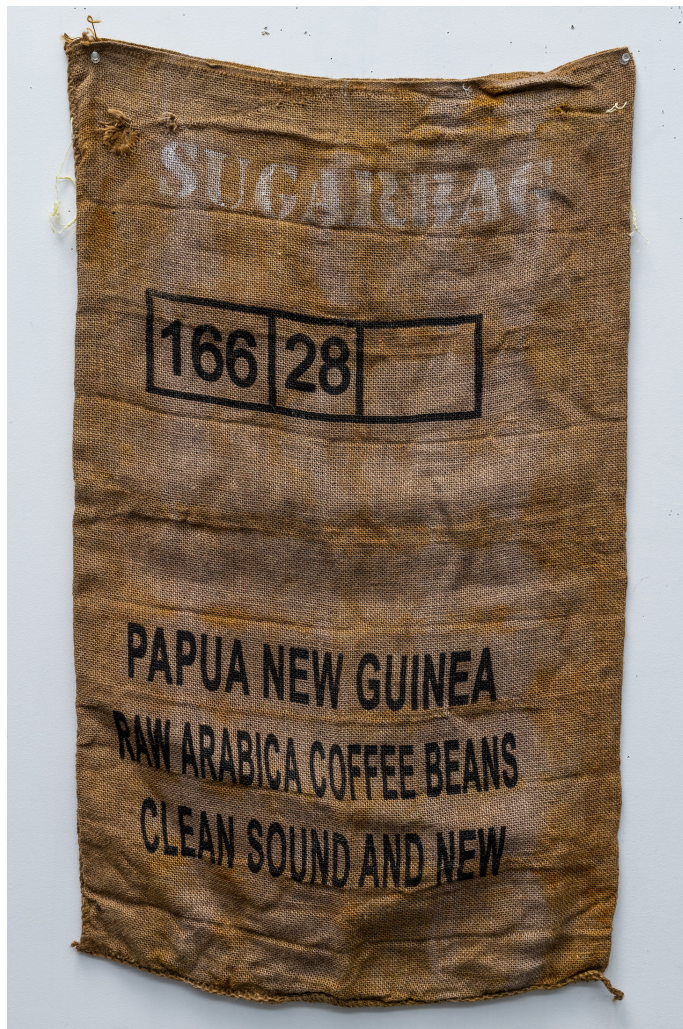


JUDY WATSON

bagging
colonialism

17 JUNE –
3 SEP 2023

by Jessyca Hutchyns



SUGAR
SUGARBAG
SALT
TEA
FLOUR
CORNERED BEEF
BLOOD
BONES
SKIN
POISON
VIOLATION
EXPULSION
COLONISATION
WOUND
CRACK
BULLETS
BAYONET

– words used in the series *bagging colonialism* (2023)

‘Not for me, especially when colonialism is constantly being bagged’, reads a comment in a visitor book at a group exhibition that Judy Watson participated in.¹ Ironically, the commenter is another Judy, signing her name simply as Toogoolawah Judy.² In Australian slang, to ‘bag’ or ‘bag out’ means to insult or criticise something. In her own act of ‘bagging’, guest book Judy is Toogoolawah, and settler history is what’s under threat – a move which clings to Indigenous place as it swiftly empties it out of its significations. But the comment is a fitting turn of phrase for what artist Judy Watson does – deftly expose and critique the many complex operations of a colonising state, often turning precisely to acts of overt obfuscation.

Judy Watson picks up this comment and places it in her own travelling bag of tricks in *bagging colonialism*. It’s a ‘re-purposing of racism’, she says of the exhibition title, which also references a series of pieces re-working jute coffee bags – a material echo of the way Aboriginal people once made use of ‘gunny sacks’ or ‘sugar bags’. In the late 19th century, Australia was one of the main importers of Indian jute bags, used to bag up wheat, sugar and wool.³

The way these bags then travelled across much of Australia often tracked alongside the forced displacements and mobilities of Indigenous lives within encroaching pastoralism and occupation.

Watson recalls a family story of an old man in a camp using a strong potato bag to carry his worldly possessions; speaks of the scratchy surface of hessian ‘bag’ dresses worn at missions and institutions; and stamps the bags with words such as *TEA*, *SUGAR*, and *FLOUR* to recall the meagre rations on missions. Words of genocidal violence, *EXPULSION*, *POISON*, *BULLETS*, make plain the methods by which such displacements and land grabs were achieved. There was travel, and there was fleeing. Bags quickly grabbed.

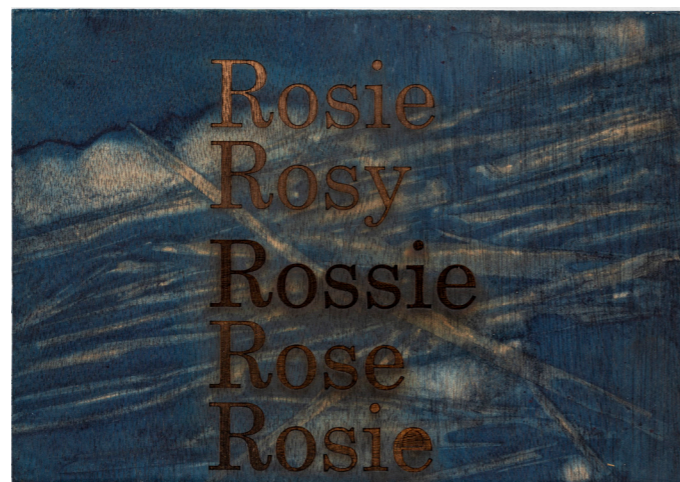
The bags Watson finds today have seen the ‘golden fibre’ of Indian jute come via other locations across the Global South through coffee imports – Colombia, Ethiopia, Papua New Guinea – a connective thread across communities and places still being materially shaped by global capitalism and the exploitation of land and people. Steeped in dyes of turmeric and indigo – further referents to histories of colonialism, slavery and resource extraction that began in India and criss-crossed the imperial globe – these bags are ‘vessels of memory’ in Watson’s words, absorbing and carrying stories of oppression, survival, and an everyday making do from the scraps.

If such scraps wear colonial scars, there is also something poetic to the way the long tensile strength of shining jute strands pulled from flowering plants – one of the longest running natural fibres to be so widely used and globally traded – are the carriers of these stories. Colonial baggage also carries the beauty and abundance of the world, the memories of ancestors. Colonial bagging gathers it all up for us to see, takes what is precious to carry forward.

While ever reflecting on the catastrophic scale of loss of the on-going colonial project, Watson’s artworks materialise post-invasion histories as co-constructed worlds, comprised of complex permeating layers, flows, and seepages. Deep stains on the tough jute bags contrast with a more fluid saturation across indigo-dyed works on long canvas strips. These aquatic flows reference both destructive water extraction and *Waanyi* water knowledge. As the land is being bagged up, it’s also being sucked dry. The names of bore drains in north-west Queensland, which tap into vast underground water sources, sit in relation to interrelated *Waanyi* words and phrases – *malu malu* (freshwater mussels), *jiwil* (spring), *dumularra* (flowing water), *winjaraba* (water poured on).

IMAGE
Judy WATSON
Born Mundubbera, Queensland, 1959
Waanyi
rosie 2021
indigo on board
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Meanjin / Brisbane
Photo: Carl Warner

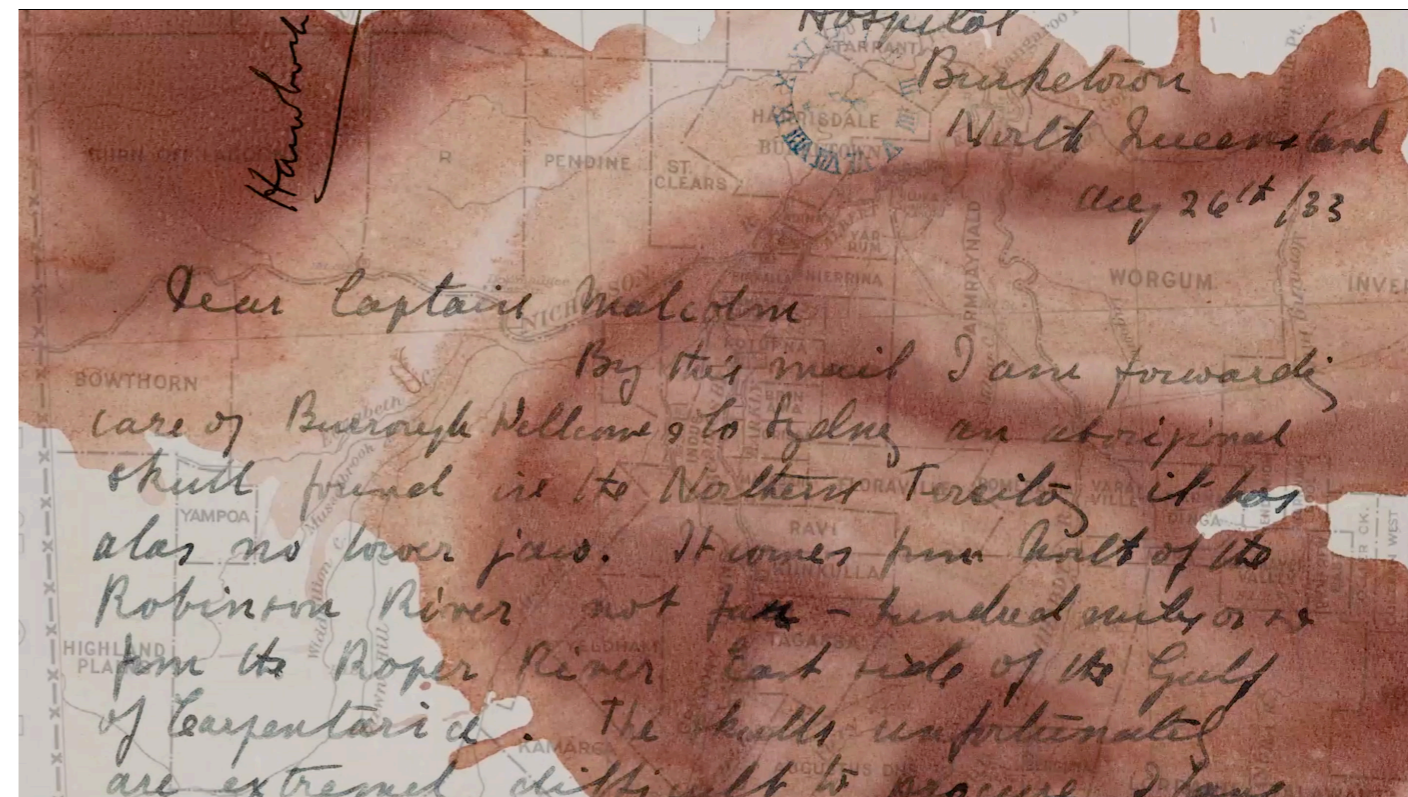
Winjaraba might describe a mode of material thinking in Watson’s work. Over a video call, I see Judy and her cousin Dorothy Watson re-soak a canvas with a small pool of water so that a still drying inked out word bleeds out into the fibres, still legible but diluted. Steeping bags in dyes for re-use, winjaraba (water poured on) – such gestures, often done collaboratively, have the quality not simply of historical re-enactment but of joining with the trace-making of the past, a tracing that itself gestures towards larger elemental forces. Words as well, put to such powerful use in Britain’s ‘paper empire’ of maps and records, or submerged through language suppression, are also subject to such forces – they appear faded, washed out, overlaid, re-surfacing.⁴



A series of small indigo-dyed wooden boards are etched with the names of Watson’s female ancestors and the places where they lived – often places they were forcibly removed from or taken to. These typographic words are given the sharpness of memorial plaques, plaques that would never have existed in the settler heritage landscape. By contrast, the hand-painted names of bore drains recede when overlaid by the spectre of *malu malu* shapes, marking a regenerative hope. Like exhausted inks, extraction depletes itself, while cared for abundance eternally returns. Carefully collect the mussels in a woven bag.

The horror and mundanity of colonial language finds force in the film *skullduggery* (2021), about the collecting and trade of Indigenous people’s bones, creating a kind of slow-moving archival onslaught. The film layers copies of correspondence that concern a man, King Tiger, who died on *Waanyi* country, and whose skull was stolen, traded, and sent to the Wellcome Collection in London. Aboriginal speakers voice the archive, read aloud by Daniel Browning, Lafe Charlton, and Roxanne McDonald, their subtle inflections and emphases lending a human weight to the detached and officious tone of the letters. Materialising the written words through the voice carries this story in a different more careful way.

IMAGE
Judy WATSON
Born Mundubbera, Queensland, 1959
Waanyi
skullduggery (still) 2021
single-channel HD video, 30:54mins
Video editing by Josh Maguire
Image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Meanjin / Brisbane
Photo: Carl Warner



In another work of filmic layers, *shadow bone* (2022), which confronts the legacy of massacres during the ‘killing times’, we witness further cross-fades of different materials – documents from the Queensland State Archives and detailed drawings by an Aboriginal man named Oscar from the late 1880s are contrasting registers of brutal violence, while dental and skeletal X-rays from Watson’s own family give a different form of embodied documentation of Indigenous lives and family lines continuing. At the surfacemost layer of the film and spanning it, Watson’s cupped hands open and close to let in sunlight and we hear the pulsing noise of water in the background, lapping onto rocks below the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Her actions cast light and shadow upon the other images.

Like water pouring on, letting the light in enacts both a contemplative and decisive gesture. Colonial baggage as a static burden, either to be ignored or dispensed with, misses the way it persists in our very bones, is the fabric of our lives on colonised country. Let’s see what’s in the bag. Colonial bagging is never only criticism, never only memorial, but continuous overlapping acts of continuance within the fabric of inextricably enmeshed settler and Indigenous worlds. As worlds were being unmade, people kept making – forging small tributaries of escape away from encroaching stains, bags re-sewn to carry things on.

IMAGE
Judy WATSON
Born Mundubbera, Queensland, 1959
Waanyi
skullduggery (still) 2021
single-channel HD video, 30:54mins
Video editing by Josh Maguire
Image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Meanjin / Brisbane
Photo: Carl Warner

Jessyca is a Palyku woman living in Boorloo (Perth) and is an art historian, curator, and Lecturer in Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia.

Judy Watson was born in Mundubbera, Queensland in 1959. Her Aboriginal matrilineal family is from Waanyi country in north-west Queensland.

¹ The show was: Slow Churn, group exhibition, *The Condensery* – Somerset Regional Art Gallery, Toogoolawah, Queensland, 9 April–3 July, 2022

² Toogoolawah, where the exhibition took place, is a rural town in South-East Queensland with a population of less than 2,000 people. It is within the Somerset region which encompasses the country of the Dungibara, Jinibara, Jagera, Yuggera, and Ugarapul peoples.

³ See Andrew Hassan, ‘Indian Jute in Australian Museum Collections: Forgetting and Recollecting Transnational Networks’, *Public History Review*, Vol 18 (2011): 108–128, pp. 110–111.

⁴ Thomas Richards has written about the fantasy of the British Empire – the fiction that so many collected fragments could amount to positive knowledge, describing it as “a paper empire built on a series of flimsy pretexts that were always becoming texts.” Thomas Richards, *Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, Verso, London, New York, 1996, p. 4.



IMAGE
Judy WATSON
Born Mundubbera, Queensland, 1959
Waanyi
king-size fitted 2023
indigo on cotton
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Meanjin / Brisbane
Photo: Carl Warner