

REFUGE

ANGELICA MESITI & CANDICE BREITZ

JOHN CURTIN GALLERY

Ten years before his death in 2018, French philosopher and cultural theorist Paul Virilio was alarmed by the fact that in 2008 over 36 million people were displaced due to climate, natural disasters or conflicts. Virilio warned of the imminent acceleration of the refugee crisis and its impact on our world:

‘The twenty first century will be the century of mass migrations. A billion people in the next fifty years is the figure predicted. A billion people will move. The whole world situation will be disrupted. Disrupted by the crisis in localisation. The old societies were connected to a territory, a native land. Today they’re adrift due to the delocalisation of jobs and never ending conflicts.’¹

Two of the world’s leading audio-visual artists give voice to the world’s immigrants and refugees in the video installations that comprise *Refuge*, the John Curtin Gallery’s exhibition for Perth Festival 2019.

Refuge features two poignant and timely works – South African Candice Breitz’s *Love Story* (2016) and Australian-born, Paris-based Angelica Mesiti’s *Mother Tongue* (2017). Both artists present the complex experiences of their immigrant and refugee subjects through music, performance and the spoken word, utilising the cinematic medium to explore cultural diversity and displacement.

The works in *Refuge* address an important global issue, given that in 2018 there were over 25 million refugees living outside of their home country, according to the Exodus World Service, and many others living within their home country but having fled their homes. The forced migration of people from developing countries as a result of violence, conflict and climate-related extreme events, is often presented in an unpalatable way through polarising political rhetoric and scare-mongering. *Refuge* depicts the human reality of these issues through the persuasive medium of cinema, bringing to life the plight of people forced to flee their homes and make new lives in often strange and inhospitable lands.

Breitz challenges audiences not to ignore the stories of refugees, deploying a provocative juxtaposition of storytellers – influential Hollywood stars Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore – with six real-life refugees. Mesiti in turn courts her audience through a compelling combination of joyful music and dance while firmly establishing an underlying narrative about displacement and the power of community.

Acclaimed at the 2017 Venice Biennale, in Breitz’s *Love Story* Moore and Baldwin recount the experiences of six refugees forced to flee their countries in desperate circumstances: Sarah Ezzat Mardini, who escaped war-torn Syria; José Maria João, a former child soldier from Angola; Mamy Maloba Langa, a survivor from the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Shabeena Saveri, an Indian transgender activist; Luis Nava, a political dissident from Venezuela; and Farah Abdi Mohamed, a young atheist from Somalia. The two actors’ empathic performances are juxtaposed with the personal narratives of these six individuals themselves, bringing to life the compelling and deeply personal experiences of these refugees.

In combination, these contrasting versions of the exact same accounts of suffering, provide insight into how such tragedies are communicated, interpreted and acted upon. In a cinematic installation interrogating the conditions under which empathy is produced, *Love Story* prompts viewers to consider why it is that Hollywood movie audiences around the world can be driven to tears by fictional blockbusters yet remain largely unaffected in the face of real human suffering.

Mother Tongue by Angelica Mesiti – whose work will represent Australia later this year at the 2019 Venice Biennale – also offers unusual insight into the immigrant experience through an elegiac journey into the song and music of diverse communities displaced from their homelands and living in the Danish city of Aarhus.

¹ Paul Virilio (2008), in Diller Scofidio + Renfro’s *EXIT*, commissioned by the Cartier Foundation, Paris, 2008

Exquisitely filmed in a number of locations and communities in Aarhus, *Mother Tongue* brings together ancient and modern rhythms, traditional and contemporary song arrangements.

This emotionally and visually immersive film is captured with the artist's characteristically dream-like nuance and reveals the role of music in defining and retaining cultural identity and tradition.

Mother Tongue has universal resonance, presenting a series of diasporic encounters between those who seek to belong yet also to retain and preserve a sense of cultural identity and tradition.

'A billion people moving over half a century. That's never been seen before. Immigrants are just the forerunners of the great traceability to come. Identity means you are connected to a place. Traceability means you go with the flow, you go on a never ending journey. Today the sedentary person is at home everywhere, thanks to telecommunications, to interactivity. The nomad is nowhere at home, except in transit camps here and there. So the question for us is: how will we cope with this perpetual motion, the perpetual motion of history in motion?'²

It is not the role of artists to proffer solutions to the enormous problems facing the world in this age of mass migration, as people are forced to seek refuge in places often far from their home and communities. Instead, the works in *Refuge* provide a forum for insight and contemplation, and in some small way contribute to the fostering in society of greater understanding and empathy.

Felicity Fenner & Chris Malcolm
Exhibition curators

² ibid