

shadow breath

In Judy Watson's artistic career and practice, women are central; elevated in artworks that draw attention to the subtle ways in which history is carried, shadowy but indelible, outside dominant gendered norms. Feminine histories are embedded in individual bodies, in scars, memory, and in the landscape. In this exhibition of paintings they emerge in floating canvases, with seeped and stained layers, motifs rising like ghostly yet powerful presences. At its heart is Watson's female lineage – her grandmother, mother, sisters, daughter and extended family – some of whom have also contributed to this new body of work, as beautiful as its conceptual construction is radical.

The term 'shadow breath' emerged for Watson during a 250 km walk across the Luberon Loop in Provence (France) in 2025 – as a physical but also poetic and conceptual phenomenon. Walking between villages, in landscapes from rocky alpine mountains to farms, lakes to dusty red cliffs, covering up to 28 kilometres each day, she thought, remembered and observed the embedded human and environmental histories in hilltop townships, the earth, its ochres and shapes. As she walked, she was accompanied by her 'shadow breath', moderating her physical exertion like a familiar.

In this exhibition, Watson casts her 'shadow breath' to memorialise and honour the women of the French resistance, who worked to support the persecuted, overlaying these narratives with maps of her journey over similar ground. Her fluid canvases infiltrate these places with native Australian plants, overlaid with ochres, soaked in water. They are subject to her processes – creasing, inundation, dancing (infiltrating colour into their fibres) – an imprinting of contemporary memory. Watson's walking route is also embroidered into the canvas, overlaid stitches evoking the regular and rhythmic tenor of the trek, absorbing the past narratives inherent in these places.

reillanne to saint-michel observatoire (2026) develops its own skeletal topography, with ochre browns and yellows shining through from below day 13 of her walking map, and washes of blue giving a sense of the layers that comprise history in this place. Imbued light emerges from the central areas evoking the power in this experience of the stars.

Her *rustrel to viens, women of the resistance* (2026) floats the names of French resistance fighters over the map. Joan of Arc's (c.1412–1431) early martyrdom for her beliefs is juxtaposed with that of music hall star Josephine Baker (1906–1975), who also spied for the French resistance during the German occupation, and was an activist against racial segregation in the US (where she was born). Others named

include Suzanne Vallon, Violette Szabo, Claude Cahun, Marcel Moore, Frederique Duran and Lucie Aubrac. Native Australian grevillea is overlaid, its resilience to changing conditions evoking that of the women who also adapted constantly to protect others and to survive.

Watson's *women of colour* (2026) lists women from Australia (largely First Nations) whose contribution is paralleled with the French resistance fighters, with strong yellow forms dancing amid layers of blue and jute twine, with ginger and grevillea used to overlay and symbolise their gritty determination.

'shadow breath' is united by Watson's sensitivity to environments both natural and cultural, and her own resistance, made manifest in canvases delivered with delicacy and a sensual use of materials and marks.

During her 2024 survey *mudunama kundana wandaraba jarribirri: Judy Watson* at the Queensland Art Gallery, she described the visual impact of her work as 'a "haunting" ... it is as if the viewer swallows the work: it goes inside their body before they understand what has happened, and then it is there. It is like osmosis.' In 'shadow breath' she draws in a maelstrom of memory, global developments and personal observation, that breath their impacts back through her seductive lens.

Louise Martin-Chew 11 June 2026