Where I Belong
Episode 9: Judy Watson
Podcast Transcript

INTRO

JUDY WATSON (JW)
I'd hoped to wake-up people's senses in a way, but you can't force that. I think it's just being observant. It's listening and just being open and not closing yourself off, and maybe being quiet too.

RECORDING PLAYS: **Judy Watson** *the witness tree* 2018*.* Sound: Greg Hooper.

WENDY LOVE (WL)
The running water sound you are hearing takes us inside a tree. It's a sound I'd never experienced before, but one that microphones picked up when they were attached to the outside of the tree. The disc shaped mics, some wedged in a crevice of the trunk, some attached with Blu-Tack, record the sound of water beneath the ground, rushing up through the tree and out through its leaves.

RECORDING CONTINUES: **Judy Watson** *the witness tree* 2018*.* Sound: Greg Hooper.

WL
The artist Judy Watson was drawn to this tree. She could hear it, even before the microphones were placed on its bark. Judy was visiting an area called Myall Creek in New South Wales. It's a place where, in 1838, twelve colonists hunted and murdered 28 Aboriginal men, women and children. The Myall Creek massacre is well-known because it was the first time that white men were tried for the murder of Aboriginal people. Some of the trees and their complicated root systems below had witnessed this massacre, and in 2017, Judy acknowledged the horror by wrapping muslin cloth around some of the trees. She says it felt like covering a deep wound within the psyche of the trees.

MUSIC PLAYS

WL
For the past four decades, Judy Watson's work as an artist has been inextricably linked to Country, its histories, its cultures, its ecosystems.

JW
So, you've got a double layer of history there, and that's what I'm interested in. Maybe it's a history of geomorphology or whatever it is. Then you've got the layer upon layer upon layer. You've got Aboriginal history. Then you've also got a colonial history because we are all in this together. We are in the same space, but it's trying to read through those layers and understand and not forget because by learning more about culture and Country and people, for me, I think you'll get a richer understanding and awareness.

WL
This layering, of histories, of cultures, of environmental changes, is the lens through which Judy experiences the world. But it's also the way she goes about her artmaking. She adds layer upon layer with such subtlety that you can still make out what came before, and to make these layers, Judy often turns to water. In fact, water is a touchstone for her practice, not only in its inspiration but its form.

JW
I'm always interested in it. There's a lot of texts that I've written about water and how it makes me feel, and the way that I work with it. Sometimes, I'm recharging the water into the materials, the fabrics and things like that, with my feet. Sometimes, it's the buckets of water going on and liquidly washing the water across the top of the surface or washing things out or impressing, so it's just a constant part of the process of making.

WL
Judy Watson is a Waanyi woman, her grandmother's family come from North-West Queensland, a place called Boodjamulla, Lawn Hill, part of Waanyi Country, where the water has bubbled up from the ground for generations, until recently, but we'll get to that later. Judy is one of the most celebrated artists of her generation. Now in her early 60s, Judy Watson continues to make work. She's prolific in so many art forms, from painting and printmaking to films and installations. Her work has been seen all over Australia and the world, and she also makes sculptures for public places. You may have walked by one without realising who created it. In Brisbane, her bronze sculpture of a tow row, an Aboriginal fishing net, is at the front of the Gallery of Modern Art. Another public art project further down the river, along Kingsford Smith Drive, led to the publication of a new book called *women of brisbane: judy watson*, which documents how Brisbane's women have influenced our city.

INTRO / THEME MUSIC

WL
From Museum of Brisbane, this is *Where I Belong*, a show that brings you stories about fascinating and creative people, shaped by Brisbane. I'm Wendy Love.

In this episode, Judy Watson and the dogged pursuit that led a young artist to unearth all she could about her ancestral Country and culture, and how all of what she continues to find informs her art, her process, with water a constant that flows through it all.

THE PAINT FACTORY STUDIO - ROOM AUDIO

WL
I meet Judy Watson on a rainy day at her art studio with writer Louise Martin-Chew.

JW
Be careful you don't slip, but yeah, it just streams. This is like the Victorian Art Gallery wall of water.

WL
Her studio is located at the Paint Factory in Yeronga. The site used to be home to a paint manufacturing plant. Now, its 34,000 square meters of old offices and factories is where a small community of Brisbane artists come to work. Judy's studio is huge, with super high ceilings. You can hear the sound of the rain drizzling down on its tin roof.

JW
So, I've got all the buckets and everything, so that just gets emptied all the time.

WL
Judy points to the collection of buckets on the windowsill. Every time it rains water leaks into her studio, from above or, when it's really coming down, from outside.

JW
Basically, it comes in over the lip here, floods through. It pours down here, they meet up and go whoosh! (laughs). Yeah, it's just one of those things.

WL
The old building just can't keep the water out. The gutters over the back are all rusted.

JW
And that's why these sets or these stages are here because everything floods.

WL
We go over to the stages she's talking about. It's almost two by three meters and rectangular with legs, so it's lifted off the ground. One of the unstretched canvases she's working on is rolled out across it. Judy takes her shoes off, steps onto the canvas and plops right down on it. She chooses a paintbrush and gets to work. That Judy literally can't escape the rain, the water, even when she's inside, is a poetic reminder of how her connection with water pervades her life and work.

JW
I love the sound of the rain on the roof, the drumming on the metal roof.

WL

And as the rain seeps into her studio, Judy takes her paintbrush and gently sweeps pale white paint onto the canvas. She dilutes the paint with water, making the colour translucent. Judy goes over and over the same mark. As we sit and talk, I'm struck by how many layers she applies to the same spot. The time it takes. The meditative process of it all. It's mesmerising.

JW

I want it to be very subtle. So, I don't really know until I do it. Whereas, if I started in and painted with an opaque straight away, I would lose the transparency. So, I want to keep the liquid quality to the work, and it's like, I suppose in a way, like a glaze, watercolour or a wash. All of these ideas, it's just bringing the wash up so that it floats, and you see it, but you don't really see it. It's dreamlike rather than being in your face.

MUSIC

JW

So, at the moment, I'm layering some imagery of objects that I've collected from a recent trip up to Boojamulla, Lawn Hill Gorge. In this case, it's a feather of a bird, and the canvas has been imprinted with dirt and mud and trampled and had many layers pushed into it. So now, the underlayer looks like a leather hide in a way. It's got a very skin-like form to it, and I often think of the canvas as being like skins, and I treat them in a similar way. I sit on them. I hang them up. I throw them over my shoulder as I take them around the place, and they hang off ladders and chairs. I used to eat my lunch on them. So yeah, they've got a bit of a life before I even put layers on.

WL

She paints over and over and over and over, every layer builds on the last. The shape of the feather remains translucent, yet it gathers greater depth and presence.

MUSIC

WL

Judy Watson was never one to simply conform. Especially with art. When she was in grade one or grade two, a teacher said something to her that really stuck.

JW

And I drew a person, and I drew all the hair on top of their head, that would have been down the back because I knew it was there, and the teacher said, "oh no, you can't do that," and she also said, "draw a cat" or something like that, "but you need to put a tail on it." And I thought, "no." I really resented that, and I still resent anyone prescribing to me how I should draw or do something. So, I just think you need to stop limiting people who are creative and allow them to have their imagination flow freely.

WL
Fortunately, Judy's mum had her back, and encouraged her to draw and create however she wished.

MUSIC

WL
Even as a child, Judy felt a strong connection to water. It was a powerful theme in her life early on.

JW
Water has always been something where, if we were out at Mount Isa for Christmas and it rained, we would immediately go out to East Leichhardt or one of the creeks that was running, and people just go and sit in the water, just sit in there because it's quite hot. You take your mangoes in and whatever, and just sit there and eat and munch and laugh and share, and the kids are playing around, and so it's just always something that's part of our connection to family and Country and memories.

WL
As Judy grew, she learned more about her mother's Aboriginal history and her father's Scottish/English one. But it wasn't until she went to uni that Judy became determined to, not only uncover as much as she could about her Indigenous heritage, but to use art to share stories.

MUSIC

WL
Judy studied creative arts, print making and an elective in literature in Toowoomba at what's now called the University of Southern Queensland. It was there that Judy studied women's literature and a lot of American literature, African American, Jewish American and Native American.

JW
I just remember that emphasis on culture and practice and place and thinking, "well, I actually want to make some work or know more about my Aboriginal history and culture." Which I always knew, but I didn't know, apart from, within the family, and we'd always visit mum's family up in North-West Queensland. I just wanted to make something in response in the same way that I was reading about it. So, that's what really led me into making work about culture and place and history.

WL
Judy had found the defining theme for her art making. It was 1978.

MUSIC

She was still finding her own style, though. One of her first works was called *Death of a Race* 1979, recalling an Australian poem. It depicted massacres etched onto a metal plate and printed.

JW
I was also doing work called *Trail of Tears* 1978, thinking about the dispossessed Native Americans who are forced to walk away from their country onto somebody else's country, and of course, that happened here.

WL
As she worked, questions about her own Waanyi family began to bubble up.

JW
That's when I wanted to find out more about, well, this is what you see on the dollar note or this or that, but where is mine, where is our family's culture. So, I think a lot of people make those sorts of things, to begin with, until they learn more about where they're actually from.

WL
She was painting self-portraits too, drawing inspiration from both her mum's and her dad's cultural heritages.

JW
You know, the in-between, in between cultures. Where I always say, I am both the colonised and the coloniser because my dad's side of the family is non-Aboriginal, and also the in-between of being the first of my family to go to university, to have a different sort of education to all of mum's other family and just the different trajectory that sends you upon.

WL
Judy's artwork records the way it is made, with water and layering, but also draws her family, her broader community, her environment into her practice. It has become a core component of the way she works. Watching her inside her studio, Judy tells me how she gets all those layers in. Sometimes it's the repetitive process of brushing paint and water over the same mark. Other times, she blasts some music and, well, twirls around on the canvas.

JW
It's dancing on it, really. So, and putting layers on, but it might be earth, it might be ochre, it might be acrylic paint, it might be other things that I've picked up. It really depends on where I am and the sort of work that I'm making. So, in this case, it's very much of the ground, and it's had other people dancing with me on it. I had my nephew Dan Watson and his partner Tor McLean and their baby, Maggie. We were dancing and pushing the mud in as well, and then I brought it back to the studio and put more layers on. So, while it just looks like maybe a dirty, flayed canvas, it actually has got a number of layers.

WL
After studying in Toowoomba, Judy went to the University of Tasmania, where she learned lithography, a printmaking technique, and earned a bachelor's degree. She'd go on to complete a graduate diploma at Monash University. But before that, between 1983 to about 1989, Judy was living in Townsville. She was teaching printmaking at a TAFE. Her mum, Joyce Watson, actually

ended up taking her class and is now known as an artist in her own right. Anyway, Judy was a member of the North Queensland Conservation Council up there and got invited to go over to Boodjamulla, Lawn Hill, in the far North-West of the state. They were sent there to determine whether the area was a good candidate for becoming a national park.

JW
And we went liloing up the gorge and doing a lot of bush walking through there.

WL
Judy had been close to this area before. She'd been to Mt Isa heaps, to the Gregory, but never right here, in Boodjamulla, in Lawn Hill, and she felt a strong sense of connection with the place. Yet, at the same time, Judy wasn't aware that she was actually standing on the same ground as her grandmother's ancestors.

JW
It's stunning Country. It's just like a paradise. You know, it's just full of very, very lush plants. There's a lot of vegetation, a lot of fish, a lot of turtles. There are some freshwater crocodiles, there's waterfalls, and then on the hills on the outside, you have the dry spinifex. It's a very harsh environment, and then you've got these subterranean, I don't know, they are just like these veins, veins of water and life running through. It was the most stunning place, and I knew it was special, and I knew there would be Aboriginal sites, but I didn't know where and when.

WL
After that experience in Boodjamulla, Judy went looking for more details about her own connections to Country. She knew her grandmother was from that same North-West area. She just didn't know the specifics, but the information she was looking for wasn't going to be volunteered. Judy would have to dig for it.

MUSIC

JW
It's not like my family didn't know. They knew, but I just had to ask the questions.
It's not as if I was being given everything straight away, and I don't think it should be either.
You've got to work for your knowledge.

WL
It took a while, but by the mid to late 1980s, through asking questions and probing for answers, Judy learns that her ancestors are from the place she'd visited a few years before. From Boodjumulla, Lawn Hill. Judy decided she wanted to learn all about this place, her family's history, from the ground up.

JW
I was asking, "well, what is from Riversleigh Station, where my grandmother was born? What about Lawn Hill? What about Waanyi Country or any of the properties that my family had worked on? At the same time, trying to find out what had happened with our family as well as

speaking with my grandmother, she gradually opened up more and more, but she said, "the old people didn't want to talk about the past." Even for her, it was painful, but I kept persevering because I thought, for the next generations, I think it's important. I'm glad I did, even though I know it was painful for her.

WL
Painful because her grandmother and other family had lived under The Act, legislation from the Queensland Government which meant the threat of forced removal, regulations that controlled every part of an Aboriginal person's life, from where they worked, what they were paid, or not paid. They were subject to appalling treatment. This period, from 1897 to 1969 and the aftermath had devastating social, emotional and physical impacts on people. The effects of which continue to ricochet now. Judy would later stumble across some of the details of these traumatic histories, histories that may have directly involved her own family.

MUSIC

WL
In 1990, not long after Judy learned about her grandmother's connection to Boodjamulla, to Lawn Hill, she got a grant to go back up there. This time with the knowledge that it was her Country too. She used the grant money to buy petrol, food and flights. Best of all, she got to go with her family.

JW
There's lots of cliffs and lots of amazing Country to walk through, and you can also see the trace of time. You can see where the water has gone through and created ripple rock and weathered the limestone. You can see that, within it, the stone tool scatters are still there. There's, you know, some rock art, you can see some of it is in more remote areas. There's a real sense of ancient, ancient times penetrating deep beneath the earth, and in fact, by the time the water, and that's why they call it dinosaur water, comes from deep beneath the ground and suddenly goes through these very, very fine hairline cracked fissures, through the limestone, and up onto the surface of the water. It's so many thousands and thousands of years old. It's something that you are lulled into a sense of deep time as you're swimming or paddling in canoes or on your liloes through the space or walking around and looking down.

WL
Judy's paintings often take you right into a space like this, they have no horizon, there's a depth of surface that invites you in. She doesn't frame her canvases, allowing them to move with the air. They are persuasive and subtle, woven around an idea that kind of infiltrates you as if you'll feel it before you are even aware of what you've seen. Judy had taken a lot of documents and research with her on her trip up to Boodjamulla. Information she had found about Waanyi Country from museums and libraries.

JW
Then the family would start talking about things and they knew all these people on names and stations. They knew about the hanging tree that I'd found out about on the Georgina. It was where Aboriginal people were hung. It's that sort of memory of what happened on that ground.

The place we're now fishing at, and catching Yellow Belly and sitting around the campfire, but realising there's other histories there before us, and you're always finding things too. They'll be things on the ground. Mum and Nanna and Uncle Ken and others would be looking at bush foods or recalling times when they worked on stations and things that they found or chatted about. So, it becomes this ingrained geography of properties, people have worked at or known people on, which is part of your family history.

WL
Being up there with her family had a profound impact on Judy and her art practice. She'd felt that internal connection to this Country, when she was here those years before, in 1984. But now, being here, with the knowledge that this is in fact the land of her ancestors, Judy really felt this visceral bond to the history of Boodjamulla. Being there, on her ancestral land, with her family, Judy learned more about her roots, and that included the ground itself.

JW
My Uncle Ken Isaacson had worked with a lot of the archaeologists and anthropologists and people like that in that area. So, when we went back, and once I knew that was our Country, that was when it was shown to me. These are the stones, tool scatters, these are the middens. Here's the rock art, here are the, you know, really important places. So yeah, it was like a double layering of learning about Country from, what I call, from the ground up.

WL
Judy leaves Boodjamulla a changed woman. She's determined to discover as much as she can about her Aboriginal past, to lay bare the shared histories that have led to where we are now, and she's found her signature style of art making, working with loose canvases, those layers and layers of water and colour and objects from her environment. More on Judy Watson, coming up after a quick break.

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WHERE I BELONG THEME MUSIC plays

WL
After Boodjamulla, Judy lived and worked in Sydney, Canberra and Darwin before returning to Brisbane in 2003.

MUSIC

WL
Years later, in the early 2000s, Judy was at a lecture where she heard, for the first time, a phrase that caught her attention. The phrase was, 'a preponderance of Aboriginal blood'.

JW
I just didn't even understand what that meant. But it means Aboriginality through both sides of the family.

WL
Judy needed to know more, so she headed to the Queensland State Archives.

JW
Every Aboriginal person had a file on them. Marcia Langton says that Aboriginal people were the most studied Indigenous people in the world, and in one way, that's a hindrance, and it's a lot of baggage. But in another way, it's a very rich resource that we can use, especially as artists, writers, performers, historians, whatever. We've got that history that we can actually trawl through and utilise within our work.

WL
In the archives, she finds a letter using that phrase, 'a preponderance of Aboriginal blood'.

JW
So, an Aboriginal woman had written a letter to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs or Native Affairs, as it was called then, and she had asked whether she and her husband, who had both been exempted under the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, were able to vote. They had been working, there were various reasons that she gave, and when she got the letter back, she was told that, yes, yes, she was exempted, and this and that. However, because she had 'a preponderance of Aboriginal blood', she was not allowed to vote, and it was just a very explicit slap in your face letter in return.

WL
After reading through these documents, Judy was compelled to create an artist's book. It was published in 2005 and features letters from the archives. The letters were written by Aboriginal people in the late 1940s, begging permission from the Director of Native Affairs for the right to vote. Their requests were refused when both sides of their family were Aboriginal. That wouldn't change until the mid 1960s when the right to vote was finally granted. For the book, Judy

photocopied the archival documents onto thin paper and made splashes on the plates and printed them up like blood in red ink. Then she ran them through together under the press.

MUSIC

WL

After that, Judy continued combing through the archives. This kind of research became a huge part of her art practice.

JW

I was seeing these slides that showed all these categorisations of people, and I suddenly thought, "I wonder how my family were categorised."

WL

Now, Judy wanted to go through the records of her own family. But in order to do that, Judy needed her grandmother's permission.

JW

With everything, it's not just the archives, it's everything else too, you do have to request, people aren't just going to bring it out straight away just because you ask. I had to get a letter of permission from my grandmother because she was the oldest person alive in our family at that stage. Next time, it would be my mother who is still alive, and she's very much in favour of looking at these histories.

WL

Judy's grandmother, Grace Isaacson, gave her that permission in 2006.

JW

I think it's very scarring, psychologically, and I can understand why a lot of those old people did not want to talk about the past. As my grandmother said, it's not something that they wanted to burden our generation with, but actually, I think that we do need to know. We really do.

WL

So, there Judy was, going through the records of her relatives. Finding things like the exemption cards people used to carry around.

JW

They call them dog tags, and how you manage to get one of those, the various stations, there would be something showing whether my grandmother was a good person, whether she understood the power of money. The documentation that went into permission to marry. Aboriginal people couldn't just marry anyone. They couldn't go anywhere. As my grandmother said, she always had the threat of being sent to an island, and she didn't know what island it was, and she said, "I didn't want to go to an island and not see anybody anymore." So, I think it was just a constant threat. If you didn't toe the line, you would be removed, and as it was, she

didn't see her mother for years and years and years, and she was treated really badly by many managers on the station she worked on, as were her siblings. So, it's not an isolated story. It's something that affected many, many people, not just my family.

MUSIC

WL
Judy would bring her grandmother her findings during this process, and despite the sadness of it all, her grandmother would laugh sometimes, like when Judy showed her a letter written by a white family member who wrote some negative things about her.

JW
She said she always knew there was something she didn't know that was in the file. So, she was worried, and so I'd taken it up to her to show her and she just had a good laugh, and also, I think, this family member, I'm sure they would never have guessed that their letters, their negative letters, would have stayed in the files of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and that other descendants of the family, the black side of the family, would be reading these and just having a good laugh at her expense. Well, not really a laugh. It's only in terms of, it was very hurtful, but you know, what can you do in the face of adversity etcetera. You've got to have a good laugh to get through those things, to get through the pain and the suffering that my grandmother went through.

WL
What Judy found in those archives turned into another artist book. This time, it was much more personal, about her grandmother Grace. The book is called *under the act* and came out in 2007. Inside, there are written documents, begging for permission to marry, to move, to exercise what we might think of as basic human freedoms. It is desperately sad and deeply illuminating. As the first person from the family to view her grandmother's file, Judy expresses her feelings of "deep personal hurt for her family and for all Aboriginal people" through her artist book.

MUSIC

WL
Judy continues to make work about the converging of histories, of cultures and the toll it's all taken on the environment. She often takes walks around Brisbane neighborhoods, collecting objects to use in her artworks, but also observing how the places have changed.

JW
I'm very interested in the edge of the river, Oxley Creek, and mountains around here, getting up and also places that I grew up in, just even memories that I have as a kid, where they used to be bush, walking to school, and suddenly now it's housing, just thinking about how things have changed. So, I'm inspired by all of the overlap of my memories and other memories that I've read about.

WL

Water remains a constant theme. Some of her recent work has centered on climate change, an issue she's passionate about. After watching the springs bubble up in Waanyi Country back in 1990, Judy's returned many times over the decades to discover that they don't do that anymore. Something also noted by Waanyi rangers.

JW
Eighty per cent of the springs that used to operate in the Gulf of Carpentaria are no longer operating as they are no longer viable. That sort of thing is pretty distressing, and it's a result of climate change and also the mines up there sucking up a lot of the water, and activity by the pastoralists, trying to blow up the springs to get more water out and compromising the integrity and viability of the springs because they're very, very fragile systems.

WL
Yet, she remains optimistic, resilient and open to everything she can learn and do. She's returned to Boodjamulla Country many times with her own children now, ensuring they also learn and carry on the knowledge of their special place, and Judy is also in tune, sensitive to her surroundings, wherever she is. She walks the grounds around her studio at the Paint Factory, listening to the sounds.

JW
I know there are important places all around me at the Paint Factory, which are part of really, really ancient history in this place, and so I don't want to add to that erasure either. I actually want to encourage people to find out what happened in the place that they're living in and be aware of whether it's the geography, the geology, the history and the cultural history, in particular, of these places and these people to just have a bit more respect.

WL
It's a message that Judy has been urging us to heed, for decades now, in work that seduces us with its beauty and then hits us with its potency. Like the water she's made of, Judy's ideas squeeze into any fissures or cracks and keep persisting.

RECORDING PLAYS: **Judy Watson** *the witness tree* 2018. Sound: Greg Hooper.

WL
Thanks so much to Judy Watson for welcoming me into her studio and to Louise Martin-Chew, who contributed so much to this episode. Keep an eye out for Judy's many public artworks around Brisbane, down along the new riverwalk beside Kingsford Smith Drive in Hamilton, where Judy's permanently inscribed the names of women important to the history of Brisbane into the walkway there, and of course *tow row*, Judy's bronze sculpture of a fishing net outside GOMA. Across the river from there is *freshwater lens* in the Turbot Street overpass, which remembers the Aboriginal people that met there in pre-colonial times.

OUTRO

WL
Where I Belong is brought to you by Museum of Brisbane. To learn more about this episode and the Museum head to museumofbrisbane.com.au. This episode of *Where I Belong* was written and produced on Turrabul and Yaggera land by me, Wendy Love and Louise Martin-Chew. Special thanks to Greg Hooper, who recorded *the witness tree*. Museum of Brisbane acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land and pays its respect to Elders past, present and emerging. If you like what you heard, please tell your friends about us and follow us on your favourite podcast app. Thanks so much for listening.