



I just walk... every day walk
I walk to rest my head and my heart
- Usama

made in australia

An Exhibition about Power,
Compacency and Consequence
by Viv Méhes

Made in Australia uses photo narrative that gently draws on the inner resilience and dignity of asylum seekers to make a powerful statement about human rights in Australia

Exhibition Dates 16 June – 11 July, 2008
Location The Foyer, 1 Spring St, Melbourne
Opening Hours 7am – 6.30pm, Monday – Friday



Perpetual



Living Arts

VICTORIAN
multicultural
commission



Refugee Council
of Australia



above
River Walk 4 from the Staying Strong series
Archival Inkjet Print on Cotton Rag Paper
23.7 x 16cm
© Viv Méhes 2008



Note from the photographer

In late 2005, Anial, an asylum seeker from Sri Lanka, begged me to create another exhibition like Shadowland. I never thought it possible to work with asylum seekers using photography, they were just too vulnerable on Bridging Visa E, but the idea of offering anonymity and the chance to work closely with Hotham Mission made it possible. In fact, the absence of direct gaze and the blurring of the faces make the images more highly charged and disquieting.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to all those in the exhibition. It is a privilege to have walked together as you opened your hearts in the hope that others may see.

Made in Australia and Shadowland create a body of work that contributes to the national artistic response to seeking asylum in Australia between 2002 and 2008.

Stranded between Worlds

We walk in search of the calm between moments of panic. Shadow our movements. See the city through our eyes. The years are vanishing, our lives passing us by, and still we are walking. We cling to our routines. We urge ourselves to remain strong: to cook, clean, to look after our health, to stay alive.

Follow the river, walk its banks. The years are drifting; the water calms us for a while.

We come across strangers who stop and walk with us. 'Come, stay with us,' they say. 'We will make up a bed in the spare room.' We follow them to temporary havens, glad for their company, their smiles. Glad to have someone willing to walk alongside. In return we make offerings, a token of our thanks: a painting, a handcrafted box, a flower garden on a sliver of earth. We do not seek charity, but a chance to rebuild our lives. We want to work, to make our own way, to pay for our bed and board.

When boredom takes hold, and the panic returns, we resume our walk. As we move, we see what those who are free, no longer observe: the infinite space within open skies, the allure of a door slightly ajar, the outstretched wings of a bird in full flight, our reflection in a passing window, the fleeting warmth of a pedestrian brushing past. Our fate is echoed in the flutter of clothes hung out to dry.

We put on our makeup and polite smiles, and sit for hours in waiting rooms. We fill in forms. Endure interrogations. Tell our stories over and again. Then return to our temporary rooms and wait for the Minister's reply. When we are refused, we stumble, and fall; then gritting our teeth, we lift ourselves back to our feet and resume our walk. Again we instruct ourselves: Acquire new skills, a trade, a profession, exercise, make use of your time. We prepare for imagined futures, while our lives are on hold.

There are times when we no longer know reflection from reality, shadow from substance, distortion from clarity. We have told our story so many times, that we long to forget them. We have answered so many questions, we no longer know who we are. We want to reduce our convoluted pasts to the present moment, to the simple beat of our movement, to the tread of our feet on solid ground.

Yet, the interrogation is not over. The inquisitor is waiting. We must prove that we are not liars, repeat every detail. So yet again, this is the gist of our tale: We left with high hopes only to discover our saviour was a pimp. We crossed oceans only to learn that betrayal knows no bounds. We left in the dead of night, and are still searching for the dawn. We left for freedom only to find ourselves confined by waiting rooms and barbed walls. We left to find an end to uncertainty, but years later we continue to walk.

As the years pass by, we have acquired subtle skills, ways of becoming invisible. It requires a certain way of walking. We travel light. We keep well within the pavement and blend with passing shop fronts and homes. We know how to vanish in the spaces beneath bridges, how to slip through the narrow alleys between high walls. We step unnoticed into side streets, a warm foyer, a public gallery. We know the labyrinths of the city, the steps descending into subways. We know how to lose ourselves in the crowd.

We cling to our lifelines, telephones. Our voices travel back to our homelands, to ageing parents, the children we left behind. For a moment we are reunited, in touch with our former selves. But when the conversation ends we feel more bereft than before the call began. We realise anew that we are stateless, reduced to papers, documents, Bridging Visa E: A single letter marooned on a bridge, stranded between worlds. That is all that remains of who we once were. Without it, we are nothing, and with it, we are little more.

Come to know us, and you will see that we are of all ages, young and old, child and adult, alone or with family, ready to work, to offer our labour, our hard-won skills. Instead we wait. Between us there are many years of waiting. We have become adept at whittling the hours. We dare not look within. We prefer to stand at windows and look out, safe in the knowledge that we cannot be observed. We are drawn to backyards, invisible, free to revel in the company of friends, a moment of respite from our uncertain worlds.

Despite our efforts we remain fringe dwellers, on the outside looking in. We are at the mercy of the decisions of others. We are statistics in an annual report, a few of all-too many who pass the prime years of their lives stateless, dispossessed. Worldwide we number in the millions, confined to camps, gathered at borders, hiding in ditches, floundering in leaking tubs, answering endless questions asked by strangers in a warren of waiting rooms.

On the streets of this city, we are so few in numbers we can be dismissed, pushed aside. Next time you glimpse us follow us for a while. Come to know who we are. Come to see that we are the fate of your ancestors writ large. Come to see that we seek only what you take for granted as your birthright, the freedom to move over the bridge to secure homes, to lives of meaning, peopled with work, family and friends. Look into our eyes and see that we are your reflections, your brothers and sisters, separated only by the whims of history, the roll of a loaded dice.

Arnold Zable
May 2008

Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project

Since 1997, thousands of asylum seekers living lawfully in the Australian community have been denied the right to work, access to Medicare and welfare payments while waiting for a decision on their application for a protection or humanitarian visa. These restrictions have forced many men, women and children into situations of extreme poverty, homelessness, poor health and nutrition. Unfortunately many asylum seekers have lived for a number of years in circumstances of extreme poverty, uncertainty and dependence on charity, often facing multiple and mounting stress factors including post-traumatic stress, social isolation, depression, separation from family and deteriorating physical and mental health.

Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project provides housing, emergency financial relief, advocacy and specialist support for destitute asylum seeker families and single people living on bridging visas without any other source of income. Our work is funded by philanthropy, church and community donations.

Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project advocates for a model of asylum seeker reception policy in Australia that allows asylum seekers to live in safety, security and with dignity while their claims are assessed. Made in Australia reveals both the strength and vulnerability of people living on Bridging Visa E without work rights, Medicare and other supports. Weaving through the stories is hope for change that will lift the burden of extreme poverty and open the doors for asylum seekers to work and contribute to the nation that hosts them.

Caz Coleman
Project Director
Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project

above
Hung Out To Dry installation [detail] 2008
20 digital photos printed onto voile and Hills Hoist
4 sq. meters

right
Hung Out To Dry series [detail] 2008
Digital photos printed onto voile
50cm x 50cm

All asylum seekers in Made in Australia have chosen to remain anonymous in order not to jeopardize their case or endanger family members in their country of origin.

Made in Australia launched Refugee Week 2008 and is part of the Emerge Festival, Multicultural Arts Victoria

Made in Australia is produced in partnership with Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project

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