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Susan Best

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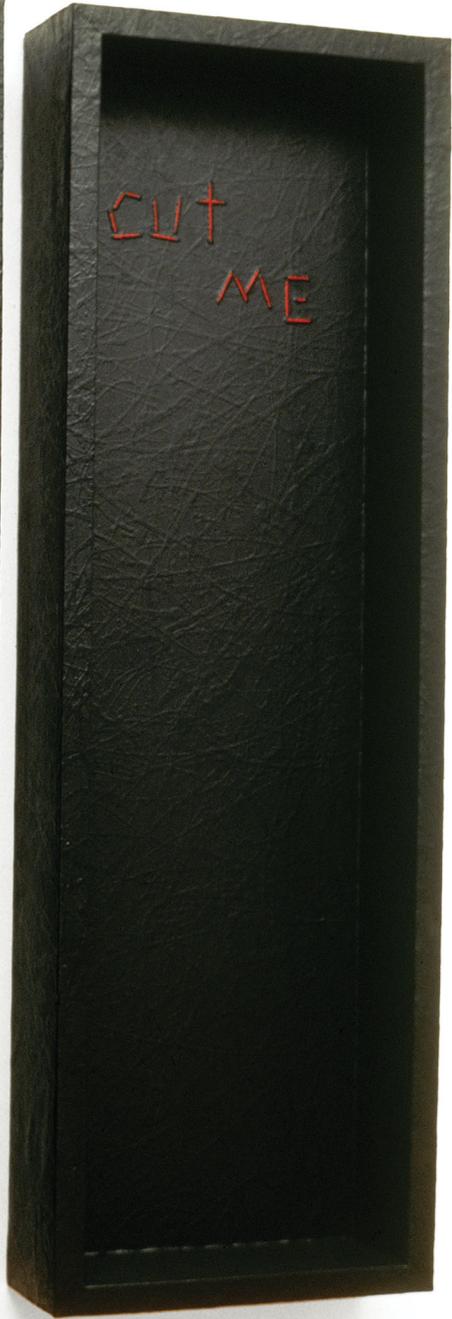
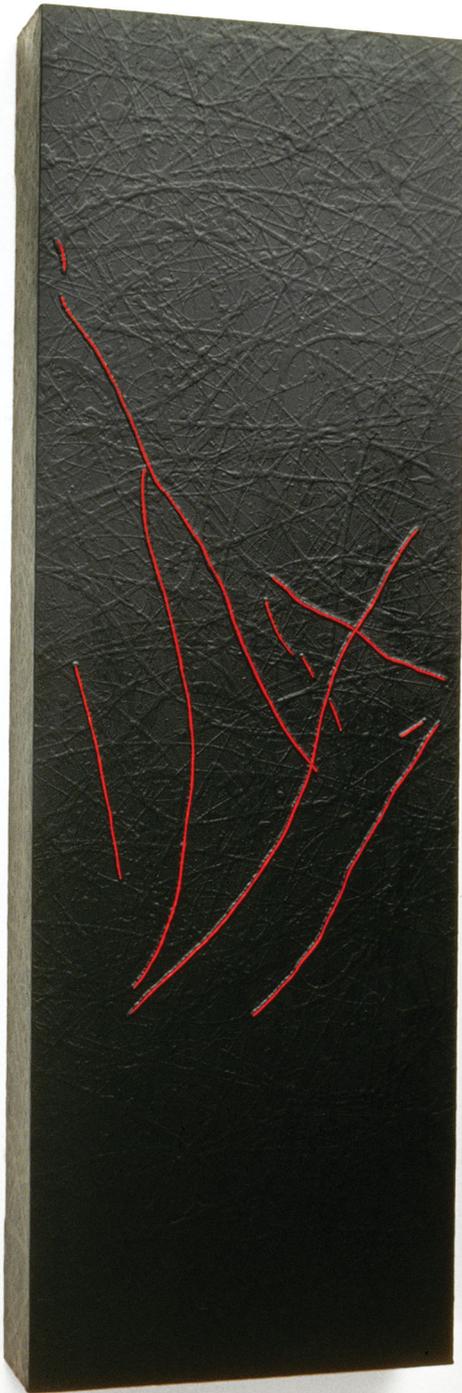
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Anger and Repair

The Art and Politics of Judy Watson's *the holes in the land* (2015)

Susan Best

Gordon Bennett, Australia, (1955–2014), *Self Portrait: Interior/Exterior*, 1993, acrylic on canvas on pine frames, leather stock whip, paper tags, two panels each 187 h x w 60 x d 25 cm, installation variable, collection: The Estate of Gordon Bennett, © The Estate of Gordon Bennett

¹ On Julie Gough's project with Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), see the collection of essays, Khadjia von Zinnenburg Carroll, ed, *The Importance of Being Anachronistic: Contemporary Aboriginal Art and Museum Reparations*, Third Text Publications and *Discipline*, 2016. For a discussion of Gough's project with MAA and Christian Thompson's work with Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, see Jessyca Hutchens, 'Losing the Archive: Julie Gough at the MAA, Cambridge and Christian Thompson at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford', in Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean, eds, *Indigenous Archives: The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art*, University of Western Australia Publishing, Perth, 2017, pp 297–320.

Repair is often assumed to be a redemptive or restorative gesture: making amends in human relationships, returning something to a usable state in the case of artefacts and clothing, or to a prior state of functioning in the case of cars and houses. This article argues for a more ambivalent approach to repair, taking into account situations where damage cannot be (or has not been) reversed, but which nonetheless call out for some kind of acknowledgement and recognition. My approach to repair is deeply indebted to queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's account of reparative reading practices. Sedgwick, in turn, borrows the idea of a reparative position or orientation from psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, for whom it signals the capacity to tolerate ambivalence; that is, to hold together both positive and negative feelings about something. The reparative position is not, then, simply about undoing or reversing damage; ambivalence precludes that wholly positive orientation. This way of thinking about repair should enable the incorporation of intense negative emotions and experiences such as the horror of annihilation, anger and despair alongside positive feelings like tenderness, love and hope. In this article, I examine the work of contemporary Australian Indigenous artist, Judy Watson, where this complexity of address is particularly evident.

Specifically, I examine *the holes in the land* (2015), six exquisitely coloured etchings focused on Aboriginal cultural material in the collection of the British Museum, which resulted from a residency in 2013. Watson is one of a number of contemporary Australian Indigenous artists whose work engages with Aboriginal cultural patrimony held in British museums. Other artists working in this vein include Julie Gough and Christian Thompson, both of whom have also worked directly with British museum collections – Thompson in 2012 and Gough in 2012–2013.¹

2 The fourth part of the anthology is called 'Decolonising Archives': Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean, *Indigenous Archives*, pp 295–428.

3 *Ibid*, xiii

4 See Walter D Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011, p 11.

5 Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, Reaktion, London, 2016.

6 See for example, Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p 23.

7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003, p 150

8 The literature enacting or adhering to the polarity is vast. To just give a few examples, see James Meyer, 'Nomads: Figures of Travel in Contemporary Art', in ed Alex Coles, *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn, de-, dis-, ex-*, vol 4, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2000, pp 10–26; Alexander Alberro, 'Beauty Knows No Pain', *Art Journal*, vol 63, no 2, summer 2004, pp 36–43; Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone, New York, 2008. While the need to rethink the rejection of aesthetics has been broached by philosophers as diverse as Arthur Danto, Jacques Rancière, Elaine Scarry, Robert Pippin, and Michael Kelly, the anti-aesthetic tradition still dominates modern art history and theory.

In a recently published anthology, Ian McLean and Darren Jorgensen align this kind of art practice with a 'decolonialising' impulse.² Strangely, they use the term 'decolonial' as if it were interchangeable with deconstruction.³ This confusion of terminology is useful here in order to articulate more precisely the nature of Watson's reparative practice. Unlike the critical project of deconstruction which disrupts by refiguring existing Western terms, Watson's practice foregrounds other non-Western ways of seeing; other 'options' in decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo's terms, options that 'delink' from the colonial matrix and build on what he calls 'the ruins of imperial knowledge'.⁴

Watson's alternative approach to representing the land will be examined in greater detail in the second section of the article, which also considers Watson's departure from Ian McLean's characterisation of urban Aboriginal art as having a uniformly angry tone.⁵ In sum, through examining these innovations, I hope to show how Watson's reparative approach forges a new way of thinking about political art. Her ambivalent stance means that she does not reject the routine ways and modes of doing things – deconstruction, critique, exposure, indignation – she simply does not follow them. To unpack the meaning of Watson's reparative approach, let me start by examining Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's brilliant theorisation of reparative and paranoid readings.

Reparation in Melanie Klein and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

Curiously, while Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's interpretation of Melanie Klein's reparative position has been widely taken up in queer theory, it has had limited purchase in discussions of contemporary art, despite its pertinence.⁶ Perhaps this neglect is because reparation is commonly seen as a softening measure to be resisted, particularly when political issues should remain uncomfortable, confronting, challenging or shocking. Certainly, Sedgwick points out that in literary studies the reparative motive or position is often aligned with aestheticising and reactionary tendencies. She writes:

The vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it's no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives.⁷

This dismissal echoes a constant refrain in the visual arts where aesthetics and politics are frequently presumed to be incompatible or polarised terms.⁸ One of my principal concerns in this article is to show how aesthetics and politics are very fruitfully combined in Judy Watson's recent work and particularly in the six colour etchings in the series *the holes in the land* (2015) that I analyse in the next section.

Sedgwick's work is very useful for this purpose. Sedgwick advocates reparative interpretations of cultural material in place of the much more common 'paranoid' interpretations (another key Kleinian term). She explains that paranoid interpretations routinely adopt a posture of

suspicion and operate as a kind of ‘exposure’ of traces of oppression or injustice.⁹ Crucially, she argues that paranoid suspicion is central to critical practice in the humanities and that it is propelled by the desire on the part of theorists and critics to avoid surprise, shame and humiliation.¹⁰

In contemporary art, this approach is typical of the anti-aesthetic tradition and identity politics art, which also favour critique and the exposure of wrongdoing. The anti-aesthetic tradition is one of the dominant approaches to political art. Typically, it privileges critique over aesthetic engagement and rejects the importance of traditional aesthetic concerns such as beauty, feeling, expression and judgement. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, this tradition of art making was associated with conceptual art and conceptualism, institutional critique, and feminist and critical postmodern practices; artists like Barbara Kruger, Allan Sekula, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Victor Burgin, Hans Haacke, Jenny Holzer, Andrea Fraser and Lorna Simpson are representative. The anti-aesthetic aim of this strand of practice is succinctly summarised by conceptual artist Sol LeWitt: it’s an art that intends to appeal to ‘the mind rather than the eye or the emotions’.¹¹ In other words, anti-aesthetic art should not be beautiful or seductive; rather it is intentionally bland or visually neutral in the manner of sociological information; ‘emotionally dry’, to cite LeWitt’s further instructions on the matter.¹²

More recently the work of Fred Wilson, Coco Fusco, Taryn Simon, Renée Green, Emily Jacir, James Luna, Regina Jose Galindo, Santiago Sierra and Alfredo Jaar, along with many, many others, can also be understood as privileging the exposure of wrongdoing, while aiming to be visually deadpan or unremarkable. I do not want to suggest here that these artists are making bad art because they adopt an emphatically political stance: they are extremely well known internationally for precisely that reason. Rather, my point is that paranoid art has become almost synonymous with political art. As Sedgwick explains, for cultural criticism,

it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective practice among other, alternative kinds.¹³

9 Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading’, op cit, p 139

10 Ibid, pp 136–38

11 LeWitt cited in Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p 49

12 Sol LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ [1967], in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p 822

13 Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading’, op cit, p 126

14 Ibid

In this spirit, I suggest that alongside the long-standing tradition of making paranoid political art, there is also an alternative – the reparative kind that I analyse here.

While Sedgwick gives a detailed account of paranoid inquiry she is much less explicit about what a reparative approach would look like. Paranoia, for example, is examined in five different and distinct ways; she lists the headings that guide her analysis:

Paranoia is *anticipatory*.
Paranoia is *reflexive* and *mimetic*.
Paranoia is a *strong theory*.
Paranoia is a theory of *negative affects*.
Paranoia places its faith in *exposure*.

The most consistent characteristic of a reparative reading, she seems to suggest, is that it seeks pleasure rather than the avoidance of painful feelings.¹⁴ Avoiding negative feelings (paranoia) versus seeking pleasurable

feelings (reparation) is the principal dichotomy operative in the contrast. Ameliorative effects are also mentioned in passing as a benefit of reparative reading, but they are less clearly defined. Presumably, amelioration flows from a reading that seeks positive feeling and that is not preoccupied with relentless critique or bent on exposure. To get a better sense of what the reparative position means, it may be helpful to look at Melanie Klein's original formulation. The distinction Sedgwick draws upon between the paranoid position and the reparative position is fundamental to Klein's account of human development and psychology.

These terms describe two phases or positions in very early psychic life. To give them their full names, the first is the paranoid-schizoid phase; the second is the reparative or depressive phase. As Juliet Mitchell notes, the two positions, the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive, 'develop in the first months of life, but they always remain as part of our personality, of our normal and our psychotic development'.¹⁵ In other words, while they occur sequentially in infant development, neither is completely surmounted or resolved.

In the paranoid-schizoid phase, Klein describes the infant's oscillation between feelings of love for the mother and feelings of hate and greed, with the latter feelings precipitating extraordinarily violent phantasies of destruction. She writes:

When a baby feels frustrated at the breast, in his phantasies he attacks this breast; but if he is being gratified by the breast, he loves it and has phantasies of a pleasant kind in relation to it. In his aggressive phantasies, he wishes to bite up and to tear up his mother and her breasts, and to destroy her also in other ways.¹⁶

The imagined attack on the mother also evokes fear of retaliation, hence the paranoid dimension of this phase. While Klein notes that in this phase the infant's relations are predominantly with part-objects – the good (gratifying) breast is loved, whereas the bad (frustrating) breast is hated – the good and bad objects are 'not wholly distinct from one another in the infant's mind'.¹⁷ The integration of these split part-objects only properly occurs in the depressive phase when the infant develops the capacity for internalising whole objects and is able to tolerate the ambivalent feelings previously kept apart by the defence of splitting (the schizoid dimension of the earlier phase). Klein describes the integration as a kind of restoration: 'If the baby has, in his aggressive phantasies, injured his mother by biting and tearing her up, he may soon build up phantasies that he is putting the bits together again and repairing her.'¹⁸

Reparation is precipitated by depressive anxiety resulting from guilt and remorse at the damage done in phantasy in the previous phase. As the infant seeks to repair the mother, he or she also internalises both the damaged and the restored mother, adding these objects of hate and love to its inner world. For Klein, objects are always simultaneously internal to the psyche as well as external, creating a complicated interweaving of inner and outer reality. Splitting and integration, thus, have consequences for both the constitution of the self and the relation to others.

15 Juliet Mitchell, 'Introduction', *The Selected Melanie Klein*, Penguin, London, 1986, p 21

16 Melanie Klein, 'Love, Guilt and Reparation', in Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere, *Love, Hate and Reparation*, W W Norton, New York and London, 1964, p 61

17 Melanie Klein, 'Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotion Life of the Infant' [1952], in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963*, Virago, London, 1988, p 62

18 Klein, 'Love, Guilt and Reparation', op cit, p 61

In her account of reparative reading, Sedgwick is careful to stress that Klein's process of restoration does not undo the imagined damage done to the mother. She draws attention to the fact that the whole object is not a pristine object; the whole she notes is '*not necessarily like any preexisting whole*'.¹⁹ She spells out the compromised quality of the whole object in a later article on Klein, citing Hinshelwood's dictionary definition of the potential pitfalls of integration: '*When such part-objects are brought together as a whole they threaten to form a contaminated, damaged, or dead whole object*.'²⁰ The reparative phase or position is not, then, redemptive or restorative in the straightforward way one might suppose. Sedgwick is at pains to emphasise precisely this point. She outlines the instability and vicissitudes of the reparative phase with great insight:

Once assembled, these more realistic, durable, and satisfying internal objects are available to be identified with, to offer one and to be offered nourishment and comfort in turn. Yet the pressures of that founding, depressive realization can also continually impel the psyche back toward depression, toward manic escapism, or toward the violently projective defenses of the paranoid/schizoid position. We feel these depressive pressures in the forms of remorse, shame, the buzzing confusion that makes thought impossible, depression itself, mourning for the lost ideal, and – often most relevant – a paralyzing apprehension of the inexorable laws of unintended consequences.²¹

What Sedgwick takes from Klein's complicated assemblage of internal and external objects is the idea of a reparative impulse that is 'additive and accretive'.²² A consequence of this additive approach may be that a reparative practice cannot be entirely separated from a paranoid one either. Certainly, Sedgwick notes that this interpenetration of reparation and paranoia may occur even when theorists are unaware of it. She states:

Given the instability and mutual inscription built into the Kleinian notion of positions, I am also, in the present project, interested in doing justice to the powerful reparative practices that, I am convinced, infuse self-avowedly paranoid critical projects, as well as in the paranoid exigencies that are often necessary for nonparanoid knowing and utterance.²³

The issue, then, to take from this unavoidable interpenetration is the impossibility of developing a purely reparative method; the reparative by definition includes the earlier phase. Nonetheless, it aims to go beyond the largely negative orientation of paranoid unveiling; the pleasure-seeking impulse is the key point of differentiation.

To return to Sedgwick's reparative motive, we can say that it seeks pleasure and amelioration, and that it also signals the capacity to assimilate the consequences of destruction and violence. While ambivalence tends to suggest indecision, oscillation between positions, or even indifference, for Sedgwick and Klein it is an inclusive term that captures, and honours, the complexity of feeling that follows from destruction both psychical and social.

19 Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading', op cit, p 128

20 Hinshelwood cited in Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol 106, no 3, summer 2007, p 637

21 Ibid, Sedgwick, 'Melanie Klein', p 637

22 Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading', op cit, p 149

23 Ibid pp 128–129

The Aesthetics and Politics of Repatriation: the holes in the land

This account of ambivalence has particular pertinence for understanding Judy Watson's practice. Her ambivalence is an unusual stance for an urban Indigenous Australian artist to take. More commonly, as Australian art historian Ian McLean has recently argued, anger is the typical emotion expressed by urban Indigenous Australian art. He writes: 'A deep anger at historical injustice is the driving force of nearly all urban art, no matter how divergent its themes, subjects and approaches.'²⁴ To highlight the affective tone of an important strand of Australian contemporary art is an unusual move on McLean's part. The 'affective turn', which has swept through other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, still has limited purchase in art history.²⁵ Generally, critical commentary in art history and criticism highlights the political and social issues addressed by urban Indigenous art rather than explicitly addressing the feelings that may underpin it.

That said, anger at past injustice is certainly not limited to urban Aboriginal art; it has been a key feature of identity politics art in Australia as well as in many other countries. As I have argued elsewhere, typically identity politics art takes one of two forms.²⁶ First, there is the paranoid type discussed in the previous section. This paranoid art frequently entails the expression of anger at wrongdoings past and present; these misdemeanours are exposed by artists in their pointed critiques of the state of things. The alternative form of identity politics art is less anger-fuelled: it counters or replaces negative stereotypes with positive ones: Sianne Ngai has succinctly described this approach as the uplift aesthetic.²⁷ The affective tenor of this kind of art is usually celebratory. To give just one example, the Australian artist of Wiradjuri ancestry, Brook Andrew, has 'uplifted' a typical ethnographic photograph of an Aboriginal man by amplifying body decorations and adding across his chest the text 'sexy and dangerous'. Andrew thereby directs the viewer towards a positive reading of the photograph as surely as ideology critique underscores the negative. While adding the epithet 'sexy and dangerous' could, of course, be read in other ways, the crucial issue for my argument is the upbeat tone. Most importantly, Andrew eschews the paranoid gesture of unveiling typically found in political versions of postmodern appropriation, such as the work of his feminist precursors Barbara Kruger or Carrie Mae Weems.

McLean's analysis of the importance of anger is most pertinent, then, to the paranoid type of identity politics art insofar as the affective tone of such work is often angry. Anger is, of course an emotion that is usually attributed to men, as Elizabeth Spelman notes, since for women 'anything resembling anger is likely to be described as hysteria or rage instead'.²⁸ Although as Kathleen Woodward points out, anger was a key feminist emotion, justified with recourse to the idea of "'outlaw" emotions, emotions experienced by those who are oppressed'.²⁹ In her conclusion to the essay, however, she queries the ongoing validity of this emotion beyond the early stage of a political struggle, cautioning against the corrosive effects of "'righteous", habit-forming anger'.³⁰

24 Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears*, op cit, p 211

25 See for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995; Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002; Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, op cit; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2005; Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007; Melissa Gregg and Gregory J Seigworth, eds, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010.

26 Susan Best, *Reparative Aesthetics: Witnessing in Contemporary Art Photography*, Bloomsbury, London, 2016

27 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, op cit, p 177

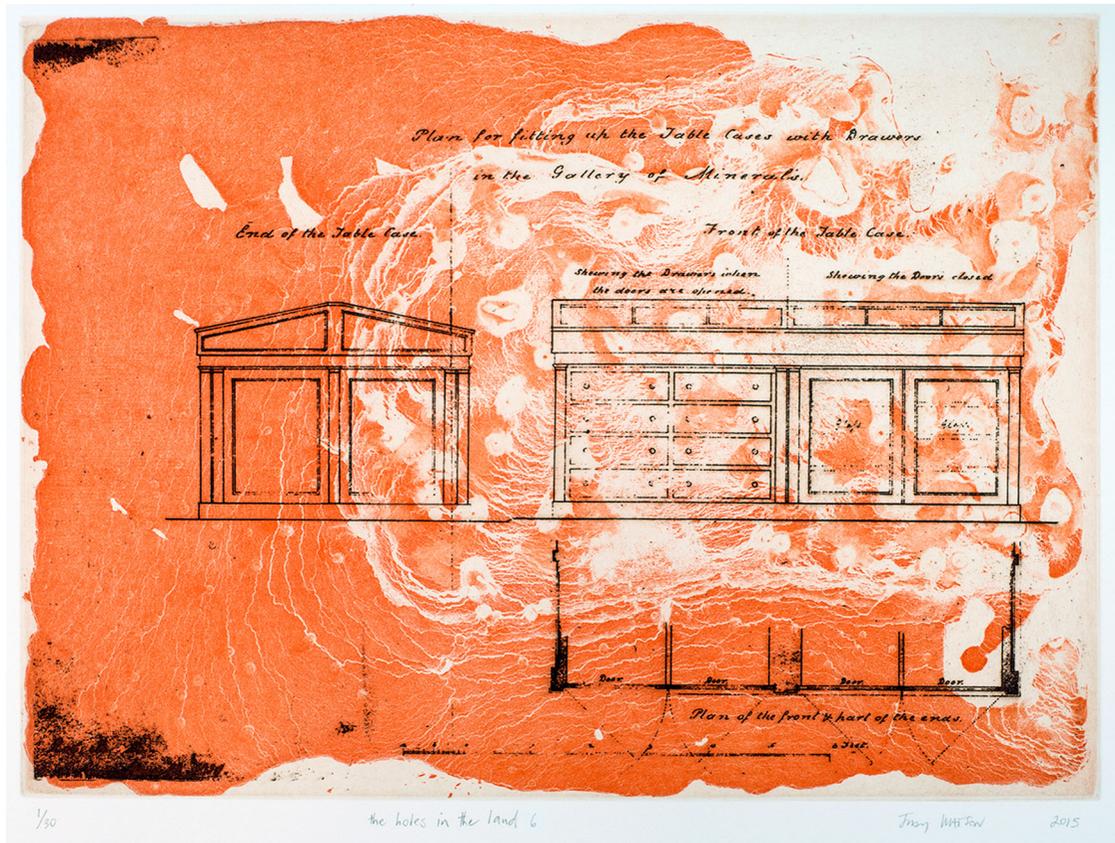
28 Kathleen Woodward, 'Anger... and Anger: From Freud to Feminism', *Freud and the Passions*, John O'Neill, ed, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1996, p 93

29 Elizabeth Spelman cited in Woodward, 'Anger', *ibid*, p 87

30 Woodward, 'Anger', *ibid*, p 92



Brook Andrew, *Sexy & Dangerous*, 1996, digital image printed on Duraclear mounted on acrylic, 183 cm x 182 cm, image: courtesy of the artist, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris and Brussels



Judy Watson, *the holes in the land 6*, 2015, colour etching from zinc plates, 37.5 cm x 49.5 cm, image: courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions. photographer: Carl Warner

This feminist reappraisal of anger reinforces the significance of Watson's ambivalent stance. Her work, *the holes in the land* (2015), cannot be straightforwardly classified as an *expression* of anger, but anger and sorrow are not excluded either. As the title underscores, the series of six etchings is about loss: specifically, the loss of cultural patrimony. In four of the six images Aboriginal cultural objects held in the British Museum are depicted; mostly they are from the northern Australian state of Queensland, which is where Watson's country is located. Watson is a Waanyi artist with maternal ties to north-west Queensland.

The series is the result of a fellowship in 2013 at the British Museum that was part of a larger research project called *Engaging Objects*: a collaboration between the Australian National University, the British Museum, and the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.³¹ The fellowship took place in the lead up to two important exhibitions of the British Museum's Indigenous Australian collections that resulted from that research collaboration: *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* in 2015 at the British Museum, and *Encounters* at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in 2015. Watson's series was first shown in *Unsettled*, an exhibition of the work of five Indigenous artists that was framed as a response to the *Encounters* exhibition.³² The other four artists in the exhibition, who also undertook fellowships in the British Museum, were Julie Gough, Jonathan Jones, Elma Kris and Wukun Wanambi.

As an artistic fellow, with rare access to the British Museum collections, Watson was positioned more like an insider, albeit only a temporary one. Certainly, the series departs from the accusatory or outsider position of institutional critique familiar from political work about museum collections from the 1990s, such as the work of African American artist Fred Wilson. Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992–1993) was a project for the Maryland Historical Society using their collection; famously in one exhibition case he juxtaposed ornate silverware with slave shackles. The shock of these two types of metalwork sharing the same space makes explicit the dependence of the genteel life of Maryland society on the forced labour of African American slaves.

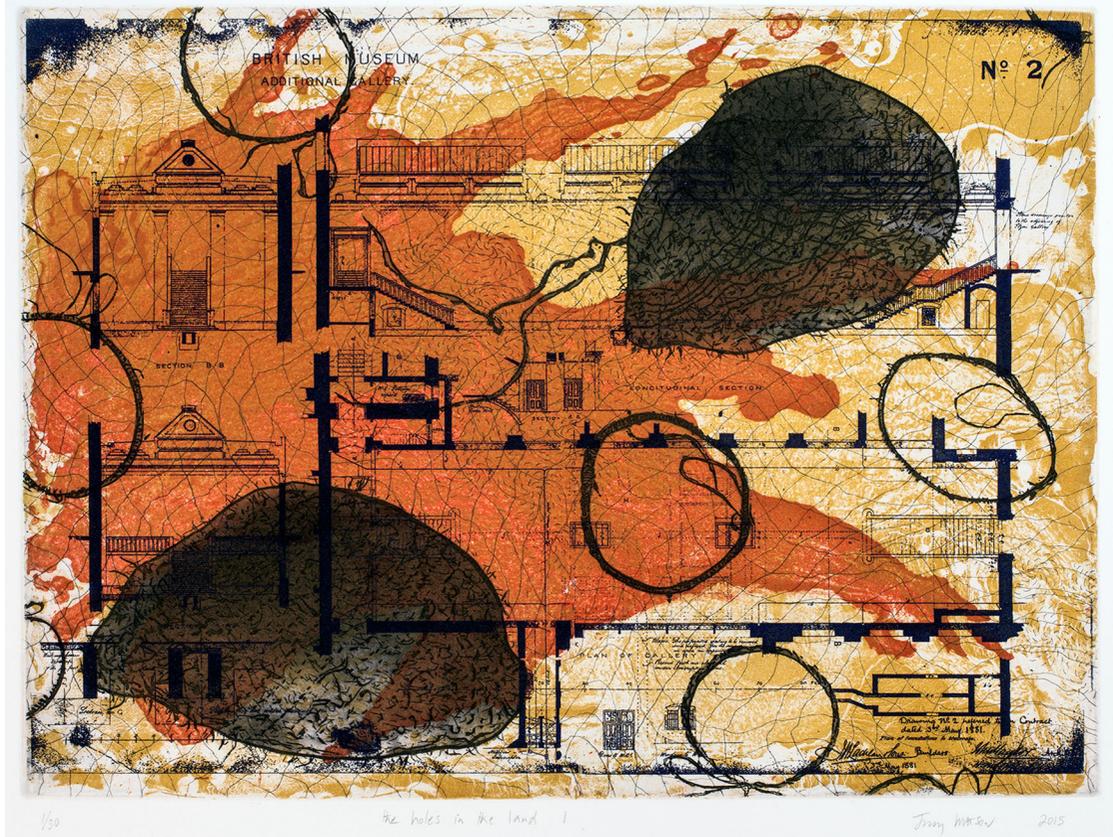
Watson's project is very differently motivated as the objects she depicts are all of Indigenous manufacture. The profound feelings stirred up by being able to reconnect with these objects is well expressed by Shayne Williams, a Dharawal Elder from the southern part of Sydney. As he put it: 'In a spiritual sense, it would be good to hold them again, just the way our ancestors held them, even in 1770... For us they feel like our national treasure.'³³ The final image in the series, *the holes in the land* 6, shows a table case with drawers: the kind of accommodation or resting place for these objects in the British Museum.

The objects in Watson's series are liberated from storage. They range from pituri bags (fabricated in two very different ways), wooden clubs, a paddle, and skirts or aprons worn by women. In the etchings, they are all rendered in black so that they register as shadows, or perhaps it would be better to say shades of their former selves, as they are more textured and volumetric than a shadow could ever be. Positioned on the uppermost layer of the etchings, they are also very insistently

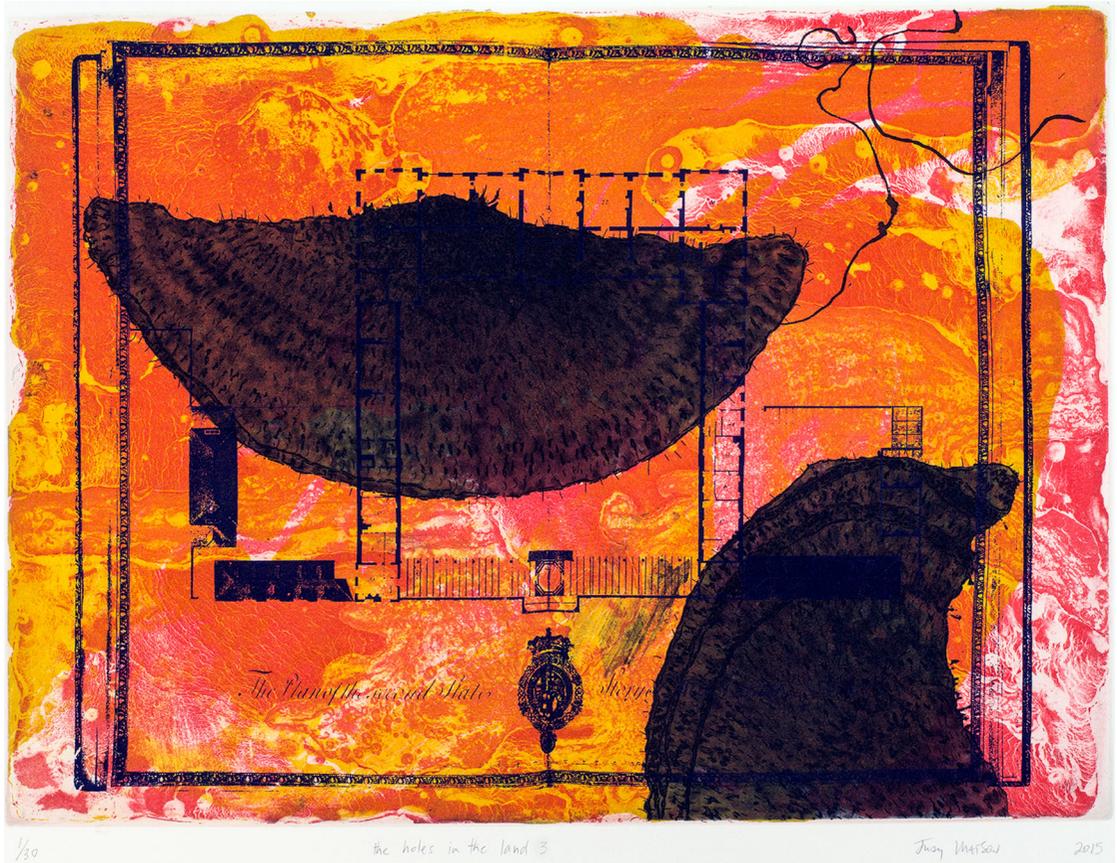
31 <http://rsha.anu.edu.au/engaging-objects>, accessed 4 February 2017

32 http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/unsettled/about_the_exhibition, accessed 4 February 2017

33 Epigram, *Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum*, Canberra, National Museum of Australia Press, 2015, no pagination



Judy Watson, *the holes in the land 1*, 2015, colour etching from zinc plates, 37.5 cm x 49.5 cm, image: courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions, photographer: Carl Warner



Judy Watson, *the holes in the land 3*, 2015, colour etching from zinc plates, 37.5 cm x 49.5 cm, image: courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions, photographer: Carl Warner

present. These treasured cultural objects are overlaid onto various architectural floor plans from the British Museum. Watson describes the relationship between these two layers of the images: ‘I like the idea of the plans of the museum being the bones of the work and the objects being shadows floating across the top of them.’³⁴ Despite their shadowy form, the objects are translucent so that they convey lightness as much as dark.

Both *the holes in the land 1* and *the holes in the land 3* depict bags of pituri. Anthropologist and British Museum curator Lissant Bolton explains that pituri is a plant with narcotic properties, which grew in south-western Queensland along the fringes of deserts, and was a much-coveted commodity traded across vast distances. She notes that it was cured ‘by being buried in hot sand, the pituri was then packed into fibre bags, many of which were very beautiful’.³⁵

The labels from the British Museum are of particular interest to Watson and where possible are displayed as part of the wall text for the work. The description for *the holes in the land 1* reads as follows:

Oval bag of pituri made of cord woven of human hair tied along one side with string. Interior beyond N. S. Gregory W. Queensland, Purchased Christy Fund. 23 Sept. 1897 (Finucane) L. 10”

34 Watson cited in Lissant Bolton, ‘Moving Objects: Indigenous Australia in the British Museum’, *Encounters*, op cit, p 30

35 Bolton, ‘Moving Objects’, op cit, p 28

97-637 Area – Australia, Sub-Area – (S.E.) Queensland PICTURI (NARCOTIC) BAG OF Human Hair-String.

The text indicates that the first bag was taken from near Gregory River, which is one of the rivers running through Watson’s country. The intimate



Judy Watson, ‘the keepers’, 2016, still, single channel video, 9 minutes 15 seconds, © courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery



Judy Watson, *the holes in the land 2*, 2015, colour etching from zinc plates, 49.5 cm x 37.5 cm, image: courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions, photographer: Carl Warner



Judy Watson, *the holes in the land 4*, 2015, colour etching from zinc plates, 37.5 cm x 49.5 cm, image: courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions, photographer: Carl Warner

substance of manufacture, human hair, makes the material and metaphorical link to possible ancestors incredibly strong. The recorded source for the British Museum is William Eugene Finucane, Government Land Commissioner in Burketown and Normanton in the 1860s, and then chief clerk of the Police Department.

The other containers for pituri are made from very different substances:

Boat-shaped bag of pituri tightly woven of pale-coloured wool from government blankets. (l.20.0 × 50.0 × depth 18.0 cm.) Acquisition details unknown. 97-636 Area: Australia Sub-area: W. Queensland Tribe

Boat-shaped bag of pituri made of twine and wool from government blankets. The colours are dark blue and red arranged in concentric circles. Interior beyond N. S. Gregory. W. Queensland. Purchased Christy Fund 23rd Sept 1897 (Finucane)

These objects can be seen more clearly in Watson's video, *the keepers* (2016). Lissant Bolton describes the reuse of government issue blankets as a complex act:

At one level the taking of an instrument of colonial control and transforming it is ironic and painful, but it also represents an innovative adaptation of new material for local purposes which is something that is evident in many other objects that survived the colonial era.³⁶

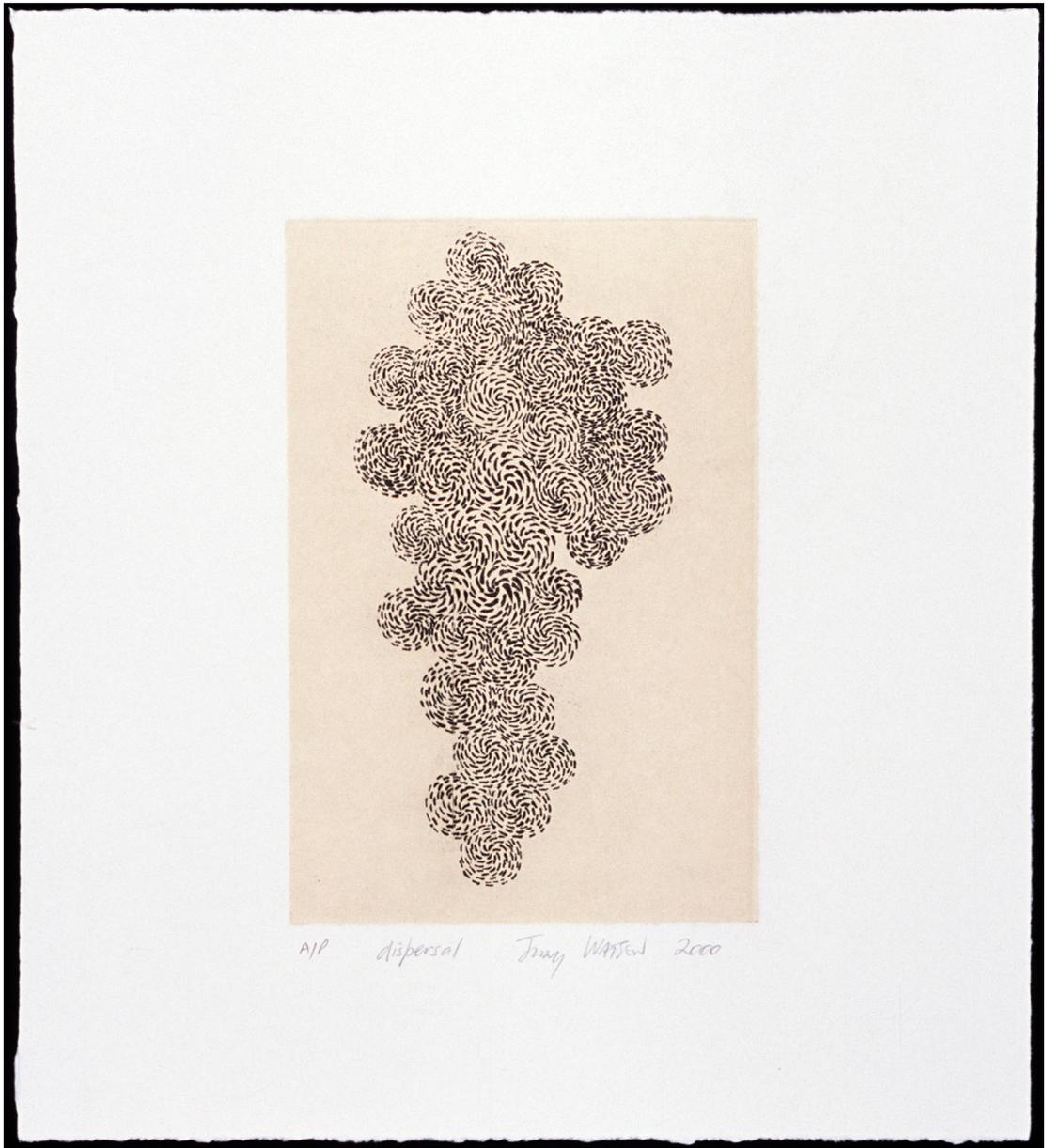
The blankets are usually seen as creating dependence on colonial powers and displacing Indigenous practices such as the making of possum-skin cloaks; here, however, they are re-purposed, creating strikingly modern-looking objects.

In the second image in the series, *the holes in the land 2*, there are two wooden clubs and a paddle. The British Museum label reads:

OC 1973, Q. 18 N. Australia. Paddle for a raft made from the wood of a variety of mangrove. Straight cylindrical handle, spatula blade, the surface being natural. Gulf of Carpentaria near Albert R. see source: R.G.S. VA XXVIII (1858) p. 152. Presented by T.R. Elsey Esqre. 1857. A. C. Gregory, N. Aust: 'Expl 9. Exped'. Paddle made of wood. This object was collected during the North Australian Exploring Expedition. (1855–1856) led by A. C. Gregory. It may have been collected by James A. Wilson, the expedition's geologist. It was presented to the BM in 1857 by J. R. Elsey, the expedition's surgeon and naturalist.

East-Australia 'Club of dark wood, rudely made, following the form of the branch from which it was cut, the head whitened, the handle red, with scratches & lines near the butt, Moreton Bay Queensland. Registration No. 1167 Australia: Moreton Bay Queensland Wood Club presented by A.W. Franks Esq. L. 2 feet, 5 1/2 inches May 20 1880.

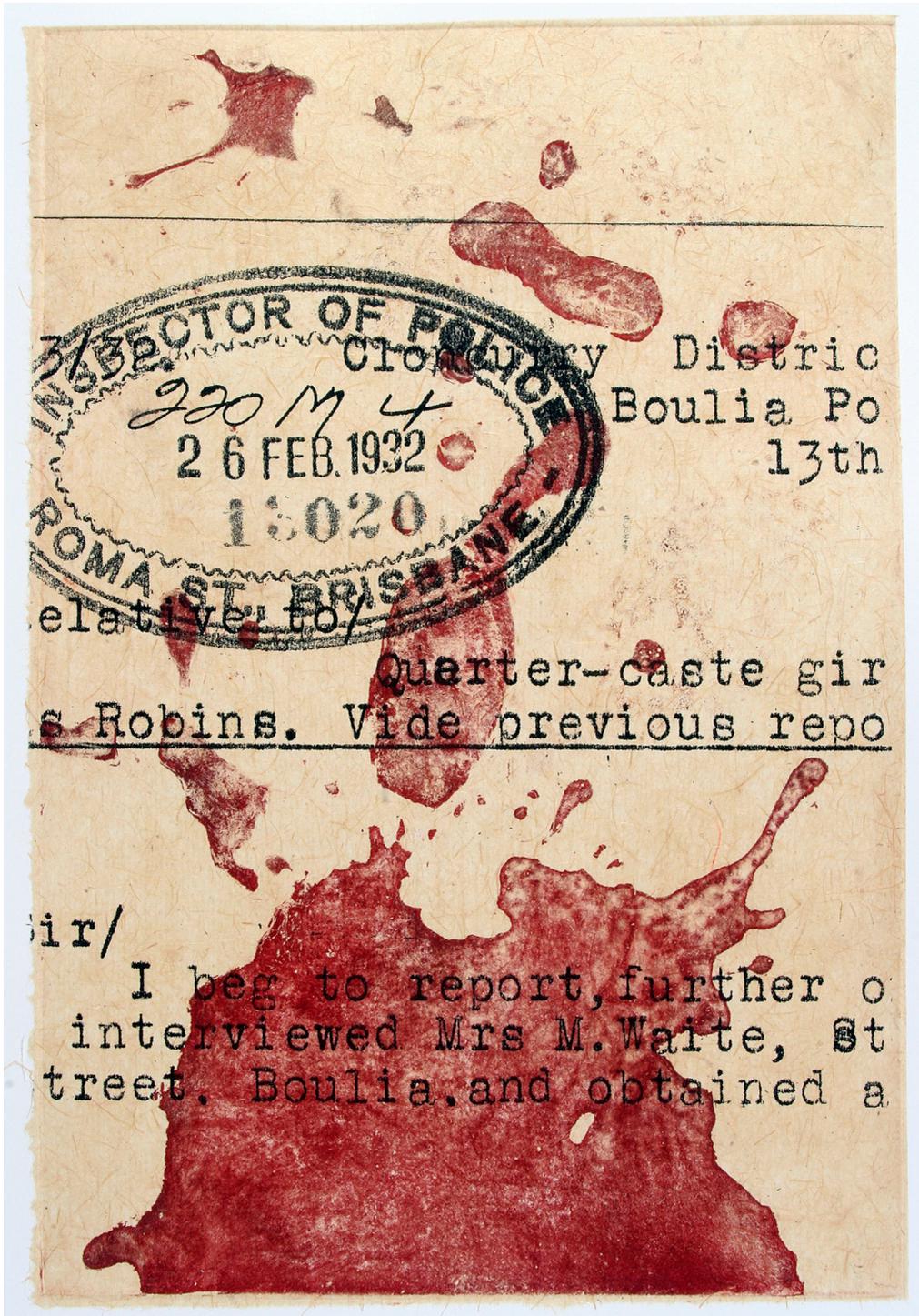
The deadpan description avoids aesthetic evaluation, as one might expect, thus leaving unremarked the sensual shape of the paddle. The fourth



Judy Watson, *dispersal*, 2000, printed image: 24.8 cm × 16.8 cm, paper: 39.4 cm × 35.6 cm, image: courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions, photographer: Carl Warner



Judy Watson, *the holes in the land 5*, 2015, colour etching from zinc plates, 49.5 cm x 37.5 cm, image: courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions, photographer: Carl Warner



Judy Watson, *a preponderance of aboriginal blood 2*, 2005, etchings on magnani incisioni cotton rag paper 300 gsm, 42 cm x 30.5 cm, image: courtesy of the artist and grahame galleries + editions, photographer: Carl Warner

image depicts two aprons, which the British Museum label describes in this way:

Australian Central 1903 4-4-32 Fringe of ochred opossum hair strings on a 4-ply cord of human hair MSS. 17 'apron worn by Women' Mara Tribe MacArthur R. given by Prof. Baldwin Spencer and J. Gillen Esq. 4-4-1904 Area Oceania Sub Area Australia Tribe North Territory MacArthur R. Category Women's Apron. Dimensions L. 12.0 cm w. 15 cm. 'Australia' Central Fringe of opossum hair, strings greased & ochred on a 2-ply string of dark brown human hair string. MSS 217. 'apron worn by Women' Mara tribe MacArthur River.

The presence of hair again draws the objects close, although in the etching the apron is hard to recognise as such. Set against a field of yellow, blue and ultramarine, it could be mistaken for seaweed or some other kind of fibrous underwater matter. In fact, apart from the paddle, all of the objects are difficult to identify. This is partly due to the way they are placed in the picture plane by Watson with little regard for relative scale or utility. Their placement creates strong diagonals in most of the images, thereby evoking energy and dynamism. Indeed, the objects seem to drift or float across the picture plane suggesting movement and a completely unexpected vitality when dealing with what could be regarded as deadened museal objects.

The positioning of the objects is also very spatially complicated in terms of geography or location. They are suspended in an indeterminate space: a kind of limbo between the museum and their land of origin, Australia. The former, as I indicated earlier, is made present by reproducing floor plans of the museum, while the latter appears through a variety of visual means. Mostly, the land is suggested by the layers of lithographic wash; swirls of brilliant colour are redolent of aerial views of earth and sea. The pigment simultaneously suggests waves, contour lines and unseen energy – confounding a settled state. Two images, *the holes in the land 1* and *the holes in the land 4* also feature the broken lines and whorls that Watson has used to conjure a living land: simultaneously suggesting heat, dust, energy fields and mirage-like shimmerings. The sensitive integration of different realities in these complex layered images repatriates the shadows of the objects while also mourning their loss. Watson sees her way of representing land as deliberately non-Western and in this development of another way of telling, her practice is clearly allied to the central aims of decolonial politics and aesthetics.³⁷

In *the holes in the land 1* and *the holes in the land 5* there are large splashes of ochre, a precious pigment that also connotes blood. Emma Lee, trawlwoolway of tebrakunna country, explains: 'Ochre is earth, it's blood, it's life. Ochre is the connection to place and country, to history and also the future.'³⁸ The doubling of blood and ochre reminds us that some of the objects would have entered the British Museum collection after massacres.³⁹ They were not necessarily innocently 'collected'. The suggestion of blood connects this series to one of Watson's previous works, *a preponderance of aboriginal blood* (2005). The sixteen etchings in this series were the result of a commission by the State Library of Queensland to celebrate the Queensland centenary of women's suffrage and forty years of Aboriginal suffrage. The work overlaid blood splatters

37 Conversation with the artist, Brisbane, 3 February 2017. For the articulation of the aims of decolonial aesthetics, see <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/>, accessed December 2014.

38 Emma Lee, 'Ochre is Blood', *Encounters*, op cit, p 147

39 Judy Watson reported to me that some of the objects in the British Museum collection have blood stains; conversation with the artist, Brisbane 3 February 2017.

onto official documents from the Queensland State Archives that determined whether Aboriginal people could vote. Before suffrage was granted in 1965, eligibility to vote was based on the specious issue of the percentage of Aboriginal blood, hence Watson's title. In *the holes in the land 5*, the spilt blood stains the plan of the drains and water-pipes of the British Museum. The orderly conduct of fluids and waste around the building is disrupted, flooded by the huge stain of blood-like ochre.

The profound locational ambiguity that can be seen in *the holes in the land* series is a consistent theme in Watson's practice. Louise Martin-Chew concisely summarises how it operates in her paintings:

As representations of landscape, more internal and metaphysical than actual, they are fresh in their tackling of the subject from the inside out. Watson has worked in this manner since the late 1980s, after initially training as a printmaker. Multiple layers in each canvas create a drift, locating the viewer above, below, or somewhere within.⁴⁰

Emphasising the viewer in this fashion really brings to the fore the way in which the images depart from the spatial habits of Western perspective painting. The images seamlessly join together these very different spatial positionings, yet the viewer is not made to feel disorientated or dislocated. In other words, Watson's melding together of different realities does not operate in the confronting domain of shock or surprise. Despite that, she nonetheless maintains a critical stance about colonial collecting practices. As mentioned earlier, the title suggests loss, as it also poetically and poignantly points to the impact of removing this material from its place of origin – such acts damage the land.

The images, however, don't depict that damage directly. Again, in this regard, Watson departs from the typical approach to political art, which often underscores damage. For example, in the work of Gordon Bennett, damage is explicitly depicted. His *Self Portrait: Interior/Exterior* 1993 transforms the artist's body into canvas: the installation echoes his measurements (height, width, depth). One component shows a black surface slashed by bloody welts presumably caused by the whip hung alongside the canvas. The other element with a recessed interior is inscribed with the masochistic message 'cut me'. It's unclear where the damage begins in this triptych. Does it start with the whip, or the desire to be cut? Reading left to right, as we customarily do, one might think of this work as showing Franz Fanon's idea of the 'epidermalization of inferiority': that the outside inscription of black skin by colonial powers necessarily leads to the interiorisation of feelings of inferiority.⁴¹ However, Fanon's acute reading of the internalisation of racism is complicated here by the assertion of agency – 'cut me' uses the imperative form, albeit the command seeks an injury already delivered. As a self-portrait, it is a confounding and confronting image that profoundly entangles outside and inside, painting and skin, laceration and self laceration.

Ian McLean was perhaps thinking specifically about Bennett when he characterised urban Aboriginal art as motivated by anger. In relation to Bennett, he writes: 'The anger is never far from the surface of his work, though he was perplexed by the common perception of it as angry.'⁴² Intriguingly, McLean also briefly notes the ambivalence that I have been

40 Louise Martin-Chew in Judy Watson and Louise Martin-Chew, *Judy Watson: Blood Language*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2009, p 14

41 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, New York, 2008, p 11

42 McLean, *Rattling Spears*, op cit, p 227

slowly unpacking in Watson's work. However, he doesn't notice the gendered nature of the expression of anger, or its absence, despite the fact that he classifies Watson's art in this fashion in the context of a discussion of three Indigenous women artists: Brenda Croft, Julie Gough, alongside Watson. While McLean puts his finger on the distinctive modality of the art of these women, he does not read this as generating an alternative affective economy to the dominance of anger. Hence, the complex emotional terrain of ambivalence described by Sedgwick and Klein is not broached.

Watson is highly conscious of the way in which she combines the softening and ameliorating powers of aesthetics with the registration of sharper and more difficult political points. Beauty in her hands becomes like a slow-release mechanism for her critical intentions. She states:

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.⁴³

Her subtle and discreet approach, then, is reparative in precisely the way described by Sedgwick and Klein. The series, *the holes in the land*, is beautiful and seductive and thus aligned with the pursuit of pleasure, yet it also generates thought about the loss of cultural patrimony and the shadow this casts on both institutions and communities. In other words, the series shows the feminist possibilities of the 'additive and accretive' approach; it enables damage and repair to co-exist in the same plane, delivering a critique of the colonialist enterprise of collecting while also celebrating Indigenous cultural traditions of making. In place of a paranoid reading, which simply unveils damage, there is a reparative approach that is much more ambivalent: holding together positive and negative. Through this highly complex holding measure, the important project of identity politics is revitalised in engaging and thought-provoking ways.

43 Judy Watson cited in Judy Watson and Louise Martin-Chew, *Judy Watson*, op cit, p 226