

REFUGE

November 19 – December 12

Alex Seton, Amy Spiers, Friends With Deficits, Katie Green and collaborators, artists from The Refugee Art Project, Thiru, Matt Huynh, Nam Le and SBS, Tim Gregory, Safdar Ahmed and Zanny Begg with contributions from Zeina laali and Bossley Park High Students, Mansoor Gulzari, Parastoo Bahrami, Neda Bahrami, Farnaz Yegan, Kamaleshwaran Selladurai, Mohammad, Bashir, Madina, Daminda and Tabarak (some names have been changed to protect the security of participants).

Curated by Siân McIntyre

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Fri Nov 27 :: If You Come To Australia – live performance fundraiser \$15

Sat Nov 28 :: Panel – Art as Action – Free

Thurs Dec 3 :: A Strange Invitation to Compassion – live music fundraiser – \$5/\$10

Sat Dec 5 :: Double Vision – experimental and DIY live music – Free

Tue Dec 8 :: Afternoon social and Refugee Art Project Zine Launch! – Free!

Sat Dec 12 :: Earlwood Farm Presents – Christmas Climate Change Variety Hour - \$5

Visit verge-gallery.net for more info

REFUGE comments on the basic human need for safety and security, free from the threat of violence and persecution. Bringing together artists from a range of backgrounds, Refuge aims to broaden the dialogue around current Australian policy with works by refugee artists, non-refugee artists and collaborative works between refugee and non-refugee artists. Here, dialogue isn't limited to one sector of society, but is the responsibility of all to actively engage in conversation and action. Accompanying this diverse range of voices and conversations is the opportunity to learn, hear and act via live performance, panel discussions and social mixers. Through these events Refuge will create an active platform of consciousness, a safe space for inquiry, learning and collaboration at Verge Gallery.

Works listed clockwise from left of door ::

Matt Huynh, Nam Le and SBS, *The Boat*. Online graphic novel, 2015. (also shown in front window)

The Boat, presented by SBS to commemorate 40 years since the fall of Saigon, tells the story of 16-year-old Mai, whose parents make the decision to send her to Australia alone on a boat. Mai's story acts as a lens through which the project explores the political and historical narratives that decisively shaped the nation's Vietnamese community.

In 1975 there were only 700 Vietnamese living in Australia, and public opinion was against accepting the so called 'boat people'. It was only when the scale of the humanitarian crisis was internationally known in the late 1970s that the government would lead public opinion and dramatically increase Australia's refugee intake. The epic and tragic story resonates with that of author Nam Le's own family and that of illustrator Matt Huynh whose parents left Vietnam for Australia in the years following the fall of Saigon.

SBS.

Undrawing The Line, Zanny Begg and Safdar Ahmed with contributions from Zeina Iaali and Bossley Park High Students, Mansoor Gulzari, Parastoo Bahrami, Neda Bahrami, Farnaz Yegan, Kamaleshwaran Selladurai, Mohammad, Bashir, Madina, Daminda and Tabarak (some names have been changed to protect the security of participants). *The Chant of Nudimmud*, Large banner with 3D glasses. 2015.

In *The Chant of Nudimmud* Undrawing the Line draw inspiration from an ancient Sumarian myth that is one of the earliest known discussion of cultural difference. This over 2000 year old text has been interpreted many ways but appears to describe a pre-biblical version of the story of the Tower of Babel with an important difference – multiple languages come as a gift to humanity, that might save them from the rising flood, rather than as a punishment for their pride. In this project Undrawing the Line seek to explore the potentiality of cultural difference and cross border exchanges in the face of rising sea levels and climate change.

Undrawing the Line was formed by four people who come from refugee and non-refugee backgrounds – Mona Moradveisi, Safdar Ahmed, Zanny Begg and Murtaza Ali Jafari – to challenge the binary between citizen and non-citizen that frames current thinking about borders.

Undrawing The Line.

Reading area: *The Refugee Art Project Zines*. \$8 for black and white zines, \$10 for colour zines.

Since late 2010 the Refugee Art Project has provided regular art workshops for asylum seekers and refugees in the Villawood detention centre and for women of a refugee background in Parramatta, Western Sydney. We are a non-profit community art organization that supports the creativity and self-expression of refugees, who are commonly marginalised and excluded from the public discourse. With the art from our workshops we hold public exhibitions, share it online and self-publish zines, of which we've made ten to date. The work conveys the personality, resilience and agency of refugees who are frequently locked up in indefinite detention, or who experience the limbo of community detention. Our organization seeks to challenge public misconceptions around the refugee issue, activating art in the struggle for social justice. Refugee Art Project have created 10 self-published zines to date, comprised of artwork, comics, poetry and the oral testimony of refugees and asylum seekers within detention and in the Western Sydney community.

Refugee Art Project zine #8 is dedicated to the work of Fakhruddin Rajai, a young Hazara Afghan artist and refugee. The zine tells Fakhruddin's story, in his own words, which gives context and meaning to his artwork.

Refugee Art Project zine #9 features the artwork of Mona Moradveisi, a young woman from Iran who is a regular participant in the Refugee Art Project women's art workshop in Parramatta.

Refugee Art Project zine #10 Mr Man in the Garden is a children's book which was conceived and painted mostly by children of a refugee background at the women's art workshop in Parramatta. It was conceived and painted by the sisters, Parastoo, Neda and Maryam Bahrami, Madina and her mother Yalda Sayer and the facilitators, Safdar Ahmed, Susan Nelson and Anjali Vishwanathan.

Safdar Ahmed.

These zines will be launched from 3-6pm on Tuesday December 8 as a part of our afternoon tea public program.

Thiru, *Untitled* (reading area), *Civilian Massacre, Field Hospital, Untitled* (three on main wall), *Bombardment* (front window), Acrylic on canvas.

These paintings were made by a Tamil refugee within the Villawood detention centre. They depict the war of 2009, in which Sri Lanka's national army waged a massive military offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).

Between September 2008 and May 2009, the Sri Lanka Army attacked the northern parts of the country, using large-scale shelling against civilians. A former UN official estimated that up to 40,000 civilians were killed in the final stages of the war. Up to 250,000 people were then herded into detention camps administered by the regime, where they were screened and 'rehabilitated', though many were tortured and disappeared. The Sri Lankan Government has sought to intimidate and silence the media and other critics of the war. Many independent journalists have been killed or abducted in white vans. The government has rejected calls for an international investigation into war crimes.

So how has Australia responded?

In the name of 'stopping the boats', Australia has given military vessels to the Sri Lankan Navy to prevent the departure of people who are trying to escape. Our government has also employed a former Sri Lankan military officer to oversee the interment of Tamil asylum seekers on Manus Island. Most shamefully, Australia has failed to support the United Nations Human Rights Council's decision to initiate an independent investigation into war crimes and human rights abuses in Sri Lanka.

The Refugee Art Project.

Friends with Deficits (Maria White, Amelia Wallin and Lisa Mumford), *Wish You Were Here*, two channel video installation. 2015.

Wish You Were Here investigates the paradoxical images of an island as either prison or paradise through an embodied conversation across distance.

Two performers attempt to conduct a conversation with each other. As the performers repeatedly fail to understand each other, the experience of isolation becomes apparent.

The performers are standing with distance and water between them. They must attempt to bridge this distance and isolation using the language of semaphore. The text that is communicated has been developed from letters from people in detention and tropes of islands as paradise.

This work was developed for, and supported by Underbelly Arts 2015 and could not have been achieved without the filming and editing genius of Tessa Rex, the Best Boy Chris Moore, the wonderful Siân McIntyre and Maia Patch-Sinclair. Thank you.

Friends With Deficits.

Alex Seton, *Stop Your Vessel*, 2015. Bianco carrara and portoro, 120 x 20 x 5 cm

***Anchor* 2015. Bronze and Bianco cararra 23 x 23 x 35 cm.**

With *Stop Your Vessel* and *Anchor*, Seton recontextualises the familiar shapes of a paddle and an anchor. Intricately carved in fine marble, they speak of time and labour, but also of luxury and privilege. Perhaps associated with pleasure and adventure, these objects become stark and cold when presented away from a body of water. In this sterile gallery environment they also speak of those who do not have luxury and privilege, of those for whom a paddle and an anchor do not speak of a pleasant Sunday afternoon. Instead these objects may represent a dream of safety and security, and the reality of immense danger and sacrifice. Slicing through the black and gold portoro and white and grey bianco carrara is a triangle and a square. Used in international signalling flags, these two shapes spell S O meaning 'stop your vessel' echoing our governments deadly catch cry. With these works Seton is calling to action, encouraging the viewer to take a paddle and use it to help, to save. To take an anchor and provide someone in need with the security and stability that it provides. To share what we have and to remember those who are not so fortunate.

Siân McIntyre.

Tim Gregory, *Manus Island Asylum Seeker Swallows Razor Blades*, 2015. Cotton on linen, 60x60cm. The work examines the various forms of state violence that remain central to the construction and maintenance of Australian society. Keeping this violence invisible ensures the sanctity of the community that is formed by it. The work attempts to expose the moral challenges involved in the construction of our identity as Australian. Australians' are often praised from their innovation, however it is important that this innovation is placed within the context of historical and present injustices that still require urgent attention. The medium of tapestry (a traditional and gendered, private medium) is used to highlight the multiple ideologies which converge to produce these situations of disproportionate death and suffering. The legacy of 19th century nationalism combined with 20th century universalism and 21st century global capitalism produces instances in which the realities of commerce, corporeality and identity collide often with tragic consequences for the most disenfranchised. How we navigate the complexity of the future is reliant on the ongoing process of making visible the sublimated tensions and prejudices of the present.

Tim Gregory.

Amy Spiers, *Wait Until Called*, documentation from installation performance and essay, 2015. Image courtesy Underbelly Arts Festival 2015. Photography: Gabriel Clark. Please see essay by Amy on wall.

Katie Green and collaborators, *If You Come To Australia*, installation/ stage/ setting, video, sound. 2015. The installation presented as *If You Come To Australia* will act as stage for a verbatim play that was created with the content from interviews between Katie Green and five asylum seekers who have been released into the community. Here, in the installation draped with Australian flags, you can hear edits from the original interviews. These disembodied voices speak about their past, their homes, fleeing their countries and their journey and settlement in Australia. The voices give firsthand accounts of the experience of seeking refuge in Australia, providing an opportunity to hear the personal narratives behind the headlines, beyond the rhetoric. Displayed with screen shots of Sydney Harbour and Christmas Island and positioned on flag covered lecterns showing the names of each interviewee, these recordings act as the unheard testimonies of people who have been vilified and ignored by Australian politicians. Audience members are invited to approach the lectern, to listen to their stories, and to reflect on the experiences that lead to, and follow from, seeking asylum in Australia.

Slán McIntyre.

If You Come To Australia will be performed live on Fri Nov 27 from 7-9pm. RSVP- email vegeassistant@usu.edu.au.

Alex Seton is represented by Sullivan and Strumpf Gallery Sydney.
Wish You Were Here by Friends With Deficits was developed for and supported by Underbelly Arts 2015. All funds raised will be going to Asylum Seeker Centre and Red Cross Settlement Services.



VERGE GALLERY

