GENERATIONS

An investigation into how
the experience of migration,
dislocation and assimilation has
impacted on artists' sense of
personal and cultural identity.

3 DEC 2011 - 26 FEB 2012

SAM BURKE &
DOMENICO DE CLARIO
MUZI LI
PAMELA MEI-LENG SEE
MAI NGUYEN-LONG
JOANNE SAAD
KHALED SABSABI
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WOLLONGONGONG CITY GALLERY

FOREWORD

One of Wollongong City Gallery's most important roles is to examine and present community stories that help delineate who we are. One of the defining stories of the Illawarra is that of the migrants who have come to find work and settle in this area.

Although the first European settlements began in the Illawarra in 1815, it was the period after WWII that saw the migration of large groups of people to this area. In the 1950s and 60s they came predominantly from Europe, in the 1970s and 80s from Turkey, Lebanon, Vietnam and other parts of South East Asia, and from the 90s to the present they have come from China, the Middle East and Africa. These migrations of people and cultures have, over time, made an indelible mark on our sense of personal, cultural and community identity.

Generations is an exhibition that explores the migrant experience through the work of 11 contemporary artists, five of whom are first generation migrants born overseas, and six of whom are from similar cultural backgrounds but born in Australia. It explores notions of dislocation, isolation, assimilation and loss and how these impact on personal identity. Although the experience of migration is a shared one for these artists, their responses and reflections, presented as painting, sculpture, installation, performance, photography and film, are personal ones.

I'd like to thank all of the participating artists - Domenico de Clario, Sam Burke, Muzi Li, Mai Nguyen-Long, Joanne Saad, Khaled Sabsabi, Lee Salomone, Pamela Mei-leng See, My Le Thi, Hossein Valamanesh and Nassiem Valamanesh - for their passionate contribution to this project.

We hope the exhibition will present visitors with some interesting, exciting and thought-provoking insights into the migrant experience.

John Monteleone
Program Director

LANGUAGES OF LOSS

Dad nearly ran me over with his car. That's the happy part of this story. The sad part is the part he constitutes the happy part partly because it parts the partition we erect within ourselves. Perhaps I should explain a little bit. To explain is to relive through the melancholy of memories and that means confronting yourself and the oneiric disfiguring truths that guide your life, that make you different from your genetic predecessor but in most parts the same. As Brian Castro interrogates in a beautiful autobiographical essay about his struggles as a writer, 'where did my melancholy come from? It's probably genetic. But nurture overrides nature' (2008:95).

My name is Farid Youssef Abdalla Farid Megaly. We chose to drop Megaly because having a double moniker would serve me well in a western country or so my parents thought! When requesting to change my name because the other kids in my Auckland school were baffled by the Arab kid with extensive facial hair for a 12 year old, Dad suggested Frederick - I stuck with Farid. And I am happy I did because in this meditative tract I would like to unpack the genealogical patterns and filiative batons that assemble my life.

One of the most defining events of this year for me was the uprisings across the Arab world, but particularly in Cairo. That is because for some formative years in my life there, when my first language was English and I was displaced in a cacophony of Arabic voices around me, I grew up with a sense of apathy, of taboo subjects that cannot be broached publicly (or even privately) and a whole heap of photos of the deposed President Hosni Mubarak plastered everywhere. Castro, again, elucidates that 'the trouble with migrants is that you're not entitled to criticize. The moment at which one is granted something so lacking in originality as citizenship, is the moment at which immigrants become impotent, forever silent, unable to be heard. The only recourse is to be counterfeit'. But I was simultaneously a migrant and a native of my own country indoctrinated with the triumphalist narrative of being an indigenous person resisting the perils of Arab colonisation by remaining a steadfast Christian minority.

Dusk and dawn sessions glued to Al Jazeera English via broadband speed internet, alarmist messages to relatives in Egypt, doing the media rounds, late night discussions with academics and friends about the harrowing events of the day, and heavy doses of shisha (Arab tobacco pipe) coloured the early months of this year. Of course, they were tinged with an oblique sense of what I term diasporic powerlessness. By this I mean, I was there but not there. Connected through every form of social media tentacle I could devour, psychically present, emotionally vacillating but ultimately and brutally physically distant. This nostalgic ruse underscores the personal travails a migrant undergoes when he/she is transplanted and no matter what semblance of a community is replicated overseas; it is futile, fake, kitschy, miniature, or as Castro names it, 'counterfeit'. It cannot capture the essence of what has been lost and it actually thrives from this corpuscular deficiency. So when my father asks me incessantly to buy him soy cheese in bulk quantities from an 'authentic' Arab grocer in Sydney when he can perfectly access the same product in Brisbane only five minutes away from him, I understand. I can grasp how this product, infused with emotional capital beyond its utilitarian value as Dad consumes it seamlessly while watching Egyptian satellite channels and shouting at the obviously biased news presenter inflaming sectarian hatred against his fellow Egyptians, is some sort of phantasmic home built on the missing parts that get lost with everyday not being at home. This haptic geography fits within French philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty's aphorism of 'phantom limbs' where the body refuses consciously to accept its state of loss, of what it once was and the eschatological aura of what it could have been had it not been wrinkled and gashed with the traumas of exile. These existential lacerations give it its form, its gait and define 'the spatiality of one's body and motility' (2002: 112).

But with these wounds come an inarticulate language and the epitome of being inarticulate as a migrant is, actually, articulation. What I am denoting here is a sense of grappling with the inexplicable, the indescribable, sedimented histories that cannot be memorialized on plaques. These narratives such as when I found out my father was an ardent communist distributing pamphlets extolling the virtues of the lionized leader Gamal Nasser until this ideological veneer shattered emphatically with the 1967 Arab defeat (naksa) at the hands of the Israelis. Now my father devotes his political fervor towards a disciplined religiosity which I am humbled to just merely observe. Hence, what can be seen as a stutter in speech or mispronunciation is actually a doubling of thoughts, ideas, senses and perceptions as the mother tongue becomes split in multiple derivatives, creating its own little anachronisms that become jokes or common parlance within the familial space. English becomes Arabized in a bastardised version and no matter how many times it will be corrected, as Merleau Ponty avers, 'anesthesia…does not do away with the phantom limb' (2002:88). This is pertinent as my father as an anesthetist has been trained to numb, to do away, and to dissolve pain in all of its manifestations in order to ensure comfort for the patient. But as I have argued via Merleau-Ponty and Castro, maybe solipsistically here, that the traces of pain remain residually lodged within the physical and psychic recesses of the body.

I ran with my paint blotched slippers being flung in the air as my calloused heels touched the squishiness of our perfectly mowed front lawn, Dad chasing after me in his car beeping persistently for questioning his authority earlier. Screaming at each other in Arabic with my sense of pride at an all-time high for using swearwords I had never dared to use in front of my parents until then. Time being held still with the annoyingly high pitched wailing prayers of my mother and tears of my sister to stop our patriarchal pettiness and after we had resolved our differences we kissed and hugged. He had been abused and humiliated in his profession and powerless to swear, to curse, to unleash that fury of years of accepting that fallacious equation that migrants are supposed to conform to some illusory status quo. And he wanted me to say what he couldn't, no actually, what he didn't want to say. His generation had learned to normalise pain while mine went out in streets, alleyways, bridges and squares to confront tyranny be it of regimes or of distance from homelands. He still fears for my safety and advises me not to go back to Egypt to search for some fetishised spiritual solace that confirms my identity etc. but at least he understands and that's all I want.

Farid Farid, 2011

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Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). [1945]. *The phenomenology of perception* (translated by C. Smith). London: Routledge.

Farid Farid is final year doctoral candidate at the University of Western Sydney and freelance writer. He has been published in many journals including Art Link, Real Time Arts, Al Jazeera English and Le Monde Diplomatique.

ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognised and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.[1]

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity could easily be an article of faith in a society that wholeheartedly embraces cultural pluralism as a fundamental principle. Rather, it seems we have to sign up to conventions and declarations to remind dominant elites of all tints and shades that they must respect and nurture diversity as a matter of policy. The idea of affirming cultural diversity as the 'common heritage of humanity' is especially poignant in the Australian context given the polysemy in which the term multiculturalism has travelled.

When I think about the generations of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and exiles that have been part of the struggle to assert identities and maintain and develop cultural traditions, beliefs, practices, rituals and expressions on their own terms, I think of the blood spilt and the flayed debates, and ululate in the triumph that is inscrutable difference.

For the first generation, experiences of loss, dislocation and translocation can be both fraught and emancipatory given the prism of experience. For the second and third, experiences of turbulence and loss may be distant enough, but losing language and a sense of place can be as heartfelt down the tunnel of assimilation. In reflecting on my own cultural dislocation, imagining how my grandparents and parents negotiated and navigated their way to being without having to swallow themselves, I feel a sense of responsibility to remember as a gesture to those who experienced hostility, antipathy and aversive treatment at the hands of the monocultural warrior.

As an embodied theme, *Generations* is idiomatic of how we have come to understand identity, place, politics and belonging in all its inherent complexities; how we have come to express otherness, resistance culture and difference in and out of the interstices. But who do we speak to and for? And why do we continue to concern ourselves with the insolence of dialogical aesthetics?[2]

After decades of postcolonial theory and contested debate around culture and identity, critical art theorist Jean Fisher affirms that, for the diasporan subject dislocated from his or her place of origin, and the indigenous person dispossessed by colonial occupation, hard-won citizenship rights often do not imply cultural belonging to national identity or the prevailing symbolic order; cultural identity is often imposed by forces outside the self, and the psychosocial dimensions of identification are fraught with ambivalence and contradiction. Roots are already rhizomatic and multilingual; the self is already doubly or even multiply inscribed with the other. 'Here' is also 'elsewhere'.[3]

And so, the conscious artist parsed into difference will always concern herself /himself with a globalised sociopolitical sphere. In this chronicle of *Generations*, an investigation into being other (and not), as well as the spatial, is being staged in an age of transnational affiliations; an age where the rhizomatic artist is ever more necessary. A vibrant tapestry of visions, ideas, assertions and questions mark out a narrative complication that speaks to me of critical autonomy. Multi-vocality is inhered in the works as is subjective agency in both contexts of production and reception. Visual sovereignty, self-representation and spatial disjunctures create new epistemologies that work towards a more critical engagement with difference. In some works, the politics is inscribed in the very aesthetic. From the sublime to the picturesque, the works drip with an avowed self-assurance. It is in this polyverse that the eclecticism of vernacular practice is able to capture the infinite possibilities of unsettling difference.

Haitian scholar Myriam Chancy asks:
'How do we reclaim ourselves … without a firm presence in the very circles that keep us perpetually on their peripheries, looking in? … How do we affirm our existence, even in those margins, without a language of our own making, especially when language has become an arena of perpetual struggle for so many of us who have had to function with imposed, European language as a result of colonisation and displacement?'[4]

This exhibition lucidly responds to Chancy's questions with the poetics of imagery and a visual lexicon grounded in all our grim histories and evocative stories. From dispossession and deprivation, to dislocation, diffusion and dissipation, 'we can know the world only through our engagement with it'.[5] And so, as we continue to exclude and detain, I read the works of *Generations* through an historical lens with a view to despair as we disenfranchise and traumatise new generations with our border panic disorders and racial paranoias. What tableaux will the children and grandchildren of today's Tamil, Iranian, Arab and Afghan asylum seekers create for the galleries of our future? How will we read (and respond to) these works? With the same dispassion that plagues our present, perhaps the next generations will hold us all to account via their artistic will to power..

Paula Abood, 2011

1 Article 1 of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation at its thirty-first session on 2 November 2001. http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/diversity.pdf Accessed 2 November 2011.

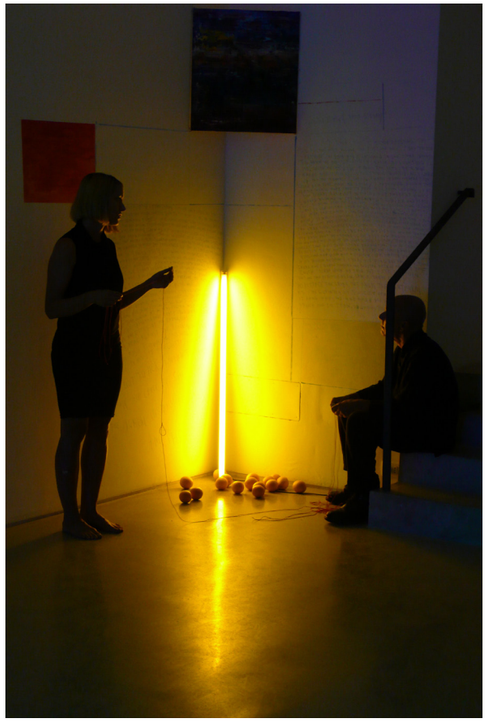
2 Kester, G. 'Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art', quoted in J. Fisher's 'Where Here is Elsewhere' in Boullata, K. (ed) Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture, Saqi London 2008. p. 61.

3 Fisher, J. 'Where Here Is Elsewhere', in K. Boullata (ed.) Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture, Saqi London 2008. p. 62.

4 Chancy, M.J.A. Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile, Temple University Press Philadelphia 1997 p.7.

5 Ibid., p. 65

Paula Abood is a community cultural development worker, writer and educator and has worked with culturally diverse communities over the past 24 years. She has written for performance, radio, publications and film and was awarded a Western Sydney Artists' Fellowship in 2007 for the blogging project *Race and the City*.



Forestories, British School at Rome, September 2011. Photographer Jacopo Benci

SAM BURKE & DOMENICO DE CLARIO

The curatorial premise for the *Generations* project focuses on encouraging invited artists to investigate and then respond to how the experience of migration (dislocation and assimilation) has impacted on their sense of identity. It further suggests that for first generation migrants the process of negotiating through an unfamiliar culture as a response/survival mechanism inevitably leaves an indelible mark, whereas second generation migrants have usually been positioned between their parents' culture and that of their birthplace. This dynamic also results in a significant impact, though of a different kind, on one's sense of identity. But what about the experiences of those who have grown up in families of third, fourth and fifth generation migrants? What might their responses be to confronting perhaps subtler aspects of cultural dislocation? How do such finely grained cultural sedimentations find their way through to manifestation and are they any less defining? Sam Burke is a fourth generation descendant of Irish, French and English heritage and Domenico de Clario is a first generation migrant from Italy. Their collaborative work for this project engages with both vastly differing degrees of cultural dislocation as well as with significant generational differences.

Gates No.2, 2011, Lambda print, 100 x 150cm

MUZI LI

In my experience of living in both Australia and China I feel I am often in a transitory position between two cultures. I explore this through imagery and different materials in my artwork.

Beijing is a photographic series that was developed in Beijing at the time my childhood home was being demolished under the government's 'urban demolition plan'. This series acts as a diary expressing the complex sentiment I have between embracing the new and letting go of the old. Beyond the physical disappearance of the old, the traditional lifestyle we have passed on from generation to generation, which I treasure the most, is fading. The sense of dislocation I experienced in Australia is different to the dislocation I feel in China: one is the struggle to assimilate into a foreign culture and another is the re-adaptation to a rapidly changing culture in which I was born. Whilst watching everything disappear surprisingly rapidly during the demolition process, I obsessively documented every remaining piece of architecture in the neighborhood in an attempt to capture their transiently existing moments. As an insignificant part of many ongoing demolition/urbanisation projects in the ever-changing urban landscape of China, these images are merged together, presenting the unified yet unpredictable appearances of the capital city in mass transformation. The images are meant as metaphors of the dilemma of my existence. They pursue the sense of belonging that is hanging in limbo.

In Australia, everyone has access to a barbacue, 2010, paper. 23 x 28cm

PAMELA MEI-LENG SEE

Dependable. The *Dependable* series of paper-cuts evolved out a broader body of artwork about how our contemporary lifestyles are sustained by oil. In 2009, I examined the link between the rise of the American muscle car and conflict in the Middle East. This was through a collaboration with Brooklyn based painter, Kevin Cyr.

In 2010-11, I wanted to bring this series home. The images in the *Dependable* series are vignettes of everyday life in Australia. They were inspired by friends and family who had either immigrated to Australia or expressed a desire to do so. I used these comments to title some of the artworks. For example: In Australia, you can keep a dog as a pet. In Australia, you can let your children out to play. In Australia, everyone has access to a barbecue. My father is a great source for this material. He arrived in Australia in his late teens for his secondary and tertiary education. He was sent here by his father with the expectation he return to Malaysia to run the family business. He refused, citing that our country provided a better environment for raising a family. His father, my grandfather, also migrated a vast distance in search of favourable conditions to raise a family. At the age of 15, he walked out of his village in Fujian Province with only his trousers. At this time (late 1920s / early 1930s) China was in conflict.

When I discovered that I was pregnant, I was renting a small room above a gallery in Beijing. Several adjacent villages occupied by migrant workers had just been demolished. Subsequently, new accommodation was being erected in haste. I regularly walked past families living and working in rooms as small as 3sqm. Dogs frequented the streets.

I found myself considering the sort of place I would like to raise our daughter.

Bearded Male 5, 2011, charcoal & pastel on Hahnemuhle paper, 107.5(h) x 78.5cm(w)
Ho Chi Minh prison poem 'Autumn Night' translated by Kenneth Rexroth
Courtesy NG Art Gallery, Sydney NSW

MAI NGUYEN-LONG

Drift. A spirit net breaks. All things float. Then it happens again, again, and again. Through dungeons of self-loathing one grapples for a bridge: between the magical and the brutal, guardian angels and demi-demons. Bubbles of joy are random dots in an ethereal space populated by snips of wandering souls. Values form goals that direct the living: children, family, friends, communities. 'drift' is a home, an other-worldliness searching for empathy and acceptance beyond life's inevitable rifts and ripples. Within these colours, lines, and forms, I am mapping a space for playing, loving, sharing, living, forgiving, and perhaps happiness.

Obscure and merging entities float in and out: a gecko-dog, a koi carp-dog appear, reappear. Small dogs sport mimicry team colours. Multiple identities, confused selves: dog-human duos, mask-like faces. A bearded male 'of Asian appearance' hosts poetry, distorts, and contorts. Totemic cylinders - hiding laundry baskets and rubbish bins – surrender haloed and circus-like linga-yonic life ledgers, embodying the indivisible two-in-oneness of oppositional principles. Each holds secrets within, some obvious, others less widely celebrated. All things borrowed nothing new. There is never one version of anything (or is there?).
The inner cog could turn in any direction. Yet it craves anchorage.

In a dream for an all-connecting universe the heart embraces the oceans, the land and sky, the blood of all others, blackness. In a plea edit out but betray not yourself, move in and out of confronting spaces - unscathed. Transform a disabling drift into an enabling shift. Nothing is whole. Signs and symbols acquire double meanings: a crying out to decipher and order personal, political and historical fragments. An unstoppable will to be functionally connected: to fill the empty spaces, to compound more and more bubbles of joy…to stay drift.

Up in the air, 2010, Ink Jet print, 90 x 120cm

JOANNE SAAD

Freedom or Fashion? Like a revolving door, for four decades now, the Palestinian Kuffiyeh (black & white traditional scarf) had made many entries and exits into the political aesthetic scene on the margin of political events. The Kuffiyeh politics of appearance in the late 60s declared the presence of a whole people and signaled their entry into the political scene.

The latest coming of the Kuffiyeh seems to belong to a different category of politics all together. My work investigates, while referencing the early period this latest eruption of the Palestinian Kuffiyeh into the cosmopolitan global space in a combination that seems to bring the culture of brands and the practice of disaster capitalism together.

To me, the Kuffiyeh today is about style as a site in which complex 'relations between appearance, recognition and identification' intermix within a framework of recognition that contributes to shaping of the youth sensibility and identity. How to make money out of misery project eludes to Naomi Klein's proposition about the impact of the market on our sensibilities to examine the current significance of the Kuffiyeh.

This work focuses on the presence of Kuffiyeh in cosmopolitan spaces like the streets of Sydney. Using photography to question and define cultural identites. By wearing a traditional Palestinian scarf what does this symbolises to the wider community? Does Che Guevara still live in the revolutionist's heart? or is he just on a $10 t-shirt? Aesthetics vs politics and what are we identifying with?

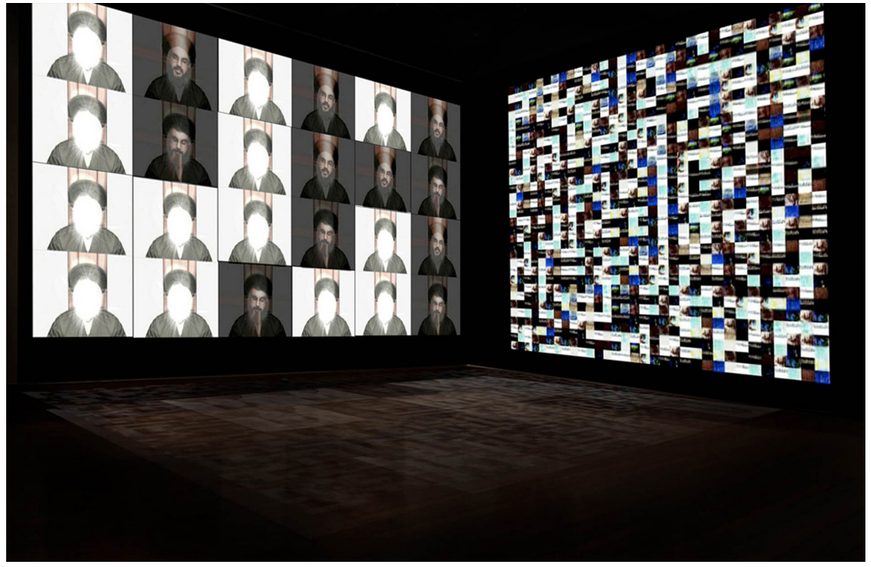
KHALED SABSABI

Khaled Sabsabi arrived in Australia from Tripoli in 1978. Due to civil war breaking out in Lebanon, his parents decided to emigrate permanently, settling in Western Sydney. While 'Lebanon was in our hearts, the family realised it was important to establish a new life in a new country'. It's not surprising then, that the artist focuses on socio-political contexts: he has worked with numerous suburban communities, developing art programs and projects that explore the complexities of place / displacement, identity experiences and ideological differences. 'The dual identities that develop through the migrant experience can create anxiety and uncertainty, but they can also generate awareness: 'Going between Arab culture and Western / Australian culture, you have the ability to experience and to analyse both cultures, both traditions, both histories'.

The artist began his creative life as a hip-hop performer; has produced sound art, immersive installations and theatre pieces.

As a video artist, he continues to work across borders of discipline, nationality and culture to create artworks that challenge the passive consumption of media spectacle. The aim of his critiques of global mass media is to bring the individual back into the picture and to ensure that viewers take responsibility for the sense they make or take from what they're seeing.

About our propensity for violence the artist comments: 'We're told that it's in our genes, or it's human nature that we love violence and we will always fight to advance ourselves. If you accept that, then that's all you will have. I want people to comment about my work, regardless whether it is a negative or positive comment; I also want people to engage with the work even if it is interpreted as controversial. Personally these statements (works) need to be addressed if we (the people) are to truly comprehend cultural opinions, traditions and diversity'.



You, 2007, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2 channel digital video, sound, 9:59 minutes, Museum of Contemporary Art, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by the artist, 2009. Image courtesy the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. © the artist

Left: *waxing*, 2011, wooden saw handle, metal paint can lid, paint, 30 x 17 x 2.5cm
Right: *not on a waning moon #5*, 2011, metal & wooden spade handle, metal paint can lid, paint, 26 x 17 x 4cm
Photography by Michal Kluvanek

LEE SALOMONE

I was fortunate to be pre-schooled by my Italian grandparents. This crèche specialised in teaching rural Italian knowledge and practices. These traditions have been a life-long source of inspiration.

I have had an attraction to moon cycles ever since childhood, when I noticed that our family planned certain activities around different phases of the moon. Seedlings were planted on a waxing moon, pruning occurred on a waning moon; even our wine production was governed by the lunar cycle. As a child, I took it as a given. As an adolescent I dismissed it as peasant Italian practices. Science has proven that the moon's gravitational force does affect the flow of moisture in soil and in plants. Science has also proven that the activity of positive and negative ions in the atmosphere does vary according to moon phases.

My sculptural works for *Generations* at Wollongong City Gallery reference human activities based around the different phases of the moon. They are signposts that reference the reality that life on our planet is lunar and solar 'powered'. They allude to the sometimes forgotten fact…..that we are all embedded in these cyclical processes of nature and that everything is interconnected….especially the past.

MY LE THI

Forgotten Languages and the Living Generations. During my childhood in the Central Highlands of Vietnam my mother and I lived in a town where the common language was Vietnamese. She knew little Vietnamese however, and spoke with me in a mixture of her mother tongue, an ethnic minority language called Fong Seng, and the local minority language, Ede. She passed away when I was ten, and to support myself I had to forego school and take on her jobs, housekeeping and running a fish shop full time for a Tieu Chau man from China. I was now speaking Vietnamese and Cantonese, not using my mother's languages, as no-one else spoke them to me, and I also taught myself Mandarin.

Migrating later to Australia, I learned the language of my adopted country, English, and forced myself to think in it. Twenty years on I revisited Vietnam, and found I could hardly converse in Ede or Fong Seng with the local people: I had lost my mother's languages. Meanwhile my son, being brought up in Australia, lost my own languages, Vietnamese and Mandarin, and himself has young children who have been taught mainly in English with some Czech and Vietnamese.

These experiences have shown me that the gaps between generations are deepened by the loss of languages. If we teach children the languages of their parents, can we hope that it may be one way to bridge the gaps between our living generations?

All the languages I have learnt including English were mostly self-taught. As a result it is not always easy for me to communicate my feelings and ideas in words and I turn to art as a medium to express them. Through art I seek to convey to my viewers the common ground which I believe people everywhere from all walks of life have, and the shared experiences of their struggles, tribulations, joys and hopes.

Forgotten Languages and the Living Generations, 2011, acrylic on canvas and straw, Vietnamese hats on bamboo stick

Untitled, 2008, wood, mirror, 676 x 100 cm. Collection of the artist, photo M Kluvanek. Courtesy Greenaway Art Gallery Adelaide

HOSSEIN VALAMANESH

It is important to consider why people migrate and I'm sure there are many different reasons and circumstances. In my own case it was a choice I made when I was 23 years old in 1973. I decided to come to be with a friend who had immigrated here earlier.

I had the option of staying or returning which made it easier for me to adjust to my new home. I was able to look at my cultural background and embrace my new home and wanted to share these memories and new experiences with my audience.

For this exhibition I chose three works. *Learning to Read*, 1995, was inspired by my first year primary school textbook. It is a collection of forty framed images, twenty of which are watercolours of objects and other things. They are reproduced and enlarged from the illustrations in the original book. I recall how much I was attracted to these images and my interest in painting them and probably not learning the spelling of the words. The corresponding twenty frames of black paper cutouts all spell out the word 'nothing' in Farsi. Maybe I am acknowledging or suggesting that I have learned nothing!

The Runner, 1999, as its title suggests, is about the passageway or the paths we tread. A Persian carpet, or 'runner', is rolled up and inaccessible to viewers. However, on the wall there are five other 'runners' exactly the same size, two of red earth and three of lotus leaves, alluding to other paths I have walked on.

I chose these works because of their specific connections to my cultural background but the third work, *Untitled*, 2008, was selected in response to the gallery space. It is a simple work that plays with ideas of illusion and impossibilities, questioning the notion of the journey, its beginnings and its possible ending.

Photographic still 1 from *Distant Words*, 2011, HD video

NASSIEM VALAMANESH

Distant Words was photographed while travelling through Iran with my father and mother. Travelling to the place where my father had grown up was a trip long overdue. For me Iran seemed like a mythical place, I had grown up hearing my father and other relatives telling stories about it with a mixture of pride and regret. I never learnt to speak Farsi and arriving in Tehran this shocked a lot of people. To me it was a language of nostalgia, a language used to describe events of the past. In my youth I had no Farsi speaking friends so the language was lost to me. Thus my experience in Iran was constrained by language and this shaped a story that became *Distant Words*.

There were other constraints, political ones, that could be sensed when talking to people who lived there and I felt these troubles outweighed my own so the narrative in *Distant Words* attempts to reflect both these obstacles.

Combing photography, text and animation has always excited me and I am constantly astounded at what can be achieved when strong images and basic compositing effects merge. The process used in *Distant Words* to me feels quite organic. Scenes, words, cut-out images and ideas are swapped around like a puzzle until a fit is found and the work feels effortless. The side effect of this haphazard method is a spontaneous energy that hopefully excites and engages the viewer, drawing them into the story but allowing them to come to their own conclusions. *Distant Words* continues my engagement with themes of longing and loneliness, on this occasion the yearning or search is not for a loved one or a place but for the ability to communicate and speak one's mind.

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