

Chrissie Cotter Gallery  
17-26 June 2016



# new beginnings

REFUGEE ARTS & CULTURE FESTIVAL  
ART EXHIBITION 2016

**An exhibition by artists from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds to celebrate Refugee Week 2016**

SSI's Arts & Culture Program Coordinator Carolina Triana presented me with the unique opportunity of mentoring a group of culturally and linguistically diverse artists with powerful stories of seeking refuge in a new country. The challenge was to embrace their knowledge and to provide them with the technical and ideation skills to bring their journeys to art. These poignant messages concerning their heritage and endeavours to begin a new life while dealing with the loss of family, friends, neighbourhood and cultural networks were key.

Together we overcame language and cultural barriers to share a visual dialogue. The artists worked diligently over the 10 sessions, rarely stopping for breaks as they grasped and employed historical oil painting

techniques, compositional elements, allegory, colour symbolism and iconography. Week by week, I critiqued their art works, encouraging them to draw on their heritage and culture, and demonstrating the use of allegory as a tool to communicate a symbolically deeper meaning, whether spiritual, ethical or political.

The students were encouraged to engage in vigorous discourse concerning the significance of the semiotics they were sourcing. The inspirational 'elements' of poetry, music and master works of cultural significance were the springboard for creativity and healing.

During the exhibition, viewers will have the opportunity to discover the depth of the artists' insights into the emotional complexity of seeking refuge. The artworks

speak to: developing a foothold and strong foundation; planting a new life; strengthening their roots in new soil; freedom from persecution for religious, sexual orientation or political affiliation; bringing value to our Australian community; and being welcomed at the dinner table.

My personal objective as mentor and curator is to encourage empathy and critical reflection. Through art I inspire the hope that change is possible with individual action and the strength of a collective voice.

Let's celebrate the significance of exhibitions like 'New Beginnings' not only to move and challenge us but also to reveal the cultural bonds that unite us.

**Miriam Luz Cabello,**  
Curator

**Exhibiting artists: Mohammed Alanezi, Mohanad Al Ghezi, Sefullah (Amir) Akbari, Damon Amb, Atefeh Hekmat, Babak Jahangirzadeh, Mersedeh Karimifar, Van Am Nguyen, Victor Youssef.**



**1** *Tree of (my) life*  
**Mohammed Alanezi**

Photography, digital print on canvas  
122x85cm

The tree of life is a universal symbol of continuity. I chose this symbol to represent my intention to continue my life regardless of the struggles I have faced until this point. Also our mother Mary gave birth to prophet Jesus under a tree. Coming to this country I feel like I have a second chance at life whilst recognising my roots and my ancestors.

The tree also represents the way nature continues its cycles. Just like human life is passed on from parents to children, nature renews itself season after season. Each season leaves its mark on the tree the way age shows itself through the lines on the face of the elderly. Time bends our backs and winds shake branches. The tree of (my) life is a promise of nothing being lost.



**2** *Racing for Hope*  
**Mohanad Al Ghezi**

Oil on canvas  
100x150cm

My work is full of symbolism. On the top left, I quote an Iraqi sculpture\* that reminds me of my past and hope for a new life. The horses race towards freedom as I turn the page to a new life in Australia, represented by the Aboriginal Australian motifs in my painting.

\* The El Haria (Liberty) Monument by Jawad Selim in Baghdad's Tahrir Square is today one of the city's most iconic landmarks and has overlooked many dramatic scenes during the republic's turbulent history. The frieze, which blends neo-classical design with modernist flair, comprises 25 human figures together with a horse and a bull, cast in bronze and welded together against a marble background. Iraq's Modernist monument commemorates the 14 July 1958 revolution.



**3** *The Silent Room*  
**Sefullah (Amir) Akbari**

Oil on canvas  
92x122cm

My painting represents the last meal that I had with my family back in my country. I don't have them now with me, so I've painted myself there alone. My new life is good but those empty chairs remind me of my family and my country. The big vases represent the Persian culture. I tried to paint it, inspired by the great impressionists. They inspire me and encourage me to keep painting.



**4** *Mirage*  
**Damon Amb**

Photography, digital print on canvas  
45x60cm

Half-life, half-light  
I watch the vapours of forms  
Through a screen of dark mirrors  
Distortions  
Untrodden paths  
Hopes dashed

My life, I can see things in front of me  
They will disappear before I gain them  
Phantoms  
Smoke screens  
Wrong turns

Half-life, half-light  
I hold my breath under water  
Bathed in darkness  
I wait  
Uncertain



**5** *Stillbirth*  
**Damon Amb**

Photography, digital print on canvas  
80x60cm

I'm happy that I died  
Before I cried  
I am the untapped potential  
Of a life unlived, miscarried

You remain in the ideal  
A perfect child, a pure idea  
Preserved in glass and time  
I place you on my windowsill

And watch nature take its green course  
The unrealised seed pushing on its cage  
Of watery memories submerged in time  
I met you here and here you remain.



**6** *Scatched Words*  
**Damon Amb**

Oil on canvas  
101x76cm

In this work, "Scatched Words" I became fascinated with layering the surfaces of paint to reveal what lay beyond. I uncovered textures; I scratched through thick layers to reveal and disguise the surface, the hidden words. The painting technique became a metaphor for the many layers we need to negotiate as new arrivals, the memories and experiences carved deep in our psyche. I added lines from a poem by Iranian poet Shamloo. The words of this poem have a special significance to the refugee experience; they speak to the heart of our quest for freedom.

I've never been afraid of Death  
Though it's been more fragile than banality  
All the fear in me,  
Is dying in a land in which the wage of a gravedigger  
Is more than the human freedom  
I wish freedom could sing a serenade even smaller than a bird's larynx  
I wish I could cry every drop of my blood so that you believe me.  
AHMAD SHAMLOO



**7** *Freedom to believe*  
**Atefeh Hekmat**

Oil on canvas  
92x122cm

I chose Jesus as the subject matter of my painting because Jesus taught me about love to God and humanity. In Iran I wasn't able to freely profess my religion and I had to hide my beliefs. Being in Australia means that I can go freely to church, I can say freely what I believe in without fear of repercussion or punishment. Jesus means to me a better life because I feel calm. I'm not afraid because Jesus is with me every time.



**8** *Émigré*  
**Babak Jahangirzadeh**

Oil on canvas  
100x150cm

I wanted to show myself in my painting, when I came to Australia to begin a new life by coming by boat in a dangerous way. The life jacket means safe place. I just wanted to show I left everything in my previous life to make a new life like a new born.



9

**Safety**  
**Mersedeh Karimifar**

Oil on canvas  
76x101cm

In my painting the hands are Australia. The waratah is my life. The hands carrying the flower means my life is supported by Australia and I'm starting my new life in a safe place. Australia has protected me with kindnesses.



10

**Climate Change**  
**Van Am Nguyen**

Oil on canvas  
122x92cm

The earth, our planet, is under threat by humankind.

When I was in the detention centre I saw smoke flying overhead and I knew it was a bushfire. I wondered if anyone would do anything about it - our lives would be in serious danger if the situation became out of control. This thought is what inspired me to raise money to help the victims of bushfires. I want to do everything I can to raise awareness about this issue, including working for environment protection. Science has always been one of my interests when I was a student in Vietnam, and my concern about the environment remains unchanged.



11

**Lotus flower planted in a new land**  
**Victor Youssef**

Oil on canvas  
101x76cm

Migrating birds come out of the darkness into a new life and a new land.

The hot horizon links the Egyptian civilization with Uluru. The rich yellows and oranges represent the burning heat of the desert. This contrasts with the tranquil blues, turquoise, and emerald greens of the river.

The Egyptian Lotus flower seeds are planted in this new land. They blossom from the womb of Australian soil, giving birth to the sacred Blue Lotus. The flower most commonly depicted in Ancient Egyptian art symbols.

The hand is the Australian people sponsoring the new lotus flowers supported by the Red Cross & SSI.

The Egyptian blue lotus flower: With the scientific name of *Nymphaea caerulea*, is actually more accurately described as a water lily. These blooms sport light blue or purple petals and was one of the most important religious motifs, symbolising rebirth, and regeneration. The Pharaoh is often depicted holding the aromatic blue Lotus.

The New Beginnings art exhibition is a highlight event of the New Beginnings: Refugee Arts & Culture Festival 2016, an initiative of Settlement Services International's (SSI) Arts & Culture program.

Some of the exhibiting artists are supported by SSI's Ignite Small Business Start-ups initiative.

For artwork purchases or exhibition enquiries please contact  
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