

# Maternal inheritances

La Trobe Art Institute  
16 May to 6 August 2023

## Artists

Darcey Bella Arnold, Betty Chimney and Raylene Walatinna, Calista Lyon and Carmen Winant, Noriko Nakamura, Jahne Pasco-White, Nina Sanadze and Yhonnie Scarce

## Curator

Amelia Wallin

This exhibition takes the biological transference of data as a starting point to build an expanded understanding of the maternal that includes alternative experiences of kin-making. Not all the artists in this exhibition are biological mothers. *Maternal inheritances* underscores that motherhood is neither a singular nor individual experience. Together, the artworks emphasise our cellular entanglements with our forebears and the collective responsibilities that these entail.

Mother and daughter duo Betty Chimney and Raylene Walatinna are Anangu women who have been producing collaborative paintings since 2016. 'Sharing the process of painting with my daughter is really special,' comments Chimney, an experienced artist and director of Iwantja Arts. 'As we work, I share stories with her about what it was like here when I was growing up, how it has changed over the years.' She continues, 'When I was younger, the older ladies here taught me a lot about Country and culture, and I love sharing this with my daughter through our paintings.'<sup>2</sup>

Chimney and Walatinna's paintings depict their ancestral Yankunytjatjara country, including sites such as the Iwantja karu (creek) which flows from a high rocky ridge down to the community, different tjukula (rock-holes) and tracks as well as references to the site of the tjurki Tjukurpa (owl ancestral story). Tjukurpa is the religion, philosophy and cultural history of the Anangu. It refers to the past, the present and the future at the same time. Following inherited cultural practices such as song, dance and ceremony, keeps Tjukurpa alive and strong. For Chimney and Walatinna, their painting *Nganampa Ngura (Our Country)* (2021) enables them to show 'the next generations how special this place is'.<sup>3</sup> Foregrounding an inheritance that is spiritual, cultural and material, *Nganampa Ngura (Our Country)* communicates the significance of First Nations sovereignty for the future preservation of culture and Country.

With a continued emphasis on sovereignty and truth-telling, the work of Yhonnie Scarce often draws on familial stories of her Nukunu and Kokatha ancestors. Informed by a deep respect for these forebears, Scarce tells their stories of survival and strength in the face of displacement and dislocation under settler colonialism. Across her sculpture and installation practice, Scarce returns to the medium of glass, an amorphous solid that holds conceptual and material significance for her. Created from natural materials under extreme temperatures, glass is a vessel for exploring the evacuation and application of uranium, of which Australia holds the world's largest known quantity.

The sculpture *Nucleus (U235) 1–3 (2020)* directly references the devastating effects of nuclear testing undertaken by British and Australian governments in South Australia in the 1950s and '60s. Three globular shapes of transparent glass sprout stems at the top, producing a resemblance to overgrown fruit, yet in places the skin of each is punctured with gaping holes. Through the voids in these shapes, Scarce depicts what she describes as 'the illness that is left behind once the earth has been opened and its contents have been exposed'.<sup>4</sup> The holes evoke both the rupturing of the land and the fracture that occurs on a cellular level. Uranium-235, referenced in the work's title, is the only naturally occurring fissile isotope capable of sustaining a nuclear chain reaction, the discovery of which has been harnessed for the creation of nuclear weaponry. The first link in this

## GATHERING DATA

by Amelia Wallin

And there I was in my mother's womb gathering data. I heard, felt and experienced her life before my birth – the happiness, the stress, the sadness, the everything. Nothing could be hidden, we were attached to each other so I could survive. I was gathering data. All her emotions and heartbeat flowed through to me in her womb until I entered the world. I was gathering data.

– Charmaine Papertalk Green<sup>1</sup>

Mitochondria are the cells that generate most of our chemical energy in order to power our biochemical reactions. Despite being present in almost all multicellular organisms, the reason that mitochondrial DNA only contains *maternal* DNA continues to elude biologists. It is this phenomenon, known as maternal inheritance, which enables the popular at-home ancestry kits, where a sample of saliva can trace maternal inheritance to better understand one's ancestral lineage.

The matrilineal is in our very data. Our maternal entanglements hold potential for new ways of thinking about our past and our future. If we recognise our position within a genealogy of caretakers and caregivers, protectors and knowledge holders, might we take more responsibility for our futures? As evidenced by the artworks in this exhibition, the concept of maternal inheritance is central to a future-focused way of thinking, one which encompasses the full spectrum of life, from the cellular to the planetary.

1 Charmaine Papertalk Green, 'I was gathering data', in Charmaine Papertalk Green and John Kinsella, *ART: Poems by Charmaine Papertalk Green and John Kinsella*, Magabala Books, Broome, 2022, p 6.

2 Betty Chimney and Raylene Walatinna, *Our Country*, Michael Reid Galleries, Sydney, 2021.

3 Chimney and Walatinna, *Our Country*.

4 Yhonnie Scarce, *Hollowing earth*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, 2017.

chain is the splitting of the nucleus, the centremost part of our cells which holds all our genetic code.

Scarce explores her immediate family history in *Florey and Fanny* (2011). Two stark white aprons are hung side by side, pockets bulging, embroidered with the names of Scarce's great-grandmother and grandmother. These aprons were the standard uniform for young Aboriginal girls sent into domestic servitude in the late 19th and early 20th century. In their pockets are bush plums, shaped from black glass. The concealment of the bush plums alludes to the restriction placed on First Nations people that prevented them from practising their culture, and the fearless forebears who ensured its protection for future generations. Bush plums, a native plant and food source, occur across both works, representing enduring Indigenous ecological knowledge and the sustaining provisions of the land.

Similarly informed by her own experiences and those of her ancestors, particularly in relation to war and occupation in Eastern Europe, Georgia-born artist Nina Sanadze dedicates her practice to peace-building. When I visit Sanadze in her studio, her table is littered with folded photocopies of black-and-white images of women and children. Unfolding one of these photocopies, she reveals uniformed men holding guns pointed at the figures. These are photographs of scenes of genocide, taken in 1942 in Ivanhorod, Ukraine, a town less than 50 km from where her Jewish ancestors resided. Sanadze's maternal great-grandmother, Hana, along with three of her children, Misha (aged 14), Efim (aged 12), and Rachael (aged eight), were killed by Nazis. The image could be Hana, and it is Hana that Sanadze sculpts from wet clay, reproducing her photographic image in life-size proportions – a physical, embodied process involving many kilograms of clay and one week's duration in the gallery's courtyard. This is a new way of working for her, creating what she has termed 'live sculptures' to emphasise their ephemerality. 'I am calling it "live,"' Sanadze says, 'precisely because it dies eventually' (email to the author, 3 May 2023). Through a sustained engagement with the material, and a rejection of traditional perceptions of preservation and memorialisation, Sanadze uncovers and exposes her own inheritances. Due to her deliberate decision to leave the clay unfired, we witness the erosion of *Hana and child familial installation (part 1)* (2023). Over the three-month run of the exhibition, the clay will dry and deteriorate, echoing the cracks where Sanadze's own lineage has been ruptured through the violence of war.

In an act that complicates authorship and collaboration and further unpacks the familial legacies at the centre of *Hana and child*, Sanadze has chosen to include in this exhibition artworks by her 11-year-old son, Henry, as well as two works by her mother, Mila. Working in oil paint and bronze, Mila's painting and sculpture respectively record the body in states of profound transformation through the experiences of pregnancy and ageing. Mila sculpts her pregnant daughter and paints a self-portrait of her own ageing body, a state that her grandmother never reached. Exhibited in proximity, Henry's drawings and sculptures of guns and tanks were created by Sanadze's side, despite her best efforts to censor the violence that underpins this work and his own history.

Reflecting on her personal experiences of cultural violence, and her inclination to imagine apocalyptic scenarios that result in the death of herself and her daughter, academic Juliette Singh asks, 'Do other mothers think this way? Or is this dynamic violence in our blood, so deeply embedded in our history that it has taken root in our cellular selves'.<sup>5</sup> In inviting her mother and son into this exhibition, Sanadze underscores the familial weight of trauma and its inheritances.

In her book, *Lose your mother: a journey along the Atlantic slave route*, the American writer and academic Saidiya V Hartman asks: 'But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and instead conceive of a new order?'<sup>6</sup> Calista Lyon and Carmen Winant take up a similar line of questioning in their work. *Breaking water* (2021) seeks to dismantle our inherited systems and structures. Motivated by the possibilities afforded by feminism and post-human perspectives, they jointly propose new 'modes of survival and resistance' that look to the sanctity and necessity of water. Originally shown as a 21-channel video work, *Breaking water* is reconfigured for *Maternal inheritances* across 12 channels on CRT monitors, situated atop custom stands made of recycled wood. The looped videos depict flows, gushes and eruptions of water alongside television, film and home video footage of feet with water puddling between them. The latter constitute imagery of leaking amniotic fluid, known colloquially as 'waters breaking', and often a sign of oncoming birth. Other footage, gathered by the artists from YouTube, features the explosion of dam walls through river restoration projects. Equating the powerful birthing experience of 'breaking water' with the activities of these projects, Lyon and Winant align reproductive and ecological care.

Lyon and Winant suggest that 'water never really "breaks" but rather shifts form, moving in and out of bodies, [and] acts as both a signal and an agent of embodied change.'<sup>7</sup> A dam restricts that which we do not want to carry forth, yet, through the release and redirection of water, *Breaking water* proposes that inheritances can be chosen. Like water, we can shift in favour of flows. We can reject our inheritance, the dam(n)ed waterways and the choked rivers, choosing, instead, freer paths.

Caregivers and new mothers often speak of the leakiness of postpartum. Beginning with the aforementioned flows of amniotic fluid, the time after birth can be marked by the fluids of blood, colostrum, milk, tears, sweat. Jahnne Pasco-White's newly commissioned painting installation, *Milky ways* (2023), appears to have absorbed all this fluidity alongside other detritus from life with young children. Indeterminate substances and shapes sweep across her canvases stained through a slow endurance that took place in Pasco-White's backyard in Chewton (Dja Dja Wurrung Country). This fabric was steeped in tubs and left to mingle with all manner of additives: soil, fungus, recycled oil paints, synthetic polymer paint, turmeric, quince, apricot skins and various raw earth pigments. In this watery state, pigments stain and bloom across the cotton, canvas and felt before they are hung on the washing line, then submerged in the buckets again. When Pasco-White and I first meet to discuss this exhibition, the fabric is already stewing. Her processes of submersion and absorption continued for more than six months. This is the work that carries on in the background, performed alongside other duties of care.

On prior occasions, Pasco-White has exhibited dyed canvases stiffened and hardened with glue, and other works have been painted directly onto a crumbling wall. Installed outdoors, the components of *Milky ways* (2023) interlock and overlap, recalling their earlier life-stage on the washing line, and forming provisional passageways which we are now invited to move between in the gallery courtyard. In siting the works outside, Pasco-White welcomes any interventions and unintentional collaborations with the weather, flora and fauna. After the exhibition, these canvases will continue their life cycle, accumulating new matter with each presentation.

<sup>5</sup> Julietta Singh, *The breaks*, Daunt Books Publishing, London, 2021, p 160.

<sup>6</sup> Saidiya V Hartman, *Lose your mother: a journey along the Atlantic slave route*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York City, 2008, p 100.

<sup>7</sup> Amara Antilla, 'Calista Lyon and Carmen Winant', in Amara Antilla and Clelia Coussonnet (eds), *Breaking water*, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH, 2022, p 9.

The 'wandering womb' was an imagined condition in ancient Greek society, in which an underutilised uterus would drift through one's body, inflicting on its carrier the symptoms of hysteria. Drawing from Japanese and Buddhist references, Noriko Nakamura's three-part sculpture, *Womb realm* (2022), reclaims the womb as a site of pleasure and compassion. This series borrows its name from a realm within the Buddhist cosmos that symbolises the principles of compassion and empathy that birth, nourish and maintain all forms of the phenomenal world.

Carved in the artist's home studio in Castlemaine (Dja Dja Wurrung Country), these sculptures depict rounded buttocks, a bare-breasted torso and a disembodied womb. Nakamura often works with limestone as material for her sculptures. Smooth and well-suited to carving, limestone holds ancient sediment in its material. It is made almost entirely of fossilised brachiopods, mineralised crustations that predate our early human ancestors. Simultaneously both soft and hard, its porosity makes it desirable for carving.

The body parts in *Womb realm* are bound in rope, evidencing the practice of *kinbaku*, or Japanese bondage. The absence of a face and the emphasis on reproductive systems recalls ancient depictions of fertility. For example, Nakamura's sculpture of a torso references a specific *dogū* from prehistoric Japan (14,000-400 BCE). Made from carved (earthenware) clay, and often found in fragments, those *dogū* that depict the female form with rounded breasts and abdomens are believed to be fertility symbols. Many of the recovered *dogū* appear to have been deliberately broken, and archaeologists have speculated that they may have been fragmented during rituals associated with birth and fertility. Nakamura states: 'I was drawn to the idea of rituals which destroy the representation of the mother' (email to the author, 5 May 2023).

Rather than being ritualistically broken, Nakamura's sculptures are deliberately fragmented and placed directly on the floor, so that they are intentionally viewed from above. The three sculptures entangle the maternal with destruction, pleasure, pain and masochistic desire. What if the womb were a site for other kinds of inheritance, beyond the biological? Addressing the taboo concept of maternal sexuality, Nakamura engages the possibility of the womb as more-than a reproductive site, a site of pleasure.

In an exploration of artistic, conceptual and familial inheritances, artist Darcey Bella Arnold paints fragments from her mother Jennifer's oeuvre. The two paintings included in *Maternal inheritances* are stretched and suspended on custom wooden stands. Their design recalls an old-fashioned blackboard; the notations and equations painted on the canvas complete this association. The daughter of two teachers and former student activists – Michael and Jennifer – the pedagogical and the instructive are driving interests for Arnold. Symbols including arrows, clocks and bricks as well as numbers and text regularly occur in her work. With *Entropy painting* (2022) and *Anti-entropy (LB Sainte Sébastienne)* (2022), Arnold introduces associations between art historical genres and tropes such as surrealism and concrete poetry with phases and words drawn from Jennifer's unique lexicon.

Jennifer lives with aphasia, a condition that impacts the ability to communicate. Her condition leads her to reject inherited language systems, instead employing her own rules and systems of spelling, grammar and speech. Also impacted is her memory, which stops at age 20 or 21, around the time she was an engaged student activist at La Trobe University in Melbourne, concerned with the Vietnam war and feminism, both of which feature prominently in her conversation and writing. An avid writer and editor, Jennifer fills notebooks with her text and notations in a form of self-organised work, bound

by its own rules. The words *atrophy* and *entropy* regularly reoccur as placeholders in Jennifer's conversation and her writing. In the artworks included in *Maternal inheritances*, Arnold studiously approaches these words, entangling their meaning with personal and art historical associations, through references to the surrealism of René Magritte and the feminist psychoanalysis of Louise Bourgeois. Words, letters and symbols occupy the canvases, underlined by crests of white paint that echo the pre-drawn lines of a notebook.

Saidiya V Hartman has remarked that 'inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on.'<sup>8</sup> Arnold chooses to engage deeply with the work of her mother, creating paintings in close collaboration and communication, and at times directly replicating Jennifer's writing on her canvases. This is a complicated form of inheritance, where roles between mother and daughter, caregiver and care receiver, are entangled. Arnold's attention to her mother's linguistic engagement and textual expressions is itself an act of care and devotion.

From the weight of familial histories affected by the traumas of war, occupation and colonisation, to the inheritance of material, artistic and cultural lineages, to the preservation of Country, the artists in this exhibition consider the complexities of reproduction while centring the matrilineal.

Across the artworks the themes of rupture and repair reoccur. Think of the stems of Scarce's glass bush plums that prick the pockets of the cotton aprons, each one an act of reclamation, or, adjacent on the floor, Nakamura's fragmented body parts that constitute an ode to self-pleasure and self-compassion. Think also of Sanadze's careful folding of the photographs of genocide, an act of preservation for her son, and for the humanity of her great-grandmother whose form has been sculpted in our courtyard. And, in another courtyard, think of Pasco-White's canvases suspended in their state of becoming, before being reconstituted into different formations and possibilities. Remember the breaking of the dams and the release of old systems towards better ways of care in the moving image and sound of Lyon and Winant, and the reclaimed timber that supports their work. Recall Arnold's attentive study of her mother's unique linguistic systems, and Chimney and Walatinna's preservation of Country and culture for future generations.

In the face of climate emergencies of catastrophic proportions, to say the future feels uncertain is an understatement. Yet, the concept of inheritance, be it material or ancestral, is quietly optimistic. While considering what precedes us, the concept of inheritance assumes that they are still resources – indeed, a future – to inherit. Amid global shifts and unfolding crises, this exhibition figures maternal inheritance as both a state of precarity, and an optimistic blueprint for our future.

<sup>8</sup> Hartman, *Lose your mother*, p 100.

## LIST OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are given as height preceding width (followed, where applicable, by depth)

### DARCEY BELLA ARNOLD

born Melbourne / Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country 1986, lives Melbourne

- 1 *Anti-entropy (LB Sainte Sébastienne)*, 2022  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, American red oak stand  
150 x 200 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and ReadingRoom

### YHONNIE SCARCE

Kokatha / Nukunu  
born Woomera 1973, lives Melbourne / Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country

- 2 *Florey and Fanny*, 2011  
cotton aprons, blown glass  
2 aprons, 15 glass parts; installation dimensions variable  
City of Yarra Collection

- 3 *Nucleus (U235) 1–3*, 2020  
blown glass  
3 parts, each 25 cm diameter (approx.); installation dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY

### DARCEY BELLA ARNOLD

- 4 *Entropy painting*, 2022  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, American red oak stand  
150 x 200 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and ReadingRoom

### NORIKO NAKAMURA

born Kofu Yamanashi, Japan, 1986; lives Castlemaine / Dja Dja Wurrung Country

- 5 *Womb realm*, 2022  
limestone  
3 parts: (a) 28 x 40 x 35 cm, (b) 32 x 58 x 80 cm, (c) 55 x 38 x 28 cm; installation dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

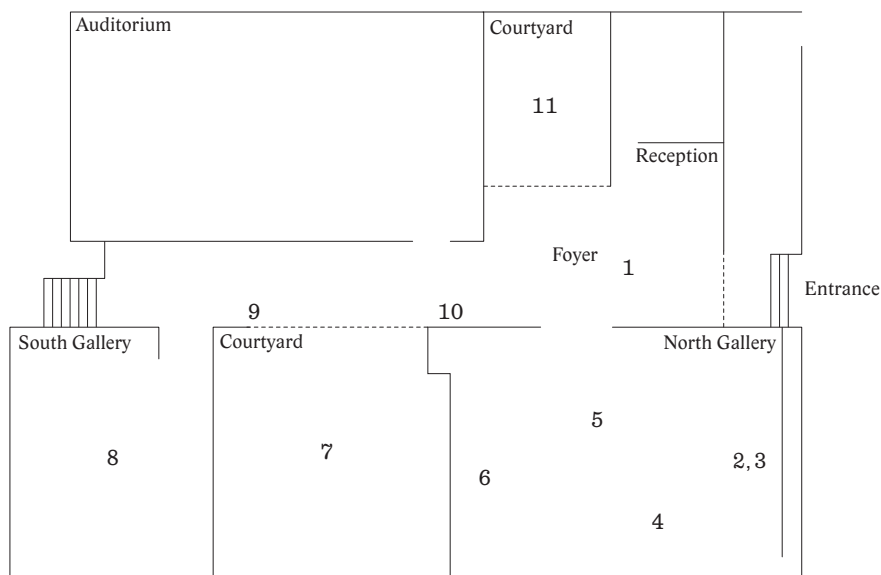
### BETTY CHIMNEY

Yankunytjatjara  
born Port Augusta 1957, lives Indulkana, Southern Desert region

### RAYLENE WALATINNA

Yankunytjatjara  
born Alice Springs 1980, lives Indulkana, Southern Desert region

- 6 *Nganampa Ngura (Our Country)*, 2021  
synthetic polymer paint on linen  
diptych: 198 x 396 cm  
Collection of John Polinelli



### NINA SANADZE

born Tbilisi, Georgia, 1976; lives Melbourne / Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country

- 7 *Hana and child, familial installation (part 1)*, 2023  
unfired clay, hessian, steel, wire  
280 x 120 x 180 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Daine Singer

### CALISTA LYON

born Nagambie / Taungurung Country  
1986, lives Columbus, Ohio

### CARMEN WINANT

born Santa Barbara, California, 1983; lives Columbus, Ohio

- 8 *Breaking water*, 2021  
multi-channel video installation (11:12 min) with sound (24:45 min), reclaimed wooden stands  
installation dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artists

### NINA SANADZE WITH HENRY SCHIFF

- 9 *Hana and child, familial installation (part 3)*, 2023

### HENRY SCHIFF

born Melbourne / Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country, 2011; lives Melbourne

*Gun models and other ammunitions*, 2022–23  
ink on paper, unfired clay  
installation dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

### NINA SANADZE WITH MILA SANADZE

- 10 *Hana and child, familial installation (part 2)*, 2023

### MILA SANADZE

born Tbilisi, Georgia, 1946; lives Melbourne / Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country

*On the green chair*, 2009

oil on canvas

91 x 61 cm

*Sculpture of pregnant Nina*, 2009

bronze

17.5 x 7 x 7 cm

Courtesy of the artist

### JAHNNE PASCO-WHITE

born Melbourne / Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country 1987, lives Colac / Gulidjan and Gadubanud Country

- 11 *Milky ways*, 2023  
indigo dye, soil, fungus, elderberry pulp, reclaimed and recycled oil paints, pastel, pencil, synthetic polymer paint, oil stick, turmeric, quince, apricot skins, raw earth pigments, plant-based crayons and blackberry on canvas, cotton and felt  
8 parts, dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist and STATION