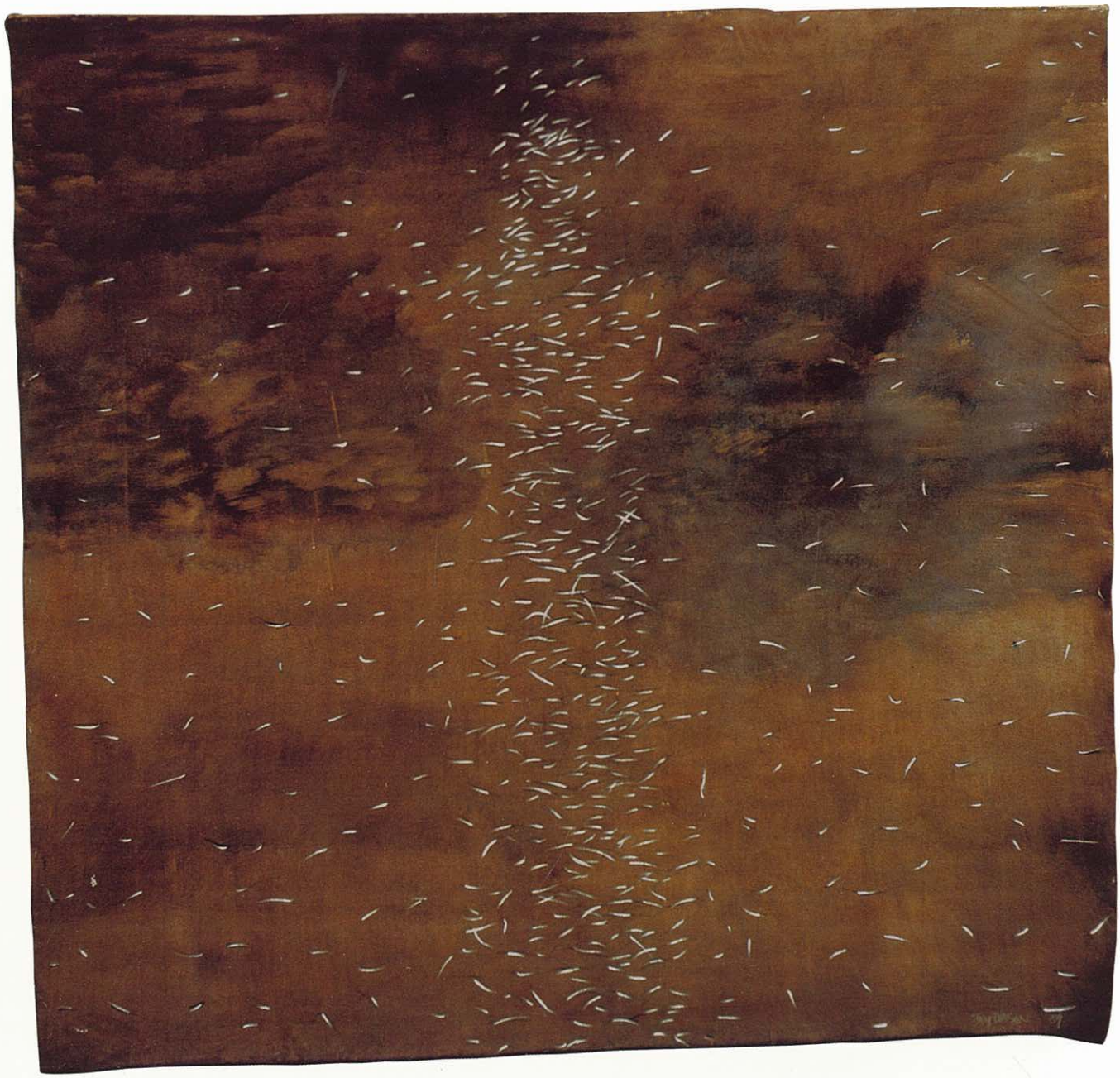
This is the first survey exhibition of Judy Watson's work. Despite a remarkable career in every respect, including selection for major international exhibitions and residencies, national exhibitions and awards, there has been no comprehensive exhibition charting her achievements. It is further proof that Australia does not celebrate its artists or accord them the kind of recognition peers in the USA or Europe both expect and receive.

Yet Judy Watson's work is important for Australians, particularly at this time in our history as we move towards reconciling the past and preparing for a shared future built upon understanding and respect. Her work speaks eloquently of the suffering of Aboriginal Australians, the massacres, prejudice and disdain, while simultaneously evoking the dignity and achievements of Aboriginal people. A contemporary artist, she bridges both cultures and works in the space between to create a powerful image of reconciliation and understanding.

This exhibition presents her work over the past fifteen years, since her first solo exhibition in 1988, focusing on her highly personal vision of the land - her country - the physical and conceptual framework that underpins her practice. Country is a concept that embraces both macro and micro notions of belonging and ownership. We speak of our country, which can incorporate the vastness and diversity of Australia, and simultaneously the intimate boundaries that define our particular relationship to 'this' place or 'our' place. It is as Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn have suggested 'simultaneously concept and place'.[1]

Indeed, country is a word that Watson uses often when talking about her work, as she identifies specific sources for paintings, locates them within the landscape and takes possession of them in a more holistic sense as the starting point for her poetic images. Although her paintings are clearly landscapes, the fundamental orientating feature of most western landscape painting is missing, there is no horizon.

> When people fly over the country, they see the country through Aboriginal eyes. I think that has changed people's perceptions of Aboriginal art ... I try to paint the land from both above and beneath to integrate the body with country.[2]



flying ants, 1989

acrylic, bitumen, oil paint, charcoal and pastel on canvas

182 x 190cm

Collection: Museum of Brisbane

Judy Watson in Sydney Studio, 1997
photo: Jenni Carter

We are either looking down or up, surrounded and enclosed by the land, not assuming some privileged position of power and authority, but welcomed into the earth, the sky or sea as a participant in an on-going drama played out over eternity. Peter Timms observed when writing about *touchstone* the work that won the Moët & Chandon Fellowship in 1995 that:

> The theme of natural harmony is made explicit in the way the painting integrates land, sky and sea. The simple superimposition of stars onto the blue of the ocean is marvellously poetic and rich in metaphor. Simultaneously, we are looking up and down, at the earth and at heaven, and we are situated within them both, no longer spectators or something outside ourselves but an integral part of the whole, participants in the cosmic dramas.[3]

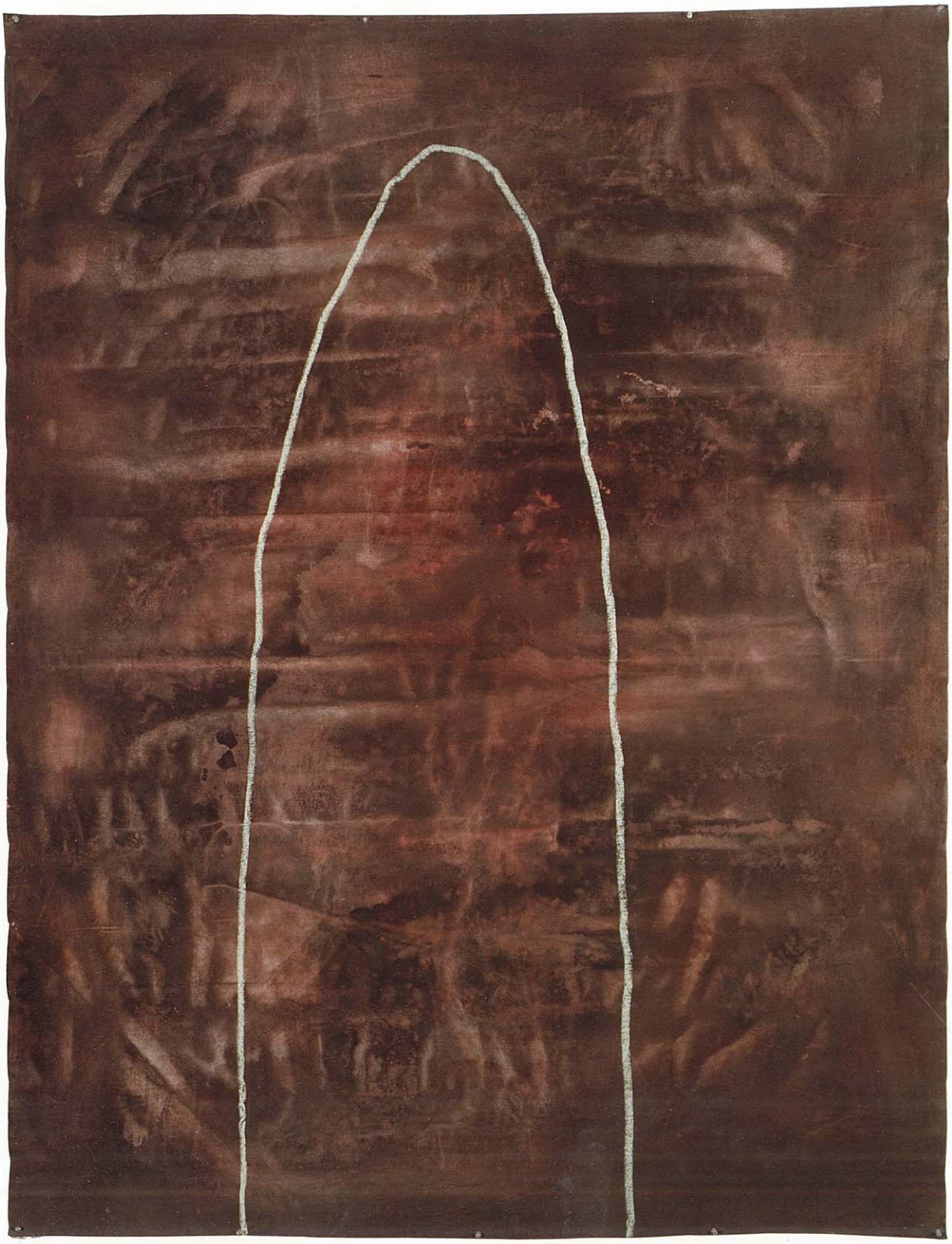
For Watson, a Waanyi woman from North West Queensland, her country is her grandmother's land around Lawn Hill Gorge and Riversleigh Station, which she visited in 1990 with her family. Making connections back to country is vitally important for Indigenous Australians, it is at the core of identity, the thing that shapes and guides the sense of self and provides the base for understanding others. As Watson has written:

> when you walk in that country
> the earth is beating pulsating
> heat, blood, heart
> things are hidden
> like the bones of the people who
> have been there before
> you are walking in their footprints.[4]

It is this layered history that makes her work so potent at a time when we are seeking to make peace with our past. Vivien Johnson has described the painting process as capturing '... a moment of connectedness'[5] and for Watson it is a vital and powerful way of linking with her grandmother and with all those who have gone before.

By placing the female form within the landscape I am making a connection between my grandmother and myself and that country.[6] This timeless quality emerges both from their imagery and their means of fabrication.

The pouring of paint, the use of ochres, the absorption and accretion of the land into her paintings connects her, it is both concrete and symbolic, like the gentle flow of sand through Gough Whitlam's hand into the open palm of Gurindji man Vincent Lingiari[7] to mark the full restoration of the first piece of Australian soil back to its Aboriginal owners.

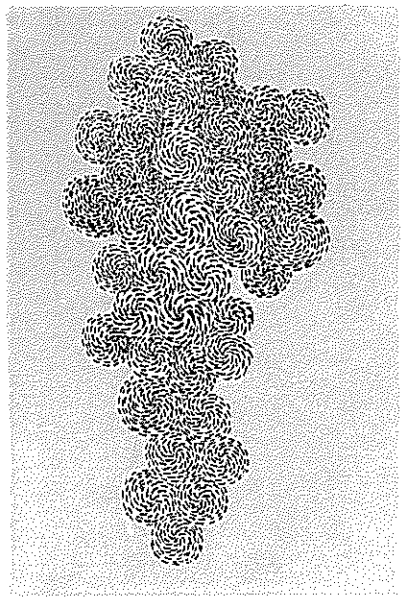


black ground, 1989

pigment and oil stick on canvas

246.3 x 189cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased from Admission Funds, 1992.



dispersal, 2000 [detail]
etching with chine colle
39.5cm x 35.5cm
printer Jo Diggens, Northern Editions
courtesy of the artist

> When we paint whether it is on our bodies for ceremony or on bark or canvas for the market we are not just painting for fun or profit. We are painting as we have always done to demonstrate our continuing link with our country and the rights and responsibilities we have to it. Furthermore, we paint to show the rest of the world that we own this country, and that the land owns us. Our painting is a political act.[10] Gularrwuy Yunupingu.

For Indigenous communities art is seen as a powerful agent of social justice[11] communicating past and current iniquities, and for Watson and her generation the political dimension of her practice whether commenting on the massacres of her people, the injustice facing contemporaries around the world or the danger of toxic bloom in Sydney Harbour is a constant.[12]

These concerns and the suppressed history of Aboriginal communities; the deep sorrow, the stolen-generations, massacres and fear, are the gaps in our reading of the land that Watson has restored. The sumptuous and seductive surfaces of her paintings evoke that history as she moves in the territory between presence and absence, measuring the spaces between as Hannah Fink explains, like any artist judging what is there by what is absent or what surrounds it.[13]

It is a very personal process that has required a deeper involvement and a preparedness to engage physically, emotionally and spiritually with the land,[12] a theme explored with great insight by Louise Martin-Chew in her essay in this catalogue. By fusing her own history and her grandmother's with the land she has been able to extend the political dimension of her work to encapsulate the wider narrative of Aboriginal people within her own story. Watson has said 'my grandmother's blood seeps down into the land'[13] and this autobiographical intimacy is an effective way of engaging her audience; revealing by inference, disclosing and enlightening.

> Watson draws back the abstract haze that clothes the landscape, and reclaims it with an autobiographic precision in homage to her grandmother and the Waanyi people.[14]

Rather than limiting her to one place, one country, this highly personal engagement with country and the stories it evokes has encouraged Watson to move through other lands as a traveller '... collecting information, materials and meaning from places other than my own country'.[15]

low tide walk, 1991

pigment, charcoal, pastel and ink on canvas

191 x 130cm

Queensland University of Technology Art Museum. Purchased 1992

She is a peripatetic, someone who travels in connection with their vocation, driven to find out more, to discover the similarities and differences, to test her realities against others in Italy, Norway, Canada, India, Kalgoorlie, France and the Kimberley. In 'cumulus', her exhibition at 24 Hour Art in Darwin and Mori Gallery in Sydney during 2001, the country she described was not only that of her grandmother but also others she has acquired through travel and encounter. She explains that when she travels she 'carries her culture with her' and so these new lands are appropriated into a broader geography of belonging. Her experiences are annexed and drawn together into a layered landscape of memory and interaction, of personal imprints and the presence of unseen others. Instead of adopting a fixed notion of identity her art is, as Victoria Lynn has suggested '... a refreshing metaphor for the gaps that exist between different cultural experiences.'[16]

Whether the subject is a termite mound from Lawn Hill Gorge or the spiralling double crown of her child's hair, a nuclear test or her own body swelling with her child, the spaces she creates are both immediately accessible and yet tantalisingly amorphous. As Hetti Perkins has observed, 'Judy Watson paints the country not from outside it but from within it'.[17] This poetry is at the core of her practice, it emanates from the nature of their fabrication, because they are, quite literally, summoned up from the earth. They are the record of their manufacture; the pooling and puddling of pigment, the imprint of burnt ground, the controlled float of colour and the accretion of forms and images borrowed or found. It is this alchemical approach that transforms base materials into her poetry of belonging and ownership that gives her work such resonance. They are as Julie Ewington has perceptively reflected in her essay in this publication 'an analogue of country, rather than a representation of it'.[18]

The materials Watson uses and the techniques she employs reflect both her humility and her celebration of the work of women. The paintings on the walls are like banners, or sheets hanging on a line, they 'move and breathe on the wall',[19] there is a blurring between the world of art and the world they inhabit, an 'edgeless-ness'[20] that encourages engagement and connection. Unlike much of the assertive and arrogant work of late modernism there is a 'grounded-ness' in her practice that encourages contact, draws you into the subtleties

black soil plains, 1991

pigment and pastel on canvas

187 x 129cm

On loan from the Macquarie Bank Collection

women be strong, 1994
lithograph on Japanese paper with
chine colle on cotton rag paper
33 x 25.5cm
printer the artist, courtesy of the artist

of the surface, envelopes you in their story.

Initially Watson trained as a printmaker, because painting seemed 'such a high art business',[21] and she was searching for a practice that was more open and available, more socially engaged and practical. Then while working on the early paintings like *sacred ground beating heart* she found she was able to manipulate materials in a more physical way and to relate to them from her personal experience. It was the impetus she needed.

> ... it's so forgiving cloth, you can scrub it and do all those sorts of things and so in a way it was a real release just to work on the ground on those canvases and then just start making the work that I'd been making on a smaller scale on paper but this time it was with my whole body. [22]

That sense of humility and her determination to make a difference within a community remain as core principles in her work. They are ideas reflected in the titles of her pictures, which are always presented in lower case, like snatches of conversation, ideas in parenthesis, possibilities still evolving. By avoiding the authorisation of capitalising Hannah Fink suggests that Watson refuses to make a definitive statement, her titles remain as 'fragments, phrases overheard from a greater narrative'.[23]

While it might seem contradictory her involvement with public art projects is another way of extending these ideas. They are grand in scale, some like the floor at Casula Powerhouse, *Walama* at Sydney International Airport and *Wurreka* at the Melbourne Museum are massive, yet they sit harmoniously within their surroundings and draw you in with their delicate surfaces and intricate detail. Once again revealing through engagement these works although large do not impose, they seduce and lure, offering up their stories on a slow fuse, mapping territory and providing direction.

Indeed seen from above the floor at the Casula Powerhouse is like a map that places you within the country as a participant, an explorer finding your way. As with much of her work it combines the distanced view of the cartographer with the intimate knowledge of the inhabitant to create 'tactile maps'.[24]

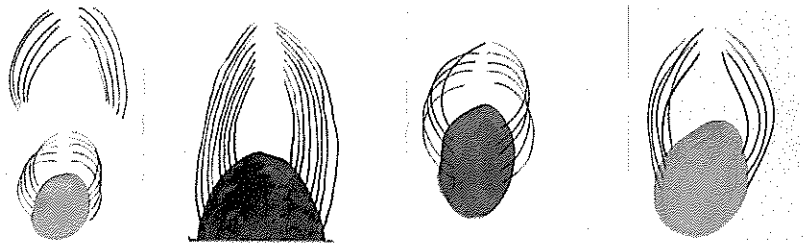
In *tremor* for example, the spiralling forms seem to represent the clouds of the 'cumulus' exhibition and the extraordinary pyrotechnics associated with the sky in Darwin, however, the painting was conceived as a response

heartland, 1991

pigment and pastel on canvas

176 x 173.5cm

Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1991



reconciliation place 1-4, 2001
watercolour on paper
38 x 28cm
Gitte Weise Gallery

to an earthquake at Tennant Creek in 1999. Her documentation of the sound of the earth, the rising smoke and the obscuring dust haze has become multi-layered and open to many interpretations.

Also incorporating female forms, suggestive of ovaries or breasts, and black lines that stripe across the surface that represent the chisel marks found in wooden implements from parts of northern and central Australia, it is an image of a place given form by her own sensory interactions with the land. These responses are then fused with the process of painting, incorporating the earth from the Gosse River, pouring the mix and its controlled drying as the paint seeks its own forms through absorption, to create an image that acts as a catalyst for each viewer to construct their own set of meanings, to choose their own direction.[19]

Not all her works are as open to interpretation, some like *evidence* refer to the massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia and in particular to the Connistan Massacre, one of the last in Australia's written history. This diptych is a very powerful evocation of the horrors of the event, the bleached bones methodically laid out in the left panel while the right hand panel seems to suggest simultaneously an X-ray image of a bone or a distant view of the land. Both intimately engaged and distanced she suggests it is our decision to choose our own sense of engagement. With few images in our national archive to record these events Watson's paintings serve as a concrete point of reference, a rallying point and a memorial.

'Watson's paintings pulsate with the moods of the country, with the sense of time worn existence and with the strength of human passions within.'[20]

Over the past fifteen years Judy Watson has won national and international recognition for her work. She has been included in major survey exhibitions such as the First Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane and the Venice Biennale, won the Moët & Chandon Fellowship 1995, and been selected for exhibitions in Thailand, South Africa, the United States, New Zealand, France, India, Italy and the United Kingdom. This exhibition acknowledges her achievements as a major figure in contemporary practice in this country and through Asialink's 'Senior Artist's Program' it will also showcase her work throughout South East Asia.

stones and bones, 1991

pigment on canvas

190 x 133cm

University of Tasmania, Fine Art Collection

Notes

[1] Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn, Australian Perspecta, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1993, p11

[2] Judy Watson, quoted by Ben Holgate in 'Beneath the Earth', The Weekend Australian, February 24-25, 2001 p11

[3] Peter Timms, Moët & Chandon Touring Exhibition Catalogue 1995, published by the Moët & Chandon Australian Art Foundation, p11

[4] Judy Watson, Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art, catalogue, Artspace, Sydney, 1991

[5] Vivien Johnson 'Upon a painted emotion', Art & Australia Vol 30 No: 2, Summer 1992, p238

[6] Judy Watson, quoted in Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art, op cit

[7] Recorded in the famous photograph by Mervyn Bishop

[8] Galarrwuy Yunupingu, quoted by Hannah Fink, Australian Perspecta, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1993, p26

[9] Howard Morphy, Aboriginal Art, Art & Ideas series, Phaidon, London, 1998, p383

[10] The painting 'red tides' describes the deadly algae in Sydney Harbour, 'pacific vessel', 'six little bombs' and 'the confetti of empire' the French nuclear tests at Mururoa Atoll in the Pacific and 'one night in Bhopal' the 1984 Union Carbide disaster in India that destroyed so many lives

[11] See Hannah Fink op cit p26

[12] According to Nicholas Thomas 'A basic difference between the approach of colonial artists, who have consistently appropriated the landscape through its representation, and Indigenous peoples, who have asserted their associations not via a distanced view, but through painting country in manifold other ways.' Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture, Thames and Hudson, London, 1999, p225

[13] Judy Watson, Gatherings Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work from Queensland, Keeaira Press, 2001, p204

[14] Victoria Lynn and Judy Watson, catalogue published by Moët & Chandon, 1996, p8

[15] Judy Watson, Beyond the Pale: Contemporary Indigenous Art, Brenda Croft, 2000 Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000, p90

[16] Victoria Lynn, 'Judy Watson: Map/Dream/Journey', Antipodean Currents: 10 contemporary Artists from Australia, Guggenheim Museum Soho, New York, 1995

[17] Hetti Perkins, 'Judy Watson', The First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1993, p110

[18] See Julie Ewington 'Water'in this publication

[19] See Louise Martin-Chew 'Judy Watson's art of the spirit' in this publication

[20] op cit Hannah Fink p28

[21] From the extended interview with Hetti Perkins in August 2002. An edited version is included in this publication

[22] ibid

[23] Hannah Fink op cit p29

[24] Wally Caruana, Aboriginal Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 1993, p201

[25] See Julie Ewington 'Water' in this publication for a further elaboration of the metaphorical associations in Watson's work

[26] Victoria Lynn, 'Judy Watson', Eyeline, Winter/Spring 1992, p6

walking around the georgina, looking for the hanging tree, 1991

pigment and pastel on canvas

180 x 140cm

Collection of John Cruthers and Elaine Baker