

## ESSAY

Judy Watson in collaboration with Elisa Jane Carmichael and Libby Harward  
***nerung ballun (Nerang River), freshwater, saltwater***

The HOTA cultural precinct is located on the lands and waters of the Kombumerri people, part of the wider Yugambah language group and recognises them as the traditional owners and ongoing custodians of the land, paying its respect to Elders past, present and future. The principals and practices of the HOTA Gallery in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples begins from this recognition of ongoing custodianship.

Born in Mundubbera (b. 1959), artist Judy Watson's extensive catalogue of work explores her Aboriginal heritage, and often utilises a form of cultural retrieval re-presented within a contemporary context. Holding matrilineal Waanyi ancestry, Watson's artistic practice is anchored in truth-telling, following the lines of emotional and physical topography that centre on particular places and moments in time. Watson is intrinsically a collector, gathering information and meaning from places, maps, archival documents, and photographs to create layered and tangible expressions of Australian history.<sup>1</sup> Through this, her works undeniably affirm identity, culture, and connection to Country. By working from site and collective memory, Watson reveals hidden Indigenous histories, unveiling the many stories inherently embedded within Country.

Commissioned by the HOTA Gallery for the opening in 2021, Watson has created *nerung ballun, freshwater, saltwater* to commemorate the Aboriginal culture that lies within the ground, the sky and the waterways found throughout the precinct. Inspired by south-east Queensland's Indigenous communities and her time on the South Stradbroke Indigenous Artist Camp, Watson has collaborated with Urban Art Projects (UAP), and Quandamooka artists Elisa Jane Carmichael and Libby Harward to realise the initial concept design. Developed through rigorous consultations with the local Indigenous community, insightful local cultural knowledge was shared, with *nerung ballun, freshwater, saltwater* representing a place of ceremony, a place of gathering, a place of education and knowledge. *nerung ballun, freshwater, saltwater* is a celebration of the dynamism and resilience of Indigenous culture. The installation intentionally responds to the history of the site in particular, its position on the nerung ballun (Nerang River) and its significance to local Indigenous people. As in many of Watson's works, memory and collaboration play a significant role in *nerung ballun, freshwater, saltwater* whereby threads of cultural knowledge and collective memories intertwine to create a place of shared experience.

The HOTA precinct is located directly within the nerung ballun catchment zones and provides the parklands with stunning water views and atmosphere. The nerung ballun is an intra-coastal waterway and is the largest, most significant river system

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<sup>1</sup> Katina Davidson, 'Judy Watson; memory scars, dreams and gardens', Tolarno Galleries, 2020

on the Gold Coast<sup>2</sup>. For the Indigenous people of south east Queensland, the waterway encompasses vital cultural knowledges, oral histories and stories that connect Freshwater people with Saltwater people throughout the Gold Coast hinterland and coastal regions. Oral histories of the areas surrounding HOTA highlight that the site was an established meeting place for Aboriginal clans visiting from as far away as Grafton and Maryborough. To honour the immense social and cultural history of the Indigenous people that have occupied the waterways since time immemorial, Watson collaborated with Michael Aird, Aboriginal photographer and anthropologist, to source original mappings of the nerung ballun. Using the maps as a blueprint, the artwork features a pathway that forms a topographical map depicting the nerung ballun prior to European settlement.



Installation view of *nerung ballun (Nerang River)*, *freshwater, saltwater* 2021, image Rachel See

As an extension of the Gold Coast, the remote beaches of South Stradbroke Island are a place of spectacular scenery, abundant in history and culture. Prior to 1894, North and South Stradbroke was one large sand island, populated by a number of Indigenous clan groups and like the Gold Coast mainland, was a seasonal visiting and feasting place.<sup>3</sup> However, the Island became divided with the breakthrough of the ocean in the mid-1880s and now respectively are known as North Minjerribah and South Stradbroke. The Aboriginal people in the region, particularly those with connections to the original island and the Mulgumpin, or Moreton Bay region (the Kombumerri and Quandamooka peoples) identify significant cultural relations with South Stradbroke Island.<sup>4</sup> In particular, a place referred to as ‘the Bedrooms’ preserves an Aboriginal shell midden. Middens are the remains of meals of shellfish,

<sup>2</sup> City of Gold Coast, ‘Health Study of Nerang River lakes and canals’, 2017, <https://gchaveyoursay.com.au/nerangriver#:~:text=Why%20is%20a%20healthy%20Nerang,also%20have%20important%20cultural%20significance>.

<sup>3</sup> Author? North Stradbroke Island, ‘Island History’, <https://stradbrokeisland.com/about-stradbroke/island-history/>

<sup>4</sup> Tenefranci, Roselle, and Mengel, Paige, ‘South Stradbroke Heritage and Recreation’, 2017, <https://boatgoldcoast.com.au/south-stradbroke-heritage-and-recreation/>

such as oysters, that were consumed and discarded, forming mounds of shell deposits sourced from the sea and waterways. Within *nerung ballun, freshwater, saltwater*, Watson has embedded the representation of the nerung ballun pathway with oyster, eugarie and mussel shells. These shells have been scattered around the mapped sand banks to mimic this cultural practice to reflect the ancient sites of Aboriginal camping grounds found within the Gold Coast region. Incorporated with the discarded shellfish are flecks of multicoloured jasper stones, a river stone found within the region and used for stone tools. The jasper stones found throughout the river pathway were labouringly collected, then generously donated and dispersed across the concrete by Aboriginal artefact maker, Rick Roser.

Alongside the pathway, a piccabeen basket and a dilly bag sculpture have been incorporated in collaboration and consultation with Carmichael and Harward. Woven bags and baskets are significant forms of cultural knowledge and identity that reflect deep connections between people and specific places. The basket and bag were originally made on the 2017 South Stradbroke Indigenous Artist Camp (*Cross Currents: From Island to Mainland*) – a five-day placement where emerging and established local Indigenous artists worked alongside leading artists to create site-specific works responding to the unique Saltwater Country of South Stradbroke Island.<sup>5</sup> The Camp is a significant creative and cultural milestone for every artist that attends, while simultaneously boosting the visibility of Indigenous presence and artmaking in the city.

During this iteration of the South Stradbroke Indigenous Artist Camp, Watson was nominated as a lead artist and worked to support artists to create ephemeral, sculptural works. The 2017 Artist Camp was a major catalyst for many of the elements featured throughout *nerung ballun, freshwater, saltwater* and highlights the dynamic and living aspects of Indigenous cultural knowledge transmissions. The knowledge associated with the piccabeen basket was passed down by Roser, another lead artist working alongside Watson on the Artist Camp. Roser taught Harward how to manipulate the Bangalow Palm fronds to create the original vessel used to carry items such as ochre and water.

Through methods of twining, knotting, looping and string making, Carmichael's original dilly bag is woven from the corky vine – an invasive weed, repurposed and reclaimed by Quandamooka hands. Her practice honours her Saltwater heritage, working from materials collected from Country and embraces traditional techniques that have been passed down through her long line of ancestors.<sup>6</sup> For Carmichael, weaving is anchored in her culture and family who are equally passionate about the revival and regeneration of traditional weaving practices. Once ephemeral works, the upscaled cast bronze piccabeen and the large hand twisted dilly bag represent eternal standing presences for the people who were and are still here, forever carrying the stories and histories of their original makers.

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<sup>5</sup> Gold Coast Indigenous Artist Camp South Stradbroke Island, "Cross-Currents; from island to mainland", 2017 <https://www.goldcoast.qld.gov.au/documents/bf/south-stradbroke-indigenous-artist-camp-2017.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Elisa jane Carmichael, 'How is Weaving Past, Present, Futures?', Masters of Fine Art Thesis Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology, 2017, pp. 1-62.

Located within the overall artwork a two-metre-tall feather canopy provides a place for shelter. The feathers represent the *mibin* or the wedge-tailed eagle and speaks to the Aboriginal people of the south east Queensland lands and waters. Sandblasted into areas that encompass the site, local language and motifs that express cultural knowledges and stories can be found. The words *muyim* (blue water lily) and *yimbin* (bulrush) etched into the river path allude to the Kombumerri Love Story, which was shared with Watson by Traditional Custodian and Kombumerri woman Justine Dillion. This story has been passed down through generations of people and is an important way of sharing history and values throughout the community.<sup>7</sup> Together, each component of *nerung ballun, freshwater, saltwater* speaks directly to the enduring nature of Indigenous creativity and celebrate the strength and resilience of Aboriginal culture.

Within *nerung ballun, freshwater, saltwater* local community hold a significant voice in the work, who contributed deeply to its conception, development, design, and story. This could only have been achieved through Community consultation, whereby new stories were added to collective stories, allowing a sense of belonging, cultural continuity, and revitalisation. HOTA engaged Gold Coast Indigenous Consultants, Relative Creative to facilitate these local community consultations. They were based on collaborative yarning and methods of storytelling. Yarning is an important process within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and is used as a tool to learn from a collective group, build respectful relationships and to preserve or pass on cultural knowledges. The processes are representative of intergenerational knowledge transfer and feeds into the developments and spirit of Indigenous artistic creation while reflecting the continuous and cyclic relationships that occur between art and culture. Through storytelling and yarning, people can dream new visions while holding onto old ones.

The *nerung ballun*, *mibin* feathers, *piccabeen* basket, *midden* and *dilly bag* are strong artistic statements of culture and reflect layered meanings and significance. Through Watson's collaborative practice, the entrance statement to the new HOTA Gallery, creates a vital sense of place and will remain significant to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people visiting the precinct. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Essay

**Rebecca Ray**

Meriam Mir Assistant Curator

HOTA Gallery

July 2021

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<sup>7</sup> Kombumerri Together Project, 'The importance of Dreamtime Stories',

<https://kombumerritogetherproject.com/digital-resources/the-importance-of-dreamtime-stories/>

## ARTWORK CREDIT

Judy Watson. *nerung ballun (Nerang River), freshwater, saltwater* 2021, bronze, bisalloy, steel, concrete, shell and jasper stones, Collection, HOTA Gallery. Commissioned for the Gallery opening 2021.

Elisa Jane Carmichael. *Dillybag* 2021, steel, Collection, HOTA Gallery.

Libby Harward. *Piccabeen basket* 2021, bronze, Collection, HOTA Gallery.