

**Isle of Refuge Art Exhibition,  
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, [UNSW College of Fine Arts](#)**

**Opening Speech of David Bitel, President of Refugee Council of Australia  
Thursday, 12 June 2003**

This is an important exhibition. It brings home forcefully to those of us who have the fortunate opportunity of viewing it, the very significant role that art plays in telling the story of human suffering. To quote Henry James: "It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance ... and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."

In recent years we have been besieged with a message from our political leaders which has demonized refugees who, it must always be remembered, are the victims of human rights violations by definition. These are amongst the most vulnerable people in the community. They are people whose lives have been uprooted, often without any warning through no fault of their own; people who previously enjoyed a happy comfortable existence like you and I, find themselves yearning for the basic rights and freedoms which all humanity are entitled to enjoy, deprived of such rights through events over which they have had no say. Refugees have maliciously been called criminals, abusers of the system and many other pejorative terms. Such language fails to appreciate the human, legal and moral obligations that we all have to extend support and sympathy to those foreigners within our community who have the greatest need. The Bible teaches us to treat with respect foreigners "because you were foreigners in the land of Egypt".

Like so many other Australians, my own family heritage is that of refugees. My grandparents' story is the "Fiddler on the Roof" story: Jews from the former Tsarist empire of Russia who suffered persecution over the centuries and who fled to the sanctuary and safety of England. The Refugee Convention, the cornerstone of the contemporary protection regime which Australia has by its ratification agreed to follow,

grew out of the ashes of the Shoah. The maniacal genocidal policies of the Nazi regime caused destruction throughout Europe, not only against Jews but also against other peoples considered to be sub-human or unter menschen: gypsies, Slavs, gays, people suffering from physical or intellectual disability, to name a few. Unfortunately, the refugee story has not disappeared and there are more refugees today from countries all over the world seeking our compassionate assistance than almost ever before in human history. Let us always remember the words of John Bradford on watching people being led to their execution in the sixteenth century: "There but for the grace of God go I".

This exhibition brings together important works of art by Australian artists, some of whom themselves have known the refugee experience. To me, particularly poignant is the work of My Le Thi which brings together in a powerful collage paintings by children in detention centers, faces and feet of refugees and other insignia of the contemporary Australian refugee experience which is a scandal to us all. The policy of mandatory detention can never be justified, particularly when it involves children. How can we justify the incarceration for extended periods of time of unaccompanied minors seeking sanctuary in this country. You may be aware of the story of an 8-year-old Afghan who spent months wandering around the Woomera Detention Centre, alone and without family. Where was the support of those responsible in Australia for the protection of children during that infant's awful predicament? The word "freedom" so prominently written on the paintings of the children reminds me of paintings of children that I witnessed in a centre established for underprivileged children in Dhaka, Bangladesh in the early 1990s. There, I saw paintings by children who had witnessed the brutality of a military dictatorship: paintings showing soldiers firing on crowds, parents being imprisoned and tortured and other graphic scenes which should never have to be witnessed by innocent children. I am also reminded of the paintings of the children of Theresienstadt Concentration Camp in wartime Czechoslovakia, which were the subject of an exhibition of the Powerhouse Museum some time ago. These paintings tell the story of the horrors of the life experienced by such children.

Art like theatre helps to individualise the refugee experience and brings back home to us all forcefully what might otherwise be a dry and sterile policy debate. Each of the works of art on display has an individual story to tell. Together, they provide an important and compelling statement which reminds us that we are a compassionate society and brings hope that the community will not forget its important obligations.

This exhibition needs to be widely seen and the excellent publication that accompanies it needs to be widely read because it tells the full story in eloquent language.

Exhibitions such as this have an important role to play in educating the public and deserve to be encouraged. I commend those who had the foresight to bring it together, to coincide with World Refugee Day on June 20.

On behalf of the Refugee Council of Australia, I am honoured that I have been asked to formally open this exhibition. I am confident that it will enjoy the success that it truly deserves.

To quote William Wordsworth:

"Is there not  
an art, a music, and a stream of words  
that shalt be life, the acknowledged voice of life?"

David Bitel

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