

Acknowledgements

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Cover and images within essay:
Judy Watson during her residency on Heron Island, 2009
Reproduced courtesy of The University of Queensland
Photos: Stuart Gould

Back cover image:
freshwater lens maquette 2009
Brass sculpture with patina
Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Urban Art Projects, Brisbane

Below:
manta 2009
pigment and pencil on cotton rag paper
Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

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JUDY WATSON
HERON ISLAND

A HERON ISLAND RESIDENCY:

JUDY WATSON'S ISLAND WORKS



Judy Watson has written that 'Some of my relatives were sent to or threatened with being sent to Palm Island, the detention centre set up off the coast of Queensland'.¹ Their experience, as Waanyi people from far north-western Queensland, would have been one of fear, anger and bitter sadness for being incarcerated so far from their homeland and loved ones. Even their journey over the waters to this island north of Townsville would have inspired fear. But in their subsequent island life, they may also have experienced wonder – wonder at the treasures that these tropical waters have to offer.



Watson's appointment as artist-in-residence at The University of Queensland's Heron Island Research Station in February 2009 presented an experience of an entirely different order. Heron Island is a picture-perfect coral cay situated on the Great Barrier Reef some 80 kilometres north-east of the Central Queensland city of Gladstone. Located within a World Heritage Listed area, the Resort website advertises that visitors 'can swim straight off the beach to an endless garden of coral where the waters are teeming with fish and marine life'.² Seabirds breed here in their tens of thousands, and summer visitors are entranced by turtle hatchlings. Without doubt, the wonders are abundant and the locale idyllic.

But for an artist so attuned to discerning the layers of history and knowledge embedded within the superficial appearance of landscape and country, Watson's view of the marine environment was probing and the insight she gained contained a sense of presentiment. Watson's visit coincided with the official launch of Research Station, rebuilt after being destroyed by fire in 2007. In operation for over 50 years, today the Research Station is proudly claimed to be 'a world class research and teaching facility and the most productive and prestigious marine research station in Australia'.³ At the launch, a number of leading scientists spoke publicly of their research and, moreover, suggested how their findings held wider relevance for the future of the environment. For even in such a remote and 'healthy' part of the Great Barrier Reef, scientific studies are discerning a less-than-pristine reality and an environment whose changes may reflect the onset of global warming.

Watson learnt how ocean acidification and coral bleaching had been linked to global warming through the groundbreaking research of scientist Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg.⁴ Dr Brad Congdon spoke of his research on the wedge-tailed shearwater seabird (also known as mutton birds) and the huge impact that sea-surface temperature, El Niño and global warming has on the availability of fish for feeding, and in turn the shearwaters' breeding success.⁵ Manta ray populations and migrations were the focus of Dr Kathy Townsend's studies, this scientist also investigating the threat to marine turtles from ingesting plastics and other marine rubbish.⁶ While absorbing details of their research, Watson could also see 'cross-overs and connections between the curiosity of artists and the work of scientists'.⁷

But how does scientific research on coral bleaching, shearwater bird populations, and manta ray migrations translate into visual images? As an artist, Watson has always allowed elements of the environment and its history to seep into

her imagination, with forms and layers emerging from a deeply felt and imaginative response to history and country. In the case of Heron Island, no records of Indigenous occupation exist. But learning that global warming forecasts an ominous future even for such idyllic coral cays as Heron Island lent her images an urgency of purpose. Watson has employed indicators of these changes to the marine environment, in particular by obtaining permission to reproduce graphs used by the scientists when speaking about their research. Combined with shapes derived from location-made sketches – coral, leaves, feathers, fragments of pisonias (*Pisonia grandis*, otherwise known as the 'bird-eating' tree), and beach detritus – her experiences resonate across a range of works, including sculpture and paintings, etchings and drawings, sound and video. A manta ray's black shape hovers on a clear aqua ground, the etched outline of a clam shell is suspended in rich blue, a scientific graph registers a message of coral bleaching upon a ghostly coral shape within a pulsing black ground, vessel-like shapes reflect a turtle's egg chamber or a shearwater's burrow.

A key piece in Watson's exhibition is the 'freshwater lens', a large sculpture that was fabricated in China by Urban Art Projects. A freshwater lens is a body of freshwater that



sits beneath the coral cay above a seawater base, a coral cay itself being made up of crushed coral and shells. The freshwater 'floats' on the saltwater, but its weight results in it forming a 'lens' shape. Such a subterranean freshwater lens is important for the ecology of coral cays, especially those with low rainfall, and for human habitation. Rising sea levels due to climate change and an increased number of extreme climate events such as cyclones and storm surges threaten to contaminate or inundate freshwater lenses, especially on smaller coral cays, which would result in changes to the ecology.⁸ Watson's sculpture of a freshwater lens was fabricated from brass, beaten and formed by hand over a sculpted clay base, then treated to achieve a verdigris patina rich in greens, blues and darker tones. The sculpture floats in the gallery space much as the coral cay's freshwater lens floats in its marine environment, its underwater realm made palpable by an accompanying sound work. Her work is a metaphor for a remarkable, yet fragile, resource.

Two national disasters bracketed Watson's residency. The first, the Black Saturday Victorian bushfires of 7 February 2009, cast a reflective note over the charred and twisted remnants from the Research Station fire of 2007. Melted Pyrex vessels, a blackened microscope, fused glass pipettes, the remains of a camera case, and other items have been placed on display as if treasured relics, relics that now bear an uncanny resemblance to the coral formations and underwater habitats that had been the objects of study. The second disaster was the Moreton Bay oil spill of 11 March 2009, when 250 tonnes of oil from the container ship *Pacific Adventurer* washed up on southern Queensland's Moreton and Bribie Islands and Sunshine Coast. The oil spill, and the recent oil and gas leak from the West Atlas drill rig off the far-north Kimberley coast of Western Australia, provided a reminder of how such events can devastate the marine environment. Watson evokes



these themes by the sparest of means – the cartographer's delineation of place combined with layers of colour, sometimes pooled, sometime splattered, sometimes rigid in outline, just enough to transport the viewer to a place of physical, emotional and ethical dimension.

Perhaps the fragility of the marine environment is best exemplified in Watson's video, made with Maria Barbagallo, of a turtle hatchling's perilous journey from its nest to the water's edge. The tiny creature scrambles through soft sand, finally reaching the foaming slurry where it will begin its swim over the fringing reef to the open ocean. The hatchling's chance of survival against the predation of birds, crabs and fish is slim. If it reaches maturity, the marine turtle's future is threatened by the danger now posed by plastic. We witness only the first moments of this drama. But such a drama for survival, even for us, is only beginning. As we watch the turtle hatchling replay its struggle through the sand, our sense of wonder is matched by a sense of foreboding that may yet breed fear, anger and bitter sadness.

Michele Helmrich, Art Museum Curator

1. Judy Watson, artist statement accompanying the painting a *complicated fall* (2007), in *Judy Watson blood language*, by Judy Watson & Louise Martin-Chev (Carlton, Vic.: The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing Limited, 2009), 110.
2. Voyages Hotels & Resorts, "Heron Island, Great Barrier Reef," <http://www.heronisland.com>
3. Centre for Marine Studies, The University of Queensland, "Heron Island Research Station", <http://www.cms.uq.edu.au/?page=54940>
4. Professor Hoegh-Guldberg, Director of the Centre for Marine Studies and newly appointed Director of the Global Change Institute (both The University of Queensland).
5. Dr Congdon, Marine and Tropical Biology, James Cook University, Cairns; See Greg Roberts and Sean Parnell, "Warmer water devastates Great Barrier Reef's seabirds," *The Australian*, 14 October 2008, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,24492395-11949,00.html>.
6. Dr Townsend, The University of Queensland's Moreton Bay Research Station, North Stradbroke Island.
7. Judy Watson, email correspondence to the author, 28 September 2009.
8. See Malcolm Turner and George N. Batianoff, "Vulnerability of island flora and fauna in the Great Barrier Reef to climate change," in *Climate change and the Great Barrier Reef*, eds. Johanna E. Johnson and Paul A. Marshall (Townsville: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Canberra: Australian Greenhouse Office, 2007), 625, 640-646, 650, 654, http://www.gbmpa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/22608/chapter20-island-flora-and-fauna.pdf.

Images above
Heron Island nos. 1, 2, 13, 21, 11, 19 2009
colour etching cotton rag paper
artist's proof
Printer: Jonathan Tse, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University
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