

From Loveday and Villawood: The Art of Australian Concentration Camps

Anton Pulvirenti



J, Villawood Detention Centre, pencil on paper, 29x21cm

The art made by Italians and Australians of Italian ancestry in internment camps during the Second World War provide a genealogical opportunity to study the art produced in Australia's modern detention centres. Factors uniting the art of the war internees and present-day refugees include art as a means for the expression of trauma, art as a means for occupying the mind during the interminable waiting in detention or internment and, by implication, the legal paradoxes and contradictions the camps themselves embodied and embody. The works

of art of Italians and naturalised British subjects such as Cesare Vagarini, Carlo Vanucci and Angelo Pulvirenti are analysed according to their formal characteristics in the light of trauma and the ambiguities of the internment experience. The present article examines the similarities between the two time periods in the context of ambiguities in public law that allow camps to appear as normalised regulators of government. The Menzies government passed and implemented the National Security Act 1939-40 in late 1939 (with amendments in 1940), in

effect a state of emergency against possible threats to the war effort within the 'narrowest limits consistent with public safety and public sentiment.'¹ The Act legitimised the internment of naturalised British subjects, a term given to Italians now permanently living in Australia, as enemy aliens. Italy's declaration of war on England in June 1940 caused Italians to be regarded as a threat to the Commonwealth because of the assets and local knowledge they possessed as long-term residents in Queensland. It was thought that they could be of possible use to an invading enemy. By February 1942, with British-held Singapore on the brink of disaster, the government moved quickly and arrested large numbers of Italians in the sugar-cane districts of North Queensland. After the bombing of Darwin in February 1942, men were arrested under bulk orders imposed by the General Officer Commanding Northern Command (of the Army). One of them was my grandfather, Angelo Pulvirenti, interned under National Security regulations 25 and 26 and promptly moved to a camp in the nation's south without trial. He was interned from February 1942 to December 1943. In retrospect, the timeframes of his internment appear as organised categories. However, in the climate of the early days of the war, his family did not know if the war would end and consequently if they would ever see him again. For all intents and purposes, Angelo had disappeared, and did not have access to a court of law to appeal his decision.

The major difference between the internment camp and detention centre is that the term 'camp' implies a structure of a temporary nature, able to be taken down when the state of emergency is no longer applicable. 'Centre', in contrast, implies rigidity, with structures composed of more solid materials that are meant to hold together for an indefinite duration. The internment camps were disbanded in 1946, after the war when the National Security Act

1939-40 was repealed. The detainment of the modern-day refugees is another matter entirely, for, under the Migration Act 1958 (and 1994), it is possible to remain in detention indefinitely. Hence the more durable nature of the buildings of Villawood detention centre with their reinforced concrete and electrified fencing. This is in contrast to the flimsier wooden huts of Loveday internment camp, whose fences were composed of barbed wire on poles pile-driven into bare earth.

The complex legal situation of internees and refugees has been well charted in the modern era by an array of philosophers, linguists, legal scholars, geo-political theorists, and architects. A prominent example is Giorgio Agamben, a political and legal philosopher who has extensively written on the appearance of camps in the contemporary era. He has remarked that the camps inhabit lacunae located at a 'point of imbalance between public law and political fact.'² The imbalance involves a contradiction since the camps are exceptional measures, a response to political crisis of refugees fleeing persecution, which in itself is a product of political violence and/or crisis. Consequently the camps must be understood on the level of politics and not juridico-constitutional grounds. Thus the camps are juridical measures that cannot be understood in legal terms, the legal form of what cannot have legal form. In such a situation the camp simultaneously binds and abandons the refugee to law. The contradiction the camp presents and the refugees inhabit have been variously described as a 'twilight zone', a 'zone of indifference' and 'a caesurae in the biological continuum of the human species.'³ The art of detainees and internees manifests ambiguity, alienation and a sense of

1 Margaret Bevege, *Behind Barbed Wire: Internment in Australia During World War Two* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 8.

2 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1.

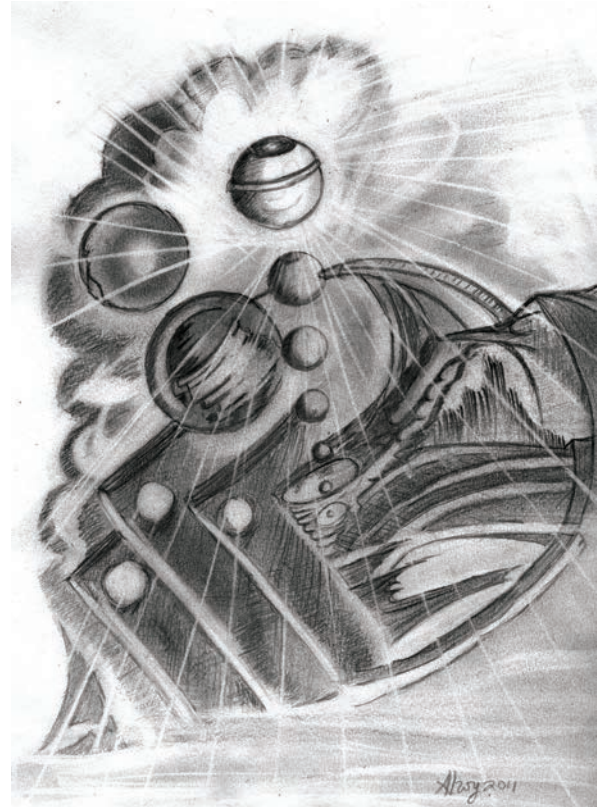
3 Elizabeth O'Shea, 'Detention Is a Legal Twilight Zone,' *New Matilda*, <http://newmatilda.com/2011/05/06/detention-legal-twilight-zone>; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998); Claudio Minca, 'Agamben's Geographies of Modernity,' *Political Geography* 26 (2007).



Alwy Fadhel, Drawing of a Girl,
pencil on paper, 29x41cm

displacement characteristic of the camp and detention centre.

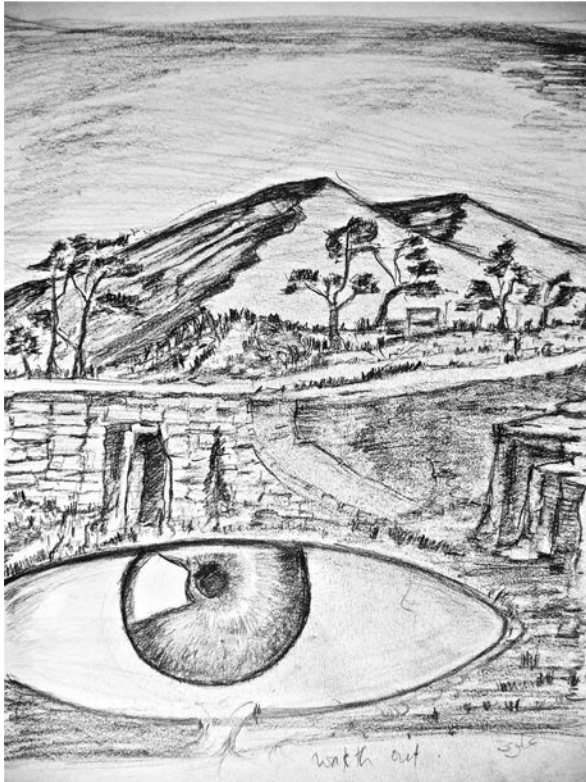
Ambiguity in the art of the camps and detention centres occupies a precarious balance between observation and invention of form. Most of the refugees are untrained artists who come to art out of a desire to fill in or make use of their time in custody. Ambiguity manifests as a delicate precariousness, that plays out in highly individualised expressions of light and rendition of surface. The work of Alwy Fadhel, who lives in the Villawood detention centre, in *Drawing of a Girl*, depicts a portrait of a woman, culled from the internet. My friend has produced a number of female portraits where there is an unusual focus on the hair. It is as if the various flowing and interlocking strands of hair are reminders of the complexities of his predicament. This is neither a conscious process nor a product of a lack of understanding of human anatomy. It is an open-ended process, both in terms of mark making and subject matter necessitated by mental stress (which often manifests in migraines that need to be countered with medication). It shuns any pre-planned contrivance in executing works and is stop-start: he will start working in a casual, almost uninterested way, abandon the



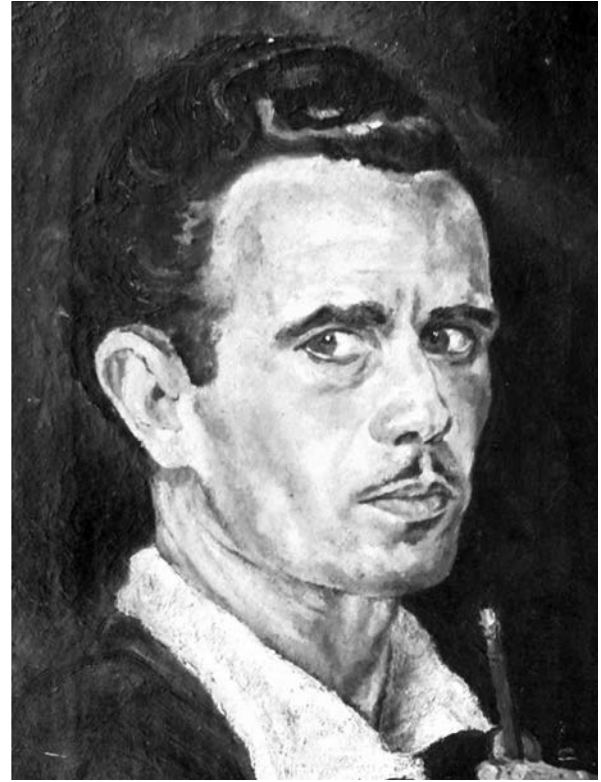
Alwy Fadhel, Untitled 4,
pencil on paper, 21x29cm

image, and move on to a new one. He will not work for a little while, and then will go to the drawing and lightly and casually depict a space with soft marks and striations that gradually build up confident and clear form. This is evident in *Drawing of a Girl*, where the light marks build up the eyes to a result that that looks as if they are sewn on. The slight bulge in the face's right jaw makes her look uncomfortable, emphasised in the ambiguous rendering of the lips. Alwy's other drawings, *Untitled Portrait 4* and *Watch Out*, are reminiscent of Surrealist artists such as Roberto Matta and Symbolists such as Ollidon Redon. It is especially evident in the presence of eyes. 'Like music,' Redon declared, 'my drawings transport us to the ambiguous world of the indeterminate.'⁴ Alwy may rub pencil into the paper to create a form without preconception or planning. The form may be modelled further to strengthen what is already there. While I was working with another refugee, Alwy would not work for the whole afternoon. The other refugee was

4 Michael Gibson, *Symbolism* (Koln: Taschen, 2006), 59.



Alwy Fadhel, Watch Out,
pencil on paper, 21x29cm



Piero Pieraccini, Self Portrait, approximately 40 cm wide,
Private Collection, 1942

very shy, and I was casually trying out different drawing styles, in an effort to help him get the drawing started. At one point, I tipped the cup of pencil shavings onto the paper and ground it into the surface with my hand. This signified a 'don't care' and free attitude. Alwy immediately picked up his pencil and began working. Unsurprisingly, he is deeply suspicious of order, resolution and categorisation.

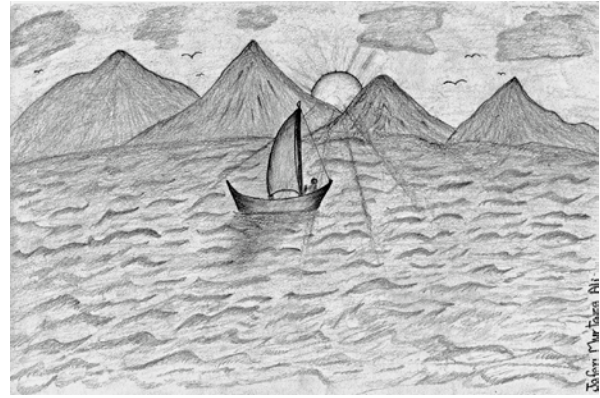
The work of the Italian internees deals with the same themes of alienation, but in completely different ways and at different skill levels. Vanucci, interned at Cowra Internment Camp after being captured by the Allies and sent to Australia after internment in India, was a trained artist who painted portraits, figures, landscapes and religious scenes. A self-portrait, exhibits an unsure sense of self. The dark background behind his head suggests a deeply psychological space which is offset by the bright fleshy tonal ranges of the face. It has an effect of amplifying the artist's personal sense of alienation. The play of contrasts between foreground and background is echoed also in a painting of Mary and Joseph in the Australian landscape, his major work during

his internment painted with another fellow internee Piero Pieraccini. The contrast between the close-up gritty and eroded foreground of the camp plays off against the floating cloaked figures standing above. Situated very close to the picture plane, the figures dominate the composition. A sense of deep space is created by the flowing hills of Cowra in the background. The dark, cloudy and ominous sky accentuates the ethereal nature of the work. Another work on an etched mirror by an unidentified internee similarly displaces the surface of the mirror with a portrait of the camp commandant. The simplified spatial relations and contrasts of scale between figure and background bring to mind attributes of Byzantine painting such as its pared-back treatment of form. This is echoed in a jewellery box carved by my grandfather during his internment. One-point perspective and minimal execution of form predominate with the perspective lines emanating from a point with my grandmother's initials carved into it. Upon viewing this box, one feels the alienation and longing that my grandfather must have felt for his absent family.



Angelo Pulvirenti, Jewellery Box, 11 x 8 x 9 cm, mallee wood, Private Collection, 1942-3

Another artist in Villawood has also executed a number of landscapes that exhibit a curious approach, one which stands out because he is keen not to waste time while in detention and works very assiduously. He is always asking me for advice about how to improve his work. The first drawing he had made was of a landscape of a sailing boat entitled Boat Journey. He works obsessively as if channelling the present onto the surface of the paper. I was encouraging him to see into the marks he was making on the paper. We worked on the picture together to begin with. I was helping him to keep going, to continue to make marks within the marks he had already made. Working in such a way seemed to help him deepen and extend the drawing process as well as to come to terms with the experiences of the boat trip to Australia. It is not one of never-ending change but one of a never-ending confirmation of the already achieved. A rejuvenation of vision results from working in such a way. The landscape is always at dusk, the point between light and dark, where it is neither completely light nor dark. He has developed a technique of darkening the edges of forms to produce a timeless and sculptural sense of form. Sculptural form cannot be pinned to a particular rendering of objects as they would really appear. This is his world; the way he sees, a unique way of making that is his alone. It is a private space in which the light and dark passages always tip toward a state of being inside which it is neither day nor night. This can also be seen in a



J, Boat Journey, pencil on paper, 21x29cm

drawing of the basketball courts in the Villawood detention centre, rendered in pencil. No matter what he does, the same way of rendering always appears, for it is always within him.

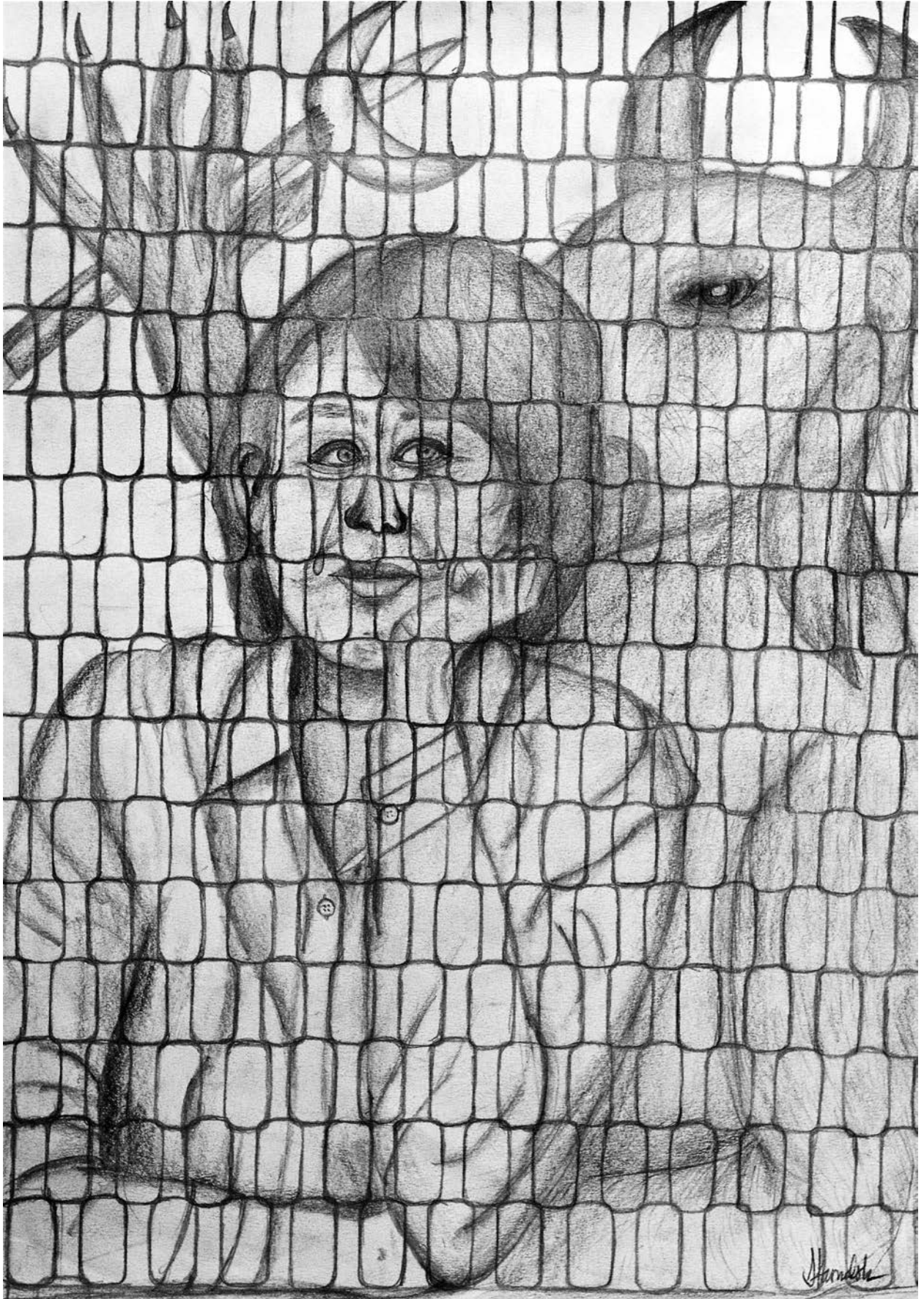
Anton Pulvirenti completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts and his Honours degree at the Australian National University in 2001. He is presently completing a PhD on Australian Internment Camps during WWII at the Sydney College of the Arts at the University of Sydney. He is a practising visual artist who has exhibited both domestically and internationally. Additionally, he has been conducting weekly art classes with refugees inside the Villawood detention centre.



K, The Weeping Tree, pencil on paper, 29x41cm



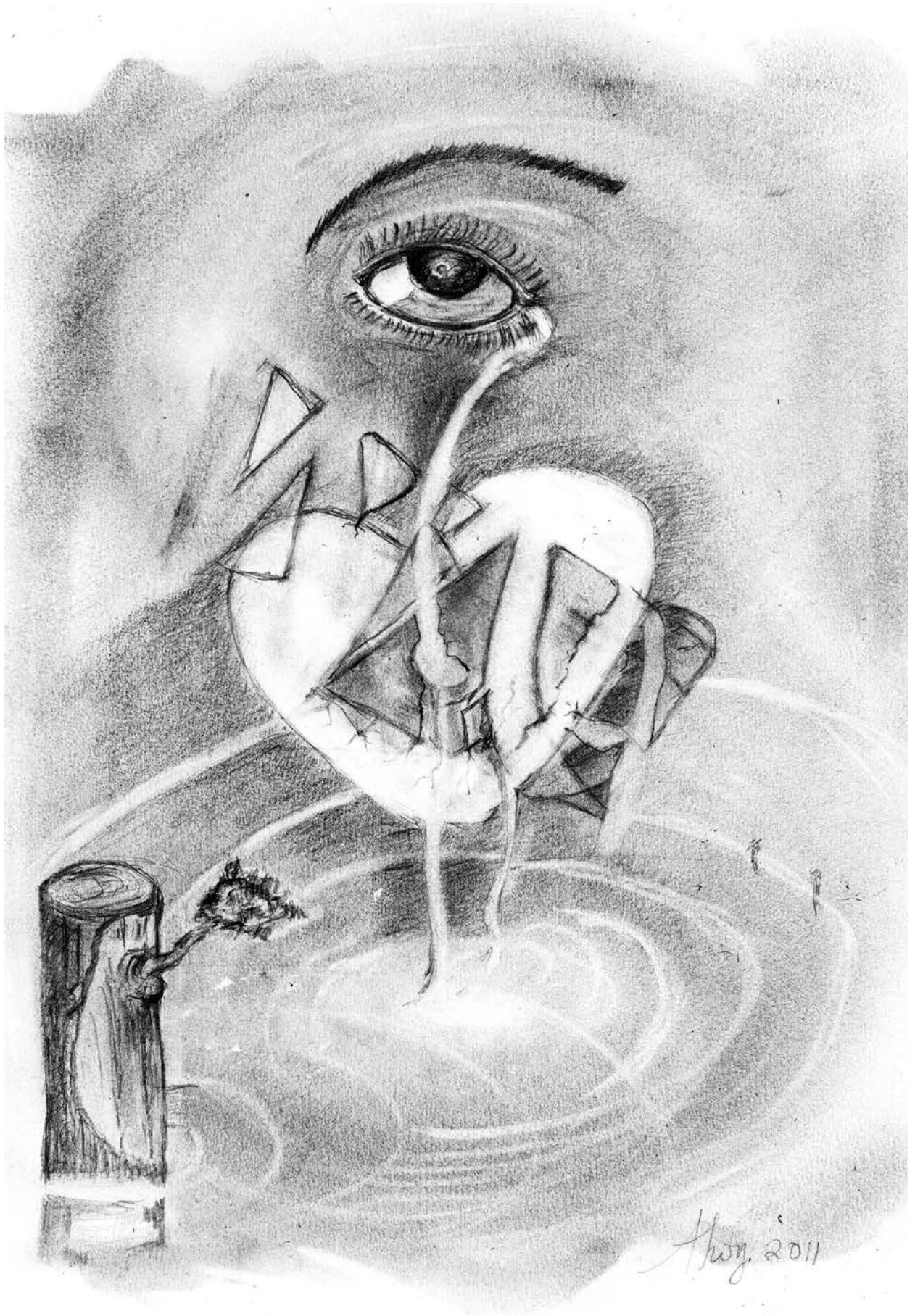
K, Imprisoned Tree, pencil on paper, 29x41cm



K, Detention, pencil on paper, 29x41cm



J, Window, pencil on paper, 29x41cm



Alwy Fadhel, Untitled, pencil on paper, 21x29cm



Alwy Fadhel, Woman in Veil, coffee on paper, 29x41cm



Syed Ruhollah Musavi, Harvest, oil on canvas, 60x85cm



Syed Ruhollah Musavi, Religious Elegy, oil on canvas, 60x85cm



Syed Ruhollah Musavi, Afghan Refugee 1, pencil on paper, 29x21 cm



Syed Ruhollah Musavi, Afghan Refugee 2, pencil on paper, 29x21cm



Syed Ruhollah Musavi, Boy in Detention, oil on canvas, 60x69cm



O, Weavers, oil on canvas board, 42x30cm



W, Dead Child, acrylic on canvas, 40x51cm



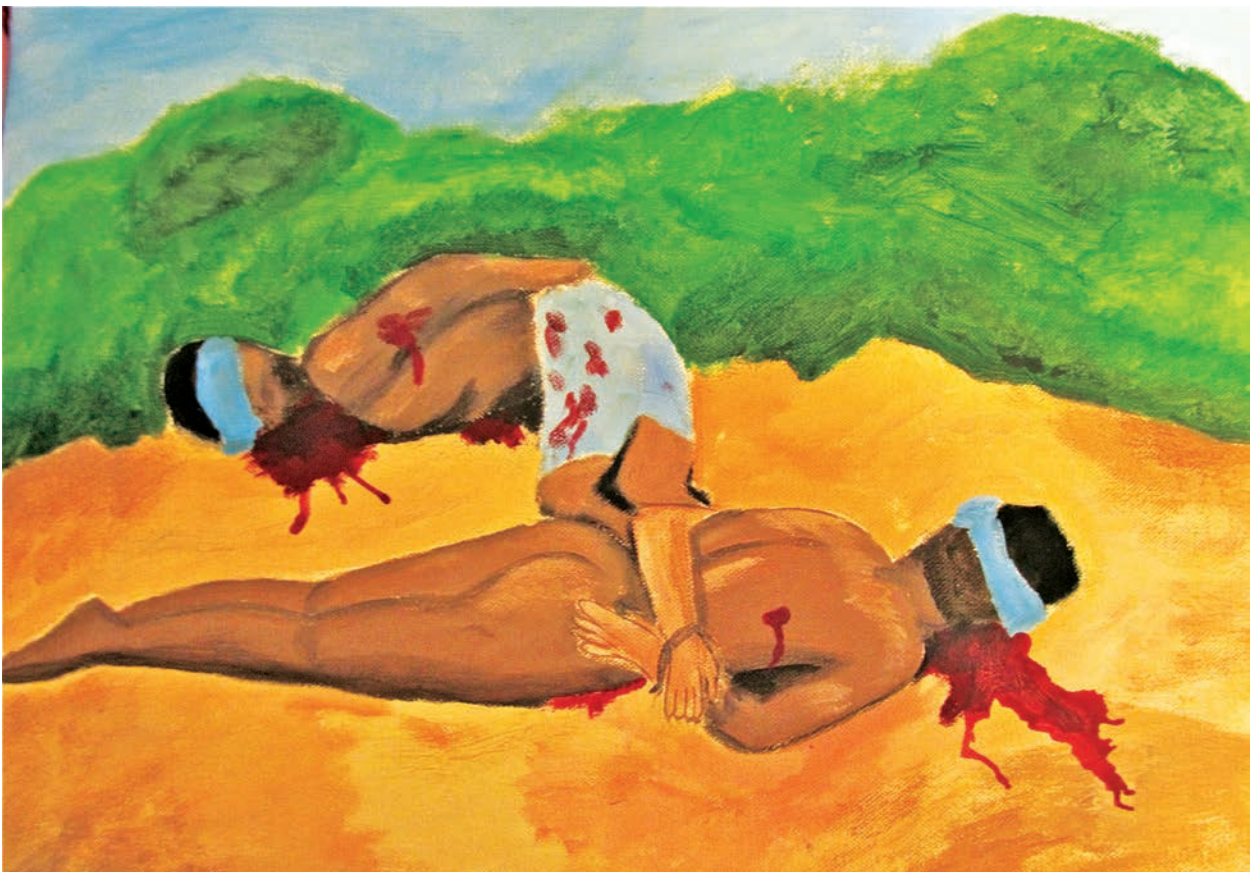
Saad Tlaa, Roger Dreams of Peace, pencil on paper, 26x37cm



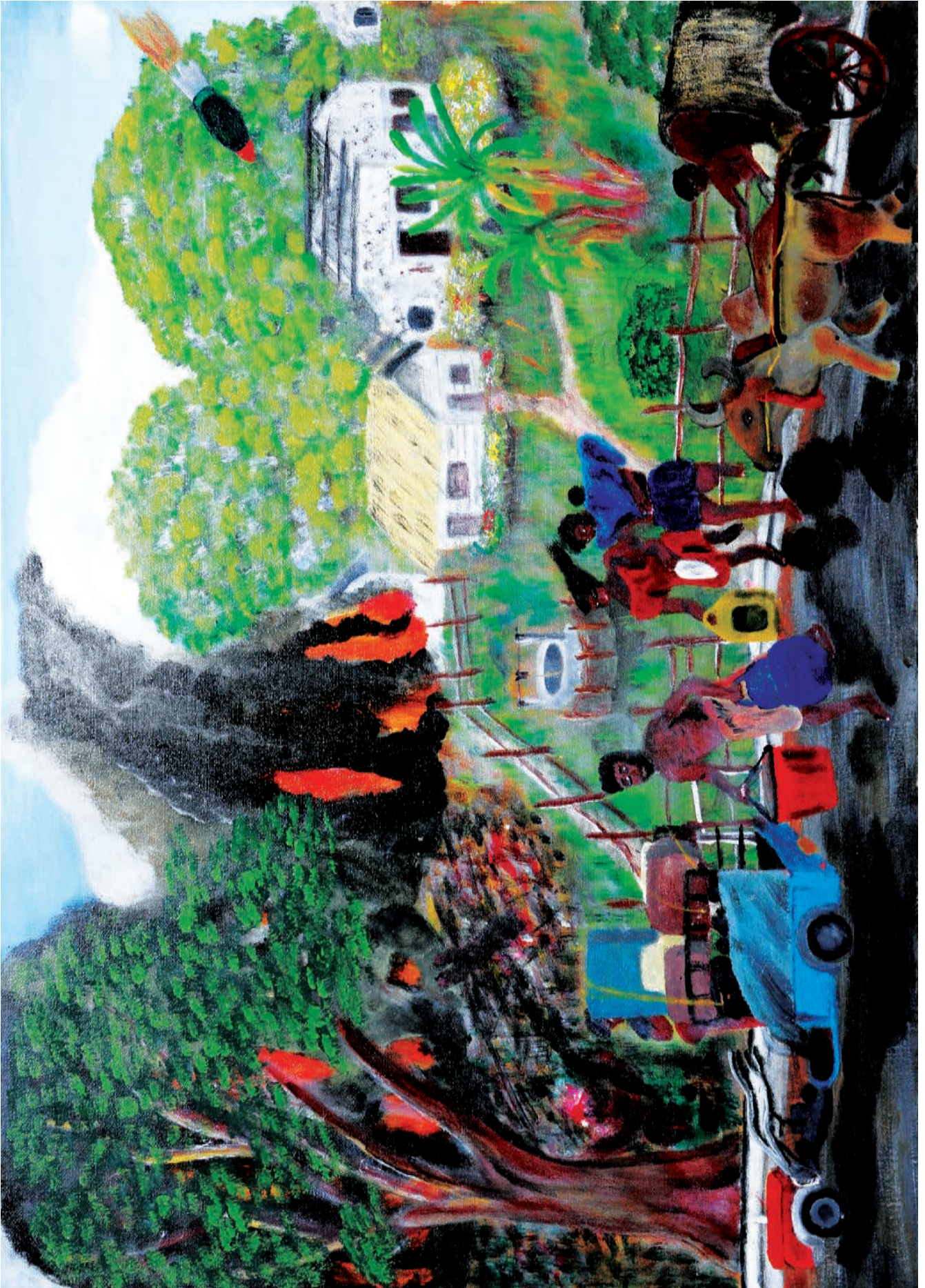
Alwy Fadhel, The Journey, acrylic on canvas, 100x76cm



F, The Sri Lankan War 1, acrylic on canvas, 100x76cm



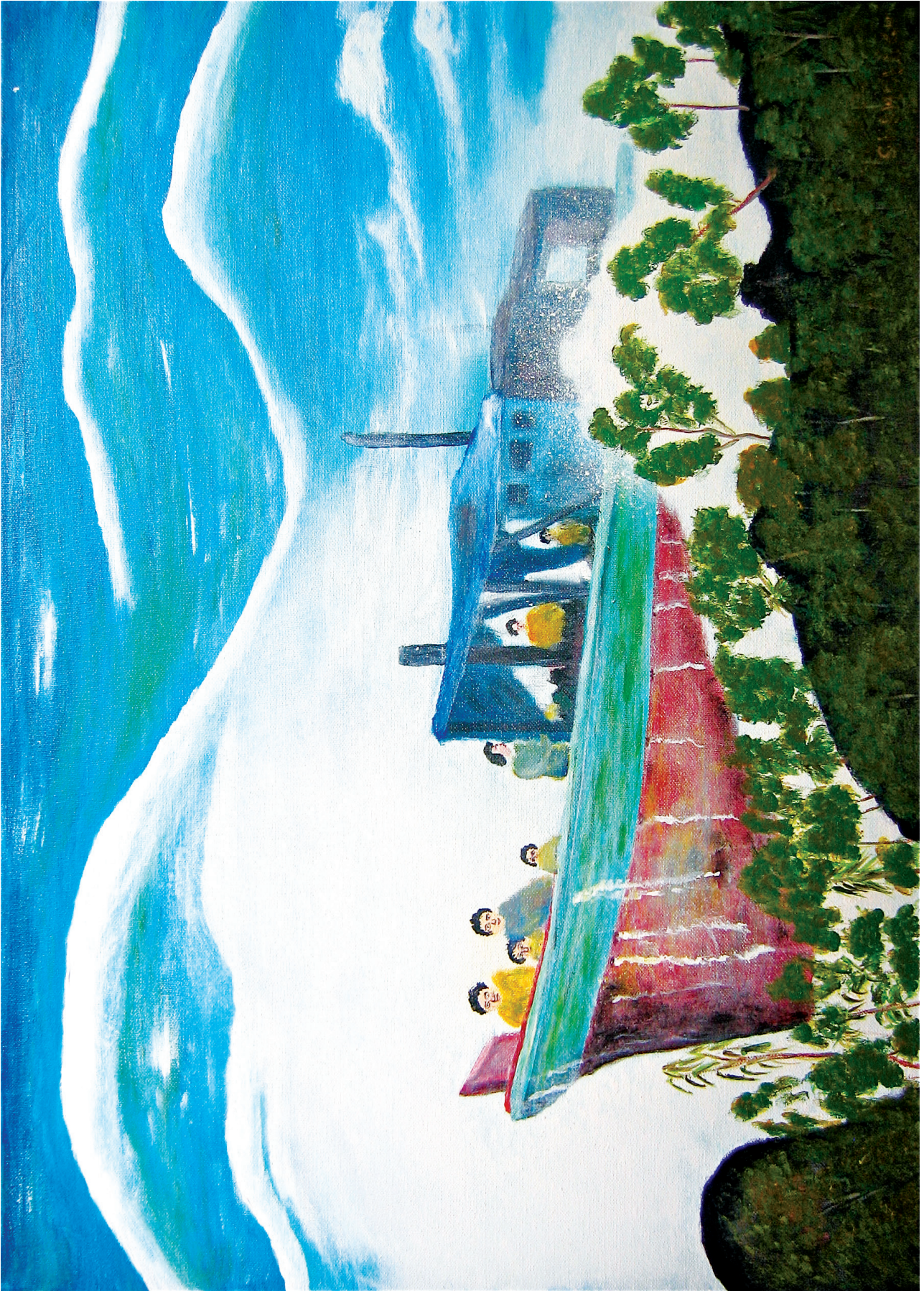
F, The Sri Lankan War 2, acrylic on canvas, 42x29cm



W, The Sri Lankan Army Bombing the Tamils, acrylic on canvas, 69x50cm



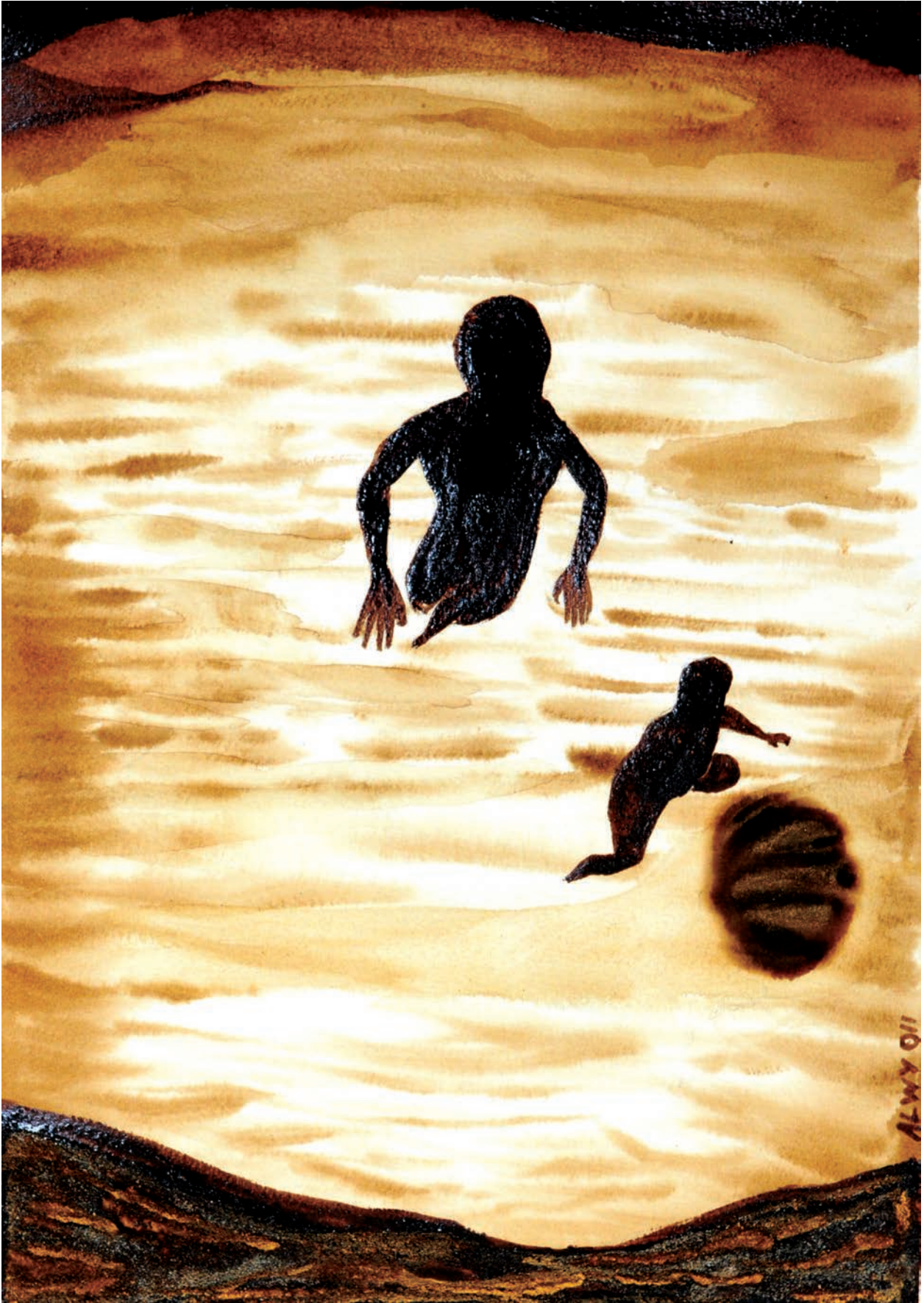
F, Boat at Christmas Island, acrylic on canvas, 41x29cm



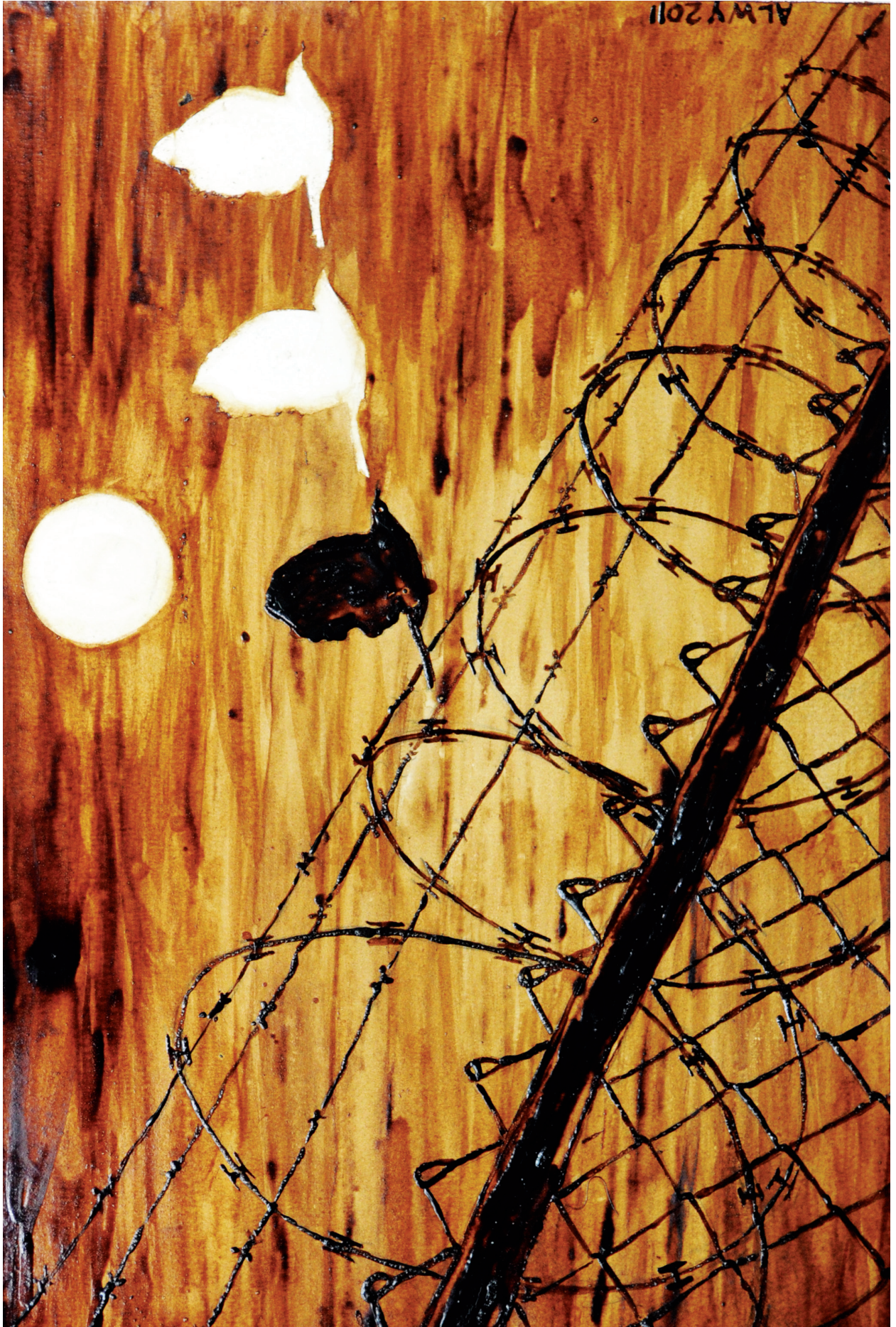
K, Christmas Island Boat Disaster, oil on canvas, 69x50cm



Alwy Fadhel, Bound, coffee on paper, 29x38cm



Alwy Fadhel, The Pool, coffee on paper, 24x35cm



Alwy Fadhel, Fence, coffee on paper, 39x27cm



Alwy Fadhel, Crying Wolf, coffee on paper, 39x27cm



Alwy Fadhel, Deeply Sad, coffee on paper, 38x29cm



M, Electric Massage Machine, found objects, 100cm



M, Hammer, found objects, 21cm



M, Brush and Palette Knife, plastic cutlery, aluminium foil and cat hair, 16cm



M, Flower, plastic plate, instant noodles, cheese and acrylic paint, 22x22cm



M, Abstract, acrylic on canvas, 30x30cm



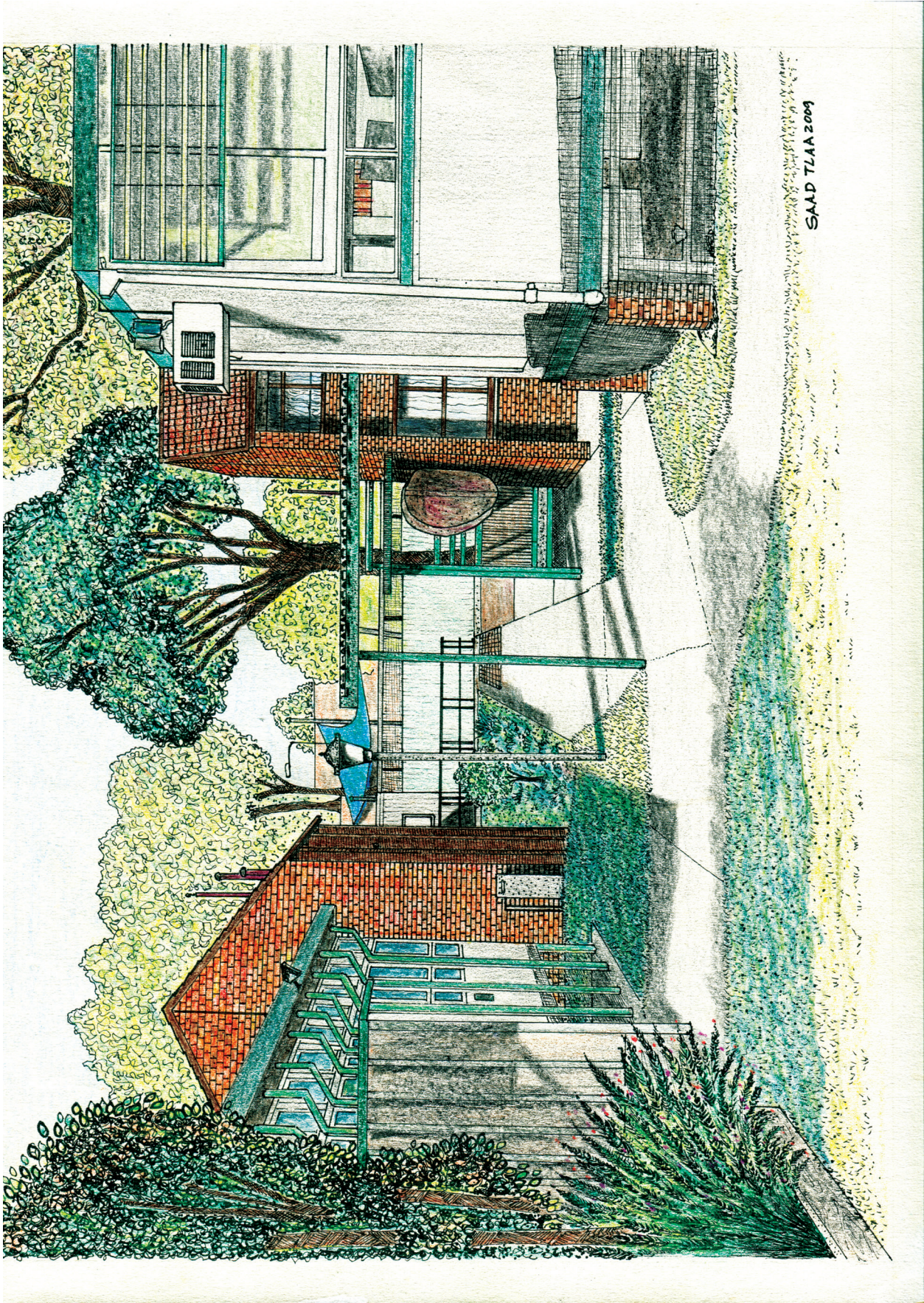
H, Tableau, found objects and mixed media, 48x35cm



H, Bringing Service to Life, found objects and mixed media, 48x35cm



Saad Tlaa, Inside Villawood 1, pen and watercolour on paper, 29x21cm



Saad Tlaa, Inside Villawood 2, pen and colour pencil on paper, 29x21cm



Saad Tlaa, Running for Freedom, watercolour on paper, 28x38cm



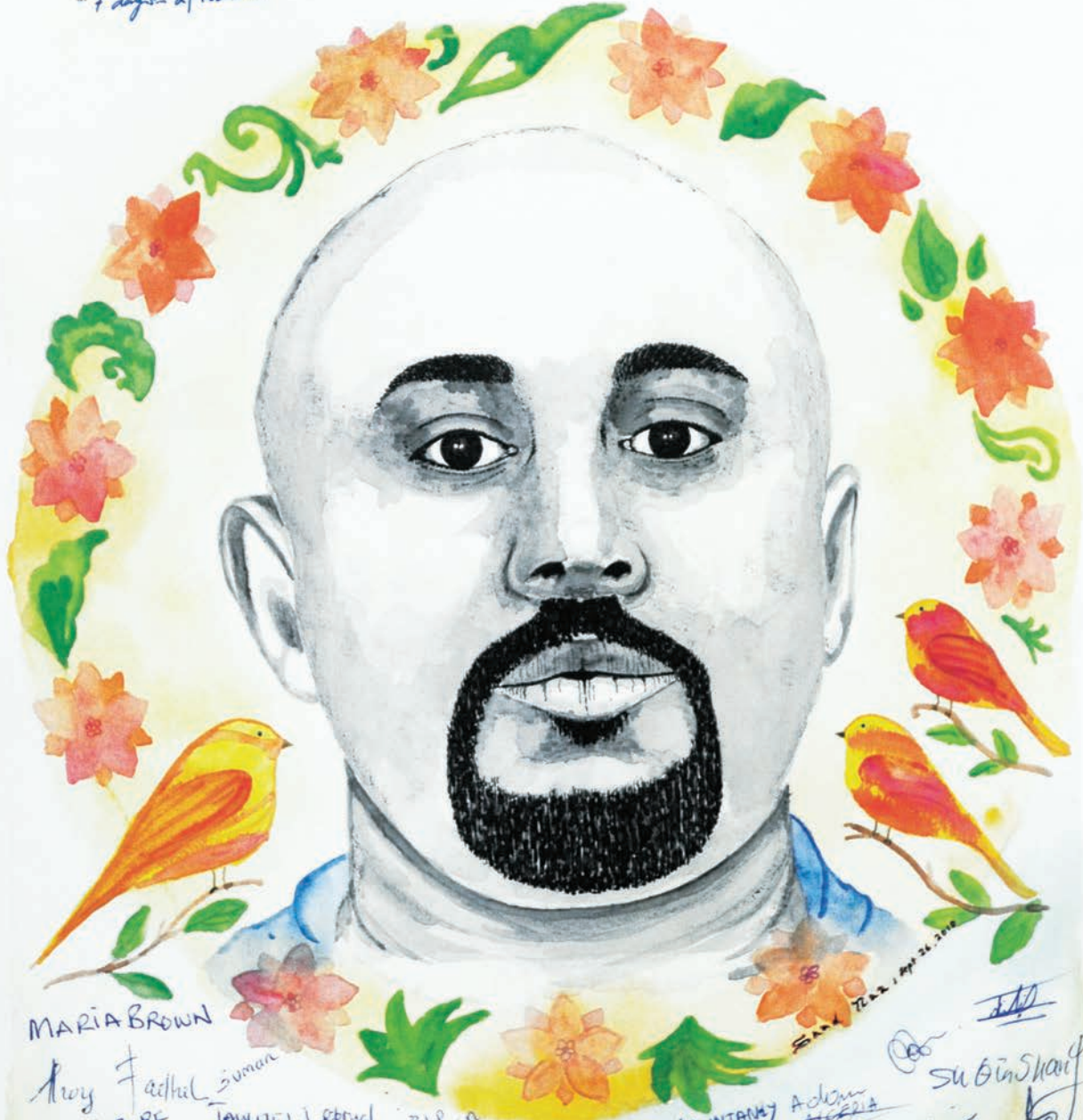
Saad Tlaa, Touching the Dream, watercolour on paper, 38x28cm



Saad Tlaa, Jump Towards a New World, watercolour on paper, 38x28cm

To the Family of our brother Josefa --
 this is on behalf of all the brother and
 sister here at villa wood I.D.C ...

your IRAQI brother
 Saad Tlaa
 sept. 27, 2010
 -7 days after....



MARIA BROWN
 May Faikel Suman
 KUNIZARE
 Thiki
 DASTA HOSH NIKOO
 YASIN YOUSUF
 KHALI
 AATCH mohammad
 Sonem
 Rinaat
 VILIVE BERO
 WANG WEI DEAN
 MUHAMMAD ADEEM
 ISMAIL
 PAKA
 XIAO NI
 SU BIN SHAN
 JUBIN
 THEER
 AHMOAD
 AHMED

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



Z, Villawood Fences 1



Z, Villawood Fences 2