

James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series

Judy Watson

Judy Watson: I'm Judy Watson, my mother is Joyce Watson the well-known Aboriginal artist and my father is Don Watson, Scottish/English heritage also living at Burrum Heads. My father wanted his daughters to get a real job and so we were actually pushed in to the commercial studies side of high school so I learnt to type which was useful. I learnt shorthand which was useful in terms of my drawing skills and business principal which never seemed to go into my head at all. It was just something that I was always interested in, I always loved drawing. Apparently my great grandmother that's my mother's grandmother was very good at drawing that's the Aboriginal side of my family and used to draw on old kerosene boxes and my mother was always interested in drawing but she didn't actually sort of make anything or work until the children were off here hands and she was, I think she was about 45, 46 and she went to art school in Townsville where I'd started teaching and in fact I was her first teacher. I always think it's like Chinese Whispers when you're using something; it's never going to be quite ... I'm not trying to do an exact mapping ...

Louise Martin-Chew: No, no.

Judy Watson: ... it's really responding to it into the image and some of that work includes flood maps and cyclone maps but I'm also using whatever happened within the economy, the housing situation etc. in January which was when these events unfolded, their criss crossing and layering the work as well and so some of them are talking about the reticulation or sort of rainfall or flood levels or they might be talking about sort of economic crisis.

And in fact, I think this particular one ... yes has got brothel water in it from the Brisbane floods. My brother in law and nephew were helping out and they were told "Oh yes go into this building here" and it turned out to be a brothel and so they were sweeping out and they came back and so my nephew had sort of mud caked all over here and stuff like that and said "Wait, stop" so I got him to stand in a bucket and I washed it off and so brothel water is literally and the Brisbane River Water has gone in here so that's the first layer and then just really a thin layer. Sometimes I use pigment and then I was putting layers of some blues and then the greens and just gradually building it up like yellowy greens, bluey greens and you can see those layers gradually coming through here and there sort of leaking out a little bit and then the blue across the top and that's once again going back to you know this dog head (3:04) quite ethereal sort of works so I'm sort of using that but then changing it depending upon what I'm looking at. So that's almost in there sort of like referencing him and his vision and then this layer of you know the Brisbane '74 Floods, the flood map has gone across here.

Yeah well I don't, I'm not living on my grandmother's country I'm living in Brisbane you know this is the river, this is the floods, this is everything that effects me but also things that are happening around the world effect me as well. Not just because of me it might be because of friend's of mine or my family you know sort of up in North Queensland, you know it's all of those transient visions and occurrences which almost become part of your, your blood, your history, your memory and you'll remember this particular time, this January or something else when something occurred. Where were you? What were you doing? For me, if I'm making this work then I can pin it back to that and when I'm drawing something, as I said it's different to a photograph.

I look back at my drawing, I can see where I was, I can smell what was around me, I might even remember what I had for breakfast that day, something about doing that line translates an imprint, a memory imprint into the page trying to find that moment.

Well they're asking lots of interesting questions because of course they've got, through Pete's side of the family they've got Scottish and German you know and that's where you know his family sort of came out and were immigrants and then came here to make a different life and now they've got the Aboriginal/English you know Scottish from my side of the family and where does it all connect you to?

We've sort of grown up going and visiting my grandparents up in Mount Isa and my grandfather who was white who had worked on stations in the Northern Territory with his brother and so we'd gone out and there and so those parallels I guess, country had sort of infiltrated into my blood but I never really knew where our country was. I thought it was Mount Isa. I wasn't quite sure about the Territory and it was really later, talking to my grandmother which was a challenging thing to do because it brought up a lot of pain for her from the past but I think all of it connects together.

I think it's the artists are just going to take it with them and that will be the younger artists coming through but of course other contemporary artists around the place. You know whether they're living in remote communities or whether they're in the city they're taking everything with them whether its hip hop culture, you know whether it's everything they see on You Tube and that's becoming part of their universe. It doesn't matter where you're living any more you have access to this wider universe and all of those things can infiltrate and become part of your language and your culture.