

# The Art of Exile

Safdar Ahmed

'The consul banged the table and said,  
"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":  
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are  
still alive.'

W. H. Auden, 'Refugee Blues'<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Whilst the term 'outsider art' is sometimes broadly defined, it acquires a particular meaning in relation to the art of refugees in detention.<sup>2</sup> Refugees are stateless people who have been forced away from their land, their roots, their culture and their past. They migrate out of necessity, across national borders and without the legal protections that citizenship guarantees. Denied a legal identity, the refugee must appeal to a higher, universal realm of jurisdiction—that of international human rights law and refugee conventions—to which most countries are signatories but which are frequently observed in the breach. The refugee is an outsider, then, in a very specific sense. To be outside is not to have discovered a new point of view, or state of mind. Nor does 'outsider art', in this sense, describe a common aesthetic form or

style. To be outside is to have fled one's country of origin, often at huge personal risk, and to have undergone a difficult and often lengthy process of resettlement elsewhere. It is to have lost valuable time locked away in a detention facility, in a state of near constant anxiety, whilst the country of arrival decides whether it will accept you or send you back to an uncertain fate in the country you have fled. The art of refugees can thus be labelled 'outsider art'—insofar as it speaks to the experiences of trauma, displacement, limbo and hopeful resettlement, which is the shared predicament of millions of displaced people throughout the world.

To understand the art of asylum seekers in Australia's detention centres, one must know something of the very difficult conditions they are made to endure. Amongst those residing in Sydney's Villawood detention centre, most have had their initial application to refugee status rejected and are caught up in a lengthy process of appealing and waiting for their cases to be reconsidered. For all involved, this is an agonising formality: time spent in and out of interview rooms and courthouses, repeating personal histories and replaying past traumas for interpreters and officials, that extends for months and years. Having fled such countries as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iran and Iraq, all are anxious about the outcome of their cases, worried for their families back home, and

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1 W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976) p. 210.

2 'Outsider art' was coined in 1972 as a synonym for the French term, 'art brut'. For Jean Dubuffet, art brut (which is often translated as 'raw art') is the art of those who are untrained and socially marginalised, including the mentally ill, criminals, spiritualists, folk artists and eccentrics. This was conceived as a distinct genre of art—outside of the formal art academy—that included the depiction of extreme psychological states, unconventional ideas and elaborate fantasies. For a critical evaluation of the genre, see David Maclagan, *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

terrified of being returned to the places from which they have fled. Whilst most detainees will eventually be recognised as genuine refugees, this predicament takes a heavy toll on their mental health. A large number suffer from depression and anxiety-related disorders that often translate into acts of self-harm and in some cases suicide. It is in this context that the mental health expert and 2009 Australian of the Year, Patrick McGorry, likened the detention regime to: 'factories for producing mental illness'.<sup>3</sup>

If notions of time and place are important determinants in the production of art, it is no surprise that the art of refugees conveys shared concerns and experiences. Such art is framed, for instance, by time spent in detention, with little else to do except wait and worry about the future. As an immersive act, art may create a moment of distraction from, or point of therapy amongst, the anxiety and ennui that pervades one's time in detention. It is also conditioned by the lack of space and resources available within the centre's brick dorms, security areas and perimeter fences. As I conducted art classes amongst asylum seekers at the Villawood centre, prominent themes began to emerge. Amongst these, three broad categories would delineate the curatorial rationale for the works collected there and from other facilities in Australia. They are: 1) The conditions and circumstances that have forced people to flee their country of origin and seek refuge elsewhere. 2) The strategies employed by refugees to endure their experience of detention. 3) Their aspirations for the future and vision of what it means to become Australian citizens. Using a few examples belonging to each of these themes, I will argue that the art of refugees clears a space in which to ask productive questions about Australian citizenship and identity. (This paper will refer to asylum seekers living within the detention system by the letters A, B, C and so on, to protect their identity.)

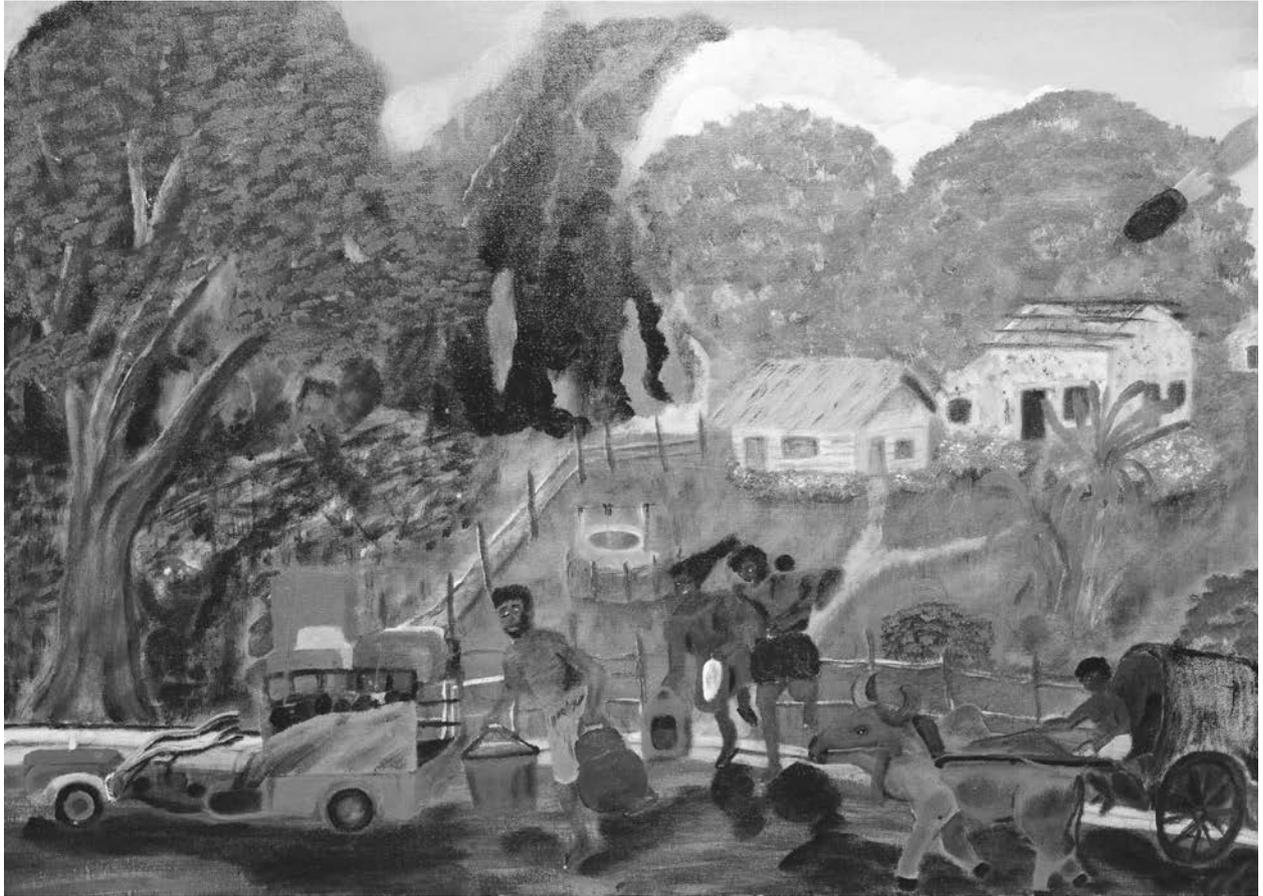
Whilst our definition of what it means to be a refugee conjures up images of victimisation, deprivation and survival, exiles are more than just the victims of war and calamity. Indeed, the work of refugees and émigrés has arguably been a starting point for modern artistic and intellectual culture. The contribution of artists in exile, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Arshile Gorky, to the development of abstract modernism is a case in point, alongside exiled writers and musicians who have created new expressive forms, new ways of seeing. This is not to minimise or fetishise the condition of exile. The role of art is not to redeem what has been lost. What it does is provide the opportunity to review, revise, and reconstitute the often scattered shards of memory, culture and identity that refugees carry with them. The artistic act may then become one of discovery. And I say may because the experience of being uprooted and then needing to reconstitute life in a new environment is a traumatic process that must be acknowledged on its own terms. It should not be qualified by notions of 'success' or 'failure'.

## Exile

Exile may seem to have no end though it always has a beginning, which is to say that there is always a point at which someone is compelled to leave their home, land, family and community for an uncertain future somewhere else. In their art practice, asylum seekers refer to the forces that drove them to flee their homeland or place of residence, and undertake the arduous journey to a safer country. One such example is a painting by a young Tamil refugee, which depicts a scene of dispossession. The Sri Lankan army bombing the Tamils refers us to the events of 2009, in which Sri Lanka's national army waged a massive military offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). According to an investigation by The Times newspaper, which drew upon UN sources, over 20 000 civilians were killed during the conflict, many of whom died as a result of aerial bombardment and shelling by the Sri Lankan government in the final weeks of the war. Over a quarter of a million internally displaced

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4 Patrick McGorry cited in 'Close Detention Centres: Australian of the Year', ABC News website, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/01/25/2801073.htm>



W, The Sri Lankan army bombing the Tamils. acrylic on canvas, 69x50cm

people were then herded into detention camps administered by the regime, where they were screened and 'rehabilitated', though many were tortured and have disappeared.<sup>4</sup> The Sri Lankan government hailed the operation as a decisive victory in the 'war against terrorism' and has rejected domestic and international calls for an independent investigation into human rights abuses committed during the war.<sup>5</sup>

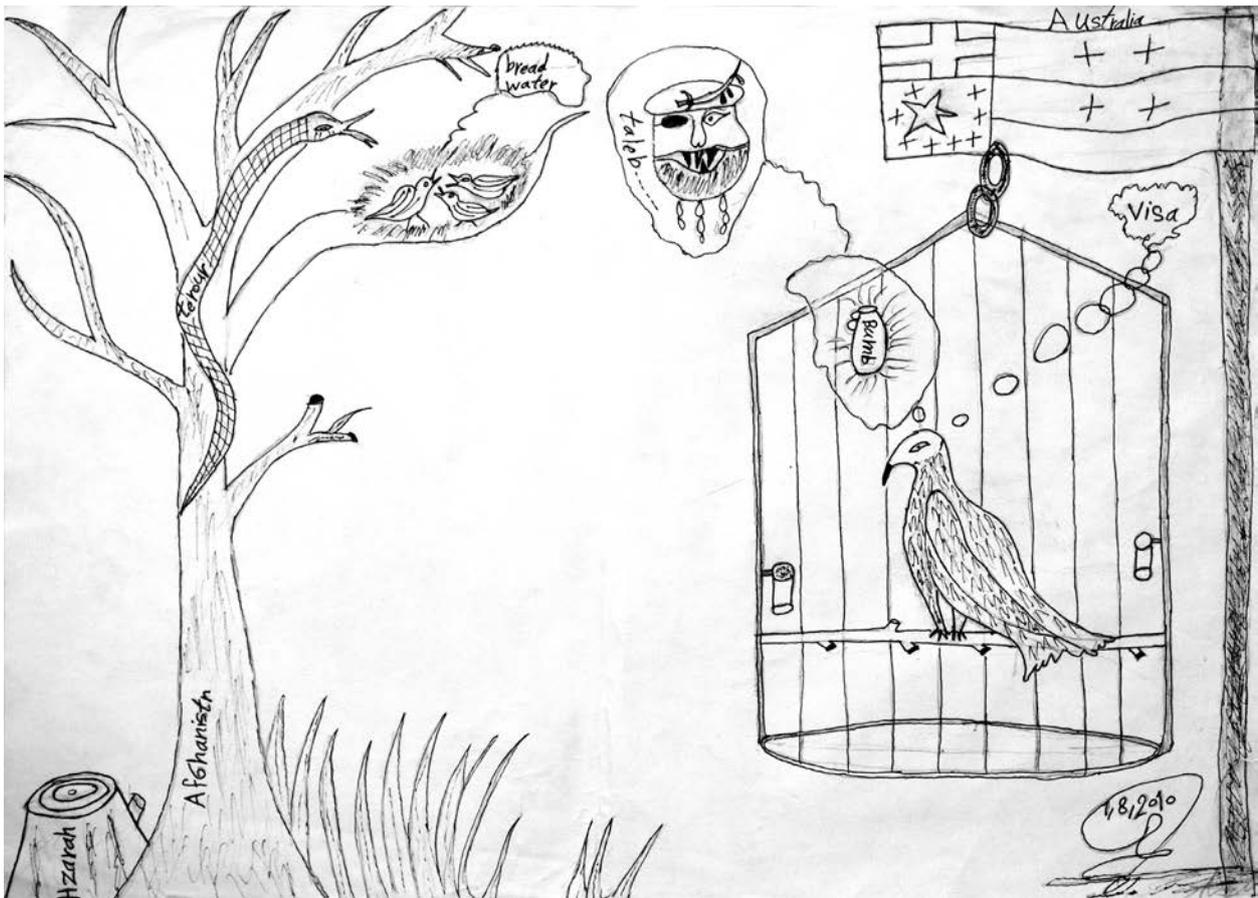
This painting focuses upon the flight of civilians. In the foreground are a cluster of figures: two men, a woman, and a child, clutching a few

belongings. They run from homes that are the target of an aerial bombardment, and will soon disappear in a welter of smoke and flame. The cause of their panic is represented only by the missile that falls from the top right-hand corner of the canvas. What is important for the painter of this image is not the action of government forces per se, but the panic of their victims. The painting depicts a moment of trauma. It is the moment at which the familiar routines of an established in this case rural life (evoked by the bullock-drawn cart and communal well) are violently overturned. The figures run from their homes, across a road and out of the plane of the canvas—which is to imagine them fleeing past the viewer. In this sense, they are crossing a threshold: from the familiar environment of their ancestral villages towards an unknown future in a new place.

A drawing by 'A', who is a member of the Hazara minority in Afghanistan, exemplifies the complex feelings involved in this process of transition. The left side of the picture tells the

4 See <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/category,COI,,COUNTRYNEWS,LKA,4a2620b41c,0.html>

5 On the impotence of the UN in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan war, see Mathew Russell Lee, 'Sri Lanka's "Bloodbath on the Beach" made the UN's Ban Ki-mute Moot: Now What?', SAIS Review, vol. XXIX no. 2, (2009), pp. 39–49. See also 'Sri Lanka Stonewalling on Wartime Abuses', Human Rights Watch (24 January 2011) at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/01/24/sri-lanka-stonewalling-wartime-abuses>. Accessed 24/3/2011.



D, Waiting. pen and ink on paper, 41x29cm

story of Afghanistan. The nation is represented as a barren tree, which sprouts only a single leaf and whose sole inhabitants (a clutch of starving chicks) are stalked by the snake of terrorism. At one side of the tree sits a mutilated stump, symbolising the long-running oppression of the Hazara people. The right side of the image tells A's own story. He sits locked in a cage, unable to feed the children he has left behind. His thought bubbles go in different directions, thinking both of the real danger represented by the Taliban to his family and of the potential security that a refugee visa represents. That his cage is held aloft by a stylised national flag indicates the helpless state of refugees within Australia's current political climate.

Like most asylum-seekers in detention, A had experienced no formal art training. He made the drawing entirely without guidance or didactic input and for no other reason than to put his feelings down on paper. The act of drawing, in this instance, was not an attempt at 'art'. It was a means to externalise—and so minimise—the

artist's fears and concerns. Sadly, the bird cannot protect its young: two of A's sons were killed by the Taliban during the time he has languished in detention. At the time of writing he remains worried for the fate of his wife, daughter and other relatives, who remain in Afghanistan and Iran.

### Surviving detention

The art of refugees in detention shows a deep faith in the validity of their own experiences, and scepticism towards the rules and institutions that legitimise their incarceration. Moreover, particular works exemplify the strategies adopted by refugees to help them endure the emotional and psychological difficulties wrought by detention. Because detention centres are places of material deprivation, art must be made from whatever objects or materials are at hand. The work of an Iranian artist whom I will refer to as 'B' is interesting in this regard. In Iran, B worked in the areas of mechanical and electrical engineering. His life was peaceful

until the Islamic regime proposed that he design weapons to be used against anti-government protesters, including a tank that fires boiling water at crowds. After refusing the work on moral grounds, B realised that he had seen too much of the regime's weapons program to live in safety and promptly fled for his life, leaving his wife and child behind. Within the Villawood detention centre, he has used his engineering expertise to devise new contraptions from the poor materials available to him.

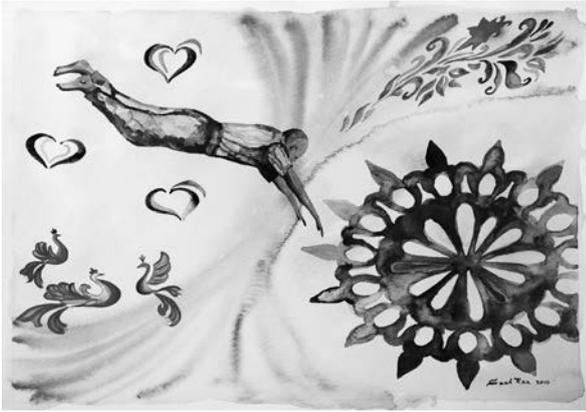
Because he wanted to paint in his free time, and because he did not have access to adequate materials, B fashioned a brush and palette knife from the plastic cutlery available to detainees in the communal mess. (As in the prison system, detainees are not allowed steel implements because of the risk they are seen to pose to themselves and to others.) B took hairs from the tail of a cat that lives in the centre, which became the hairs of his brush, and which he fused to a plastic fork with aluminium foil. A finer brush was made from cat hair and a radio antenna. B has also made original artworks from the instant



M, Improvised tools,  
found objects, 21cm

food that is available to him. In one instance, he fashioned the bud and petals of a sunflower from finely cut cheese, which he then painted and attached to a round plastic plate. The twisted strands of intertwining '2-minute noodles' were used to make the stalk of the flower and to create a decorative border that frames the scene. After that B embarked on his largest project to date, making a to-scale replica of the Sydney Harbour Bridge from straight spaghetti and glue. Such pieces represent an attempt to transcend the detainee's environment through the transformation of local materials/found objects into works of creative and aesthetic pleasure.

If certain pieces reflect the physical conditions of the detention environment, others relate to the emotional and psychological traumas endured there. In this category are two works by an Iraqi refugee, Saad Tlaa, which commemorate the suicide of the Fijian asylum seeker, Josefa Rauluni. On the morning of 20 September 2010, Josefa was given deportation papers. This was in keeping with the Australian government's practice of notifying detainees of their return date at the last minute—in order to avoid desperate acts of self-harm and suicide. Josefa had spent the previous months exhausting all avenues of appeal in an attempt to remain within Australia. He was an outspoken advocate for democratic change in Fiji and feared persecution by the military regime upon being returned there. At one point the deposed Fijian prime minister, Laisenia Qarase, had unsuccessfully pleaded with Australian authorities to grant him asylum. Fifteen minutes before he was due to be handcuffed and escorted to the airport, Josefa climbed onto the roof of the Villawood detention facility, where he pleaded to be allowed to stay in Australia until the political situation in Fiji had changed. The protest was to no avail; evincing his despair, he threw himself from the roof and died upon hitting the ground. Josefa's death sparked a protest by eleven Tamil asylum seekers who staged a thirty-hour sit-in on the same roof, and who were equally adamant that they should not be sent back to Sri Lanka.



Saad Tlaa, Jump towards a new world, watercolour on paper, 38x28cm

Josefa's death was witnessed by many fellow detainees, including Saad Tlaa, who painted a memorial to his fallen friend. A portrait of the dead man looks out of a wreath of flowers, beneath which are the signatures of Josefa's friends in the Villawood centre. The portrait was given to the family of the dead man as a tribute. A second work depicts the action of a falling man. Behind the figure are the stylised shapes of three birds, below the forms of their hearts breaking. This was to represent the loss experienced by Josefa's wife and children. The man falls into the shape of a mandala whose spokes double as a clock, showing the exact time (9:25 am) of Josefa's death.

On one hand, these images are an attempt to reconcile the shock and sadness endured after the death of a friend. And yet, this was not an ordinary death insofar as the circumstances that led to Josefa's death continue in the Villawood centre. Such a death may happen again. To receive a notice of deportation and be sent back to their country of origin is a fear that haunts every asylum seeker. The moment in which Josefa knew he would be returned is a moment dreaded by every expectant refugee. Saad's work thus forms a tribute to Josefa's life and acknowledges the fragility that marks the ongoing fate of asylum seekers within the detention system. On 15 November, within two months of Josefa's passing, an Iraqi man named Ahmad al-Akabi also committed suicide. The text above Josefa's portrait reads:

'To the family of our brother, Josefa—this is on behalf of all the brothers and sisters here at the Villawood IDC [Immigration Detention Centre]—

Your Iraqi brother,  
Saad Tlaa,  
September 27th 2010.  
7 days after...'



Saad Tlaa, Tribute to Josefa, watercolour on paper, 29x41cm

## Imagining Australia

Precisely because refugees are defined according to what they do not possess (i.e. the protections of legal citizenship), the question of their identity cannot be separated from that of the nation state and its ideological forms. This is true of the objective conditions with which refugees contend, just as it pertains to the subjective formation of a refugee's identity. For instance, one must consider a nation's effort to shape a common culture amongst its citizens. Pioneers, explorers, morally minded mutineers, peasants who till the soil, and heroic

soldiers are the tropes to which many national identities defer. The notion of 'home' is conflated with that of the 'homeland', just as the nation becomes an outsized depiction of the modern nuclear family. This latter point is displayed in the construction of gendered national roles: early leaders are described as 'founding fathers', and the geographical space of the nation is likened to a maternal womb—the 'motherland'. Without overstating the influence of nationalist sentiments upon the formation of the individual, such themes inevitably exact a toll upon those who find themselves cast out from their national 'home'.

Moreover, refugees do not forget the formative social, cultural and nationalist sentiments of their upbringing. In other words, they rarely embrace a single-thread narrative that would seek to devalue or negate the past. Despite the expectations of those who imagine a total program of national and cultural 'assimilation', refugees are unlikely to abandon the identities they seem to have left behind. Rather, their past becomes the foundation for assimilation. A dialectic is at play: between the nationalism, country, circumstances, ideology, mores, culture and customs of the refugees' past—and that which can be absorbed of their new country: its culture, politics, customs and so on. This can be a difficult process although the outcome is not always loss. For as the late Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said put it, the activity of reconciling two places, cultures and homes gives rise to an 'awareness of simultaneous dimensions' that may lead to the productive criticism of 'orthodox—which is to say repressive—cultures, judgements and points of view.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the condition of exile may yet provide scope for criticism and reconstruction. The dialectical negotiation of different identities may yet create new identities, new perspectives. The themes of Australian nationalism as they appear in artworks made by asylum seekers are a reminder of where they stand in relation to the concept of the nation

state, and to Australian nationality in particular. Asylum seekers who live in detention exist in a time before they can form themselves as Australians. To this end they project themselves into the future, as soon-to-be contributors to the Australian national identity. This process of becoming Australian (even before the event) may involve a surprising (re)appropriation of the symbols and icons of Australian nationalism, however, this is as it should be. If modern nations are 'imagined communities', to employ the phrase of Benedict Anderson, this process has never been monopolised by one exclusive group or class.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the task of imagining (and building) the nation has often fallen to new migrants, émigrés and exiles. Regardless of whether one agrees with multiculturalism as a political doctrine, the contribution of migrant communities to the fabric of Australian identity cannot be denied.

Saad Tlaa's drawing of Sydney harbour and the Sydney Opera House, with the Australian flag hoisted in the foreground, reproduces the most widely circulated, globally recognised, and thus easily appropriated symbols of Australian identity. Thematically, the work represents an idealised ritual of boat-owning households in Sydney—to sail the harbour on a clear day—evoking a symbolic image of the Australian 'way of life'. Formally, the artist's use of a pointillist technique renders the flag and its harbour almost hyper-real. And yet the exactitude of this image conveys something else entirely. The cleanliness and accuracy of the drawing is more evocative of a tourist advertisement or brochure than of something a yacht-going weekender would recall. That is because the image was itself sourced from within detention. It was mustered through a search engine, from the sea of images and signs that circulate on the internet. In this context, the appropriation of tourist ('Australiana') imagery is entirely logical. The koala, the kangaroo, the Opera House and so on are more readily available to outsiders

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6 Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2000) p. 186.

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7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

than to ordinary Australians, who have a broader range of experiences to choose from.

Unfortunately, the rhetoric towards asylum seekers amongst Australian politicians and the corporate media is often callous. It is held that refugees who come to Australia 'unlawfully' must be detained and kept apart from the wider community for as long as it takes to check their



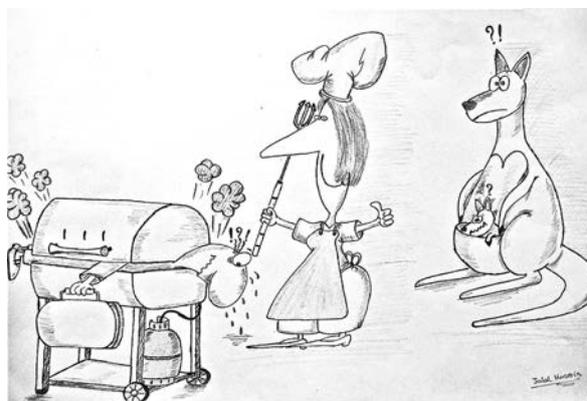
Saad Tlaa, Sydney Harbour, coloured pen on paper, 29x21cm

identities and belabour their applications. That this may take a number of years in some cases is unconscionable. Under international law it is not illegal to travel to a country without a visa if one is claiming asylum. And when one considers that a high percentage of asylum seekers who arrive by boat are eventually recognised as genuine refugees, it makes no sense to malign them as a potential threat to Australian society. Unless, that is, there are short-term political gains to be made from appearing 'tough' on the issue of security, 'people smuggling' and 'border protection'. At a deeper level, demonising refugees seeks to allay an increasing sense of national insecurity. It stems from a sense of paranoia which, as Ghassan Hage points out, is symptomatic of broader fears associated with the social and cultural fragmentation that neoliberal economic policies and the forces of globalisation have wrought upon the national community.<sup>8</sup>

8 Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*, Pluto Press, Annandale NSW, 2003.

Certainly, a low point in the public discourse towards asylum seekers came in the wake of the Christmas Island boat disaster of December 2010, in which a boat carrying refugees was smashed against the jagged rocks of Christmas Island, killing many of those on board. As the bodies were being buried, Scott Morrison, the Shadow Minister for Immigration, questioned the government's decision to fly the deceased's relatives to Sydney for the funeral, intoning that this was an unnecessary waste of taxpayer's money. A radio host of Sydney's 2GB station, Chris Smith, then ran a quiz with prizes for the listener who could call in and correctly guess the number of asylum seekers killed in the disaster. The 'lucky' winner was awarded a DVD, movie passes and a book.<sup>9</sup>

How does one react to such hostility? A cartoon by an Iranian detainee satirises the plight of refugees within the detention system through a novel take on a hallowed Australian pastime: the 'great Aussie barbie'. Here, a pitchfork-branding



J, The Great Aussie Barbie, pencil on paper, 41x29cm

Julia Gillard barbecues a troubled, sweaty-looking refugee. In the background, a kangaroo and her joey regard the scene with expressions of befuddlement. The contrast between the Prime Minister's satisfaction, the refugee's alarm, and the kangaroos' surprise highlights a disjunction that is commonly observed amongst detained asylum seekers. It is the difference between the

9 Media Watch website: <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3144613.htm>. Accessed 25/4/2011.

heartlessness of Australia's migration policies and the apologetic disbelief and sympathy of the ordinary Australians with whom refugees come into contact. As the cartoon demonstrates, detainees understand only too well that their fate has been commandeered by opinion poll-wary politicians and right wing radio shock-jocks. They know that they are locked up to satisfy a callous political reality. There is humour in absurdity.

I will conclude by restating that the art of refugees provides an interesting point of reflection on what it means to be or not to be a legally recognised person: a citizen. Refugees are compelled to adapt to new experiences in their quest to start life anew, for which their identities are always in flux. They are compelled to evaluate, or find commonalities between the culture of their homeland and the new places to which they have fled. On top of this, there are the difficulties imposed upon them by the Australian

government's punitive system of mandatory and indefinite detention. There are the months and years spent waiting for their stories to be verified by bureaucrats and officials who have no concept of what it is to be endangered or persecuted. It is within this context of struggle that the creative moment clears a space for the reclamation of dignity and hope.

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Dr Safdar Ahmed completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the National Art School in 1999 and was awarded his PhD in the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Sydney in 2009. His dissertation analysed the connections between modern Muslim reformism and European paradigms and theories of modernity. He is currently researching modern exegetical approaches to the Qur'an and gives weekly art classes inside the Villawood Detention Centre.



Alwy Fadhel, Untitled, pencil on paper, 21x29cm



Alwy Fadhel, Untitled 3, pen and ink on paper, 21x29cm