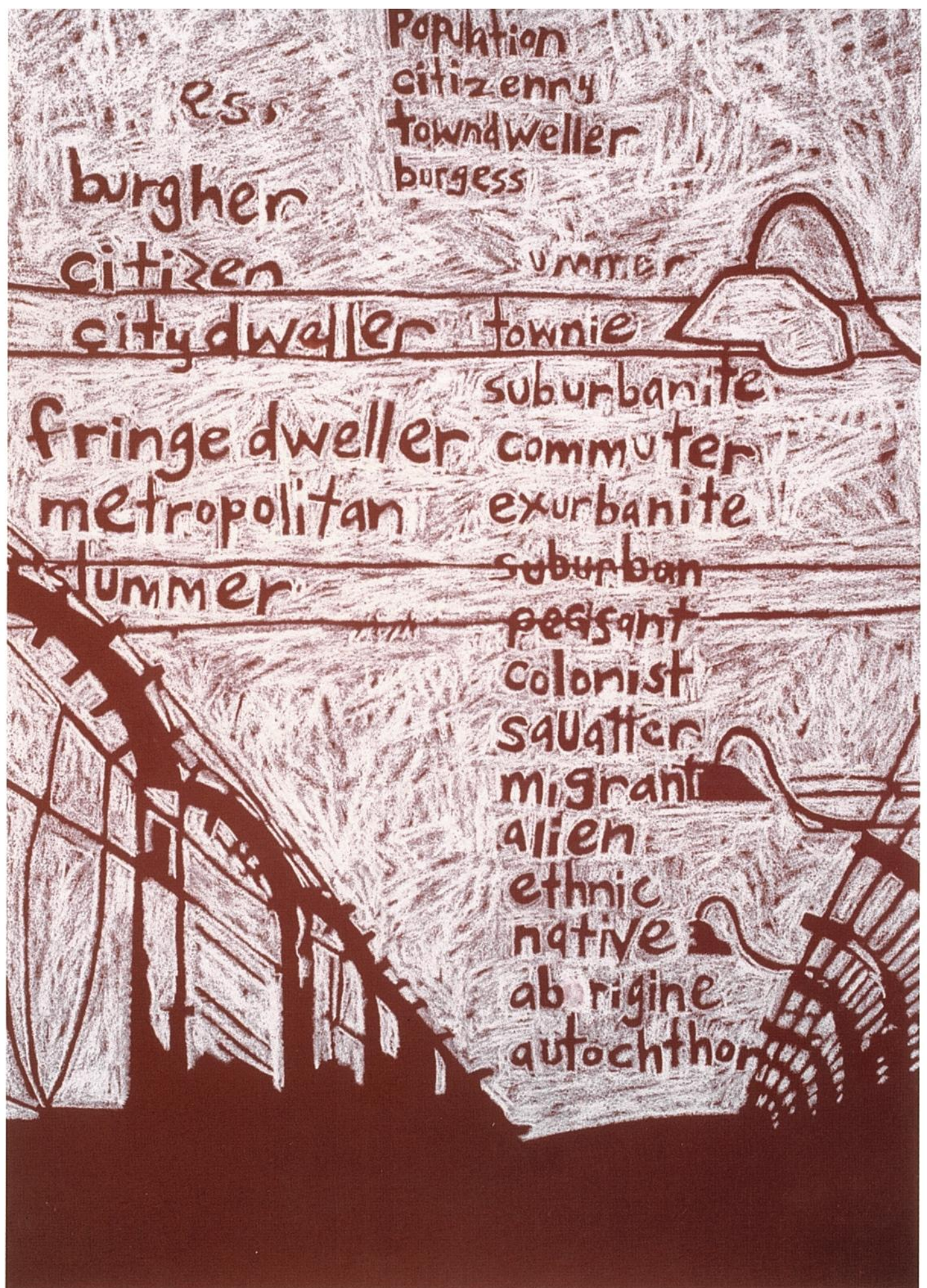




ISLE OF REFUGE

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Gordon Bennett

George Gittoes

Tim Johnson + Karma Phuntsok

Chris O'Doherty aka Reg Mombassa

Sue Saxon + Anne Zahalka

Laurens Tan

My Le Thi

Albertina Viegas

Savanhdary Vongpoothorn

Guan Wei

Mahmoud Yekta

INTRODUCTION

Many things are objectionable in the Howard government's policy on refugees. It's inhumane, hypocritical, xenophobic and politically self-serving. But one of its most troubling aspects is the message it sends to and about existing migrant and refugee communities in Australia.

As Ghassan Hage so vividly argues in his contribution to this catalogue, one cannot consider the treatment of Australia's external "national others", the refugees, in isolation from the treatment of its internal national others, the "multicultural" Australians. The rejection of the legitimacy, legality and indeed the humanity of contemporary asylum seekers arriving on Australia's shores is also a rejection of the history of those Australians who arrived under similar circumstances in the past. It threatens to negate their belonging as Australians, and to erase their crucial contributions to the nation – indeed, they *are* the nation, for what would Australia be without the post-war arrivals from Germany, Italy, Greece, the Baltic states, Lebanon, Indochina, China and elsewhere?

Perhaps nowhere is the presence of Australians of refugee and migrant backgrounds more apparent than in contemporary Australian visual art, a field in which a significant number of the most celebrated practitioners are non Anglo-Australians, and where the tropes of migrancy, hybridity and interculturality dominate.

Isle of Refuge brings together a group of prominent Australian visual artists who, through their personal histories, ethics and politics, have a special sense of solidarity with refugees in detention in Australia and in Australian camps in the South Pacific. This group includes artists who came to Australia as refugees, those who migrated because of political or racial pressure/persecution (*émigrés*), and those who are the children of refugees, *émigrés* and migrants. These artists also happen to represent some of the key refugee "sending" regions and nations: Europe, Indochina, the Middle East, China, Tibet, and East Timor.

We are extremely proud to have participating in the show a number of artists, both professional and non-professional, who are currently being detained in Villawood Detention Centre. My Le Thi has worked with the recently released poet Mohsen Soltanyzand and, over many trips to Villawood, has quite miraculously managed to bring to fruition collaborations with a number of asylum seekers, including children, still imprisoned there. We have not included their names here out of fear their participation in the exhibition will cause problems for them with DIMIA.

In addition, *Isle of Refuge* includes Anglo-Australian artists who have been particularly concerned with refugee issues in their work, and Indigenous Australian artist Gordon Bennett, whose participation the curators regard as being of great importance since, for us, it is only Aboriginal Australians who ultimately have a moral right to accept or refuse anyone entry into Australia. Given the fact that Indigenous Australians have not exactly unequivocally benefited from settler culture, an Aboriginal critique of the state's refusal of refugees has a great deal of *gravitas* indeed.

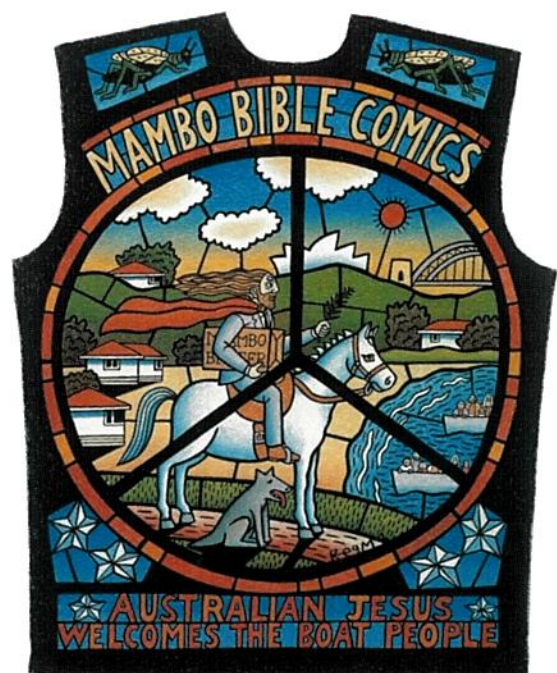
Rather than attempting to define a universal refugee experience, *Isle* has set out to explore the multifarious ways in which the refugee and *émigré* exhibitors have made themselves "at home" in Australia. Instead of framing them in terms of uprooting and displacement, for us it has been more productive to look at how the artists have negotiated ways of belonging in a land that continues to impose varying degrees of social exclusion on its "recently" arrived members. While planting firm roots in this country, each of the artists has also explored and reasserted

the sense of transnationality that comes from his or her direct or inherited history of flight and resettlement. In all of these artists' *oeuvres*, one discovers a strong sense of a claim to Australianness, and yet at the same time a transgression and transformation of what the parameters of national belonging might mean in a multicultural Australia. For these artists, Australia as "Isle of Refuge" has not been a place to passively shelter, but rather a site from which to actively question the official constructions of national identity, culture and history in both host- and home-lands.

If, on the one hand, Australia has operated for the artists in the show as a site in which the possibilities of interculturality and hybridity can be personally and aesthetically explored, on the other, all are aware of the fragility of this cosmopolitan space. The erection of external national boundaries against refugees surely leads to the threat of the re-erection of internal ones. As those who feel threatened by the presence of cultural and racial others in the national community find support for their fears and hatreds in official attitudes and policies, so they become more likely to be confirmed in these feelings and to act them out. The potential consequence is the loss of the recognition, status and indeed safety of Australians of migrant and refugee backgrounds.

It is on the issues of what kind of Australia we are to live in, and how this nation is to treat those who come to it in search of refuge, that all of the artists in the show find themselves on common ground. Their moral outrage at the dehumanisation of refugees, their refusal to see the clock wound back on multiculturalism and its values, and their insistence on recognising the history and belonging of existing refugee and migrant communities in Australia, all come out strongly in the works exhibited. All involved in the show are committed to defending the idea that Australia should remain an isle of refuge for those who come to it in search of safety, compassion and stability. Indeed, to deny them these things is to deny our history and everything that is good about us as a nation.

Ashley Carruthers, Rilka Oakley & My Le Thi



Chris O'Doherty a.k.a. Reg Mombassa
Australian Jesus Welcomes the Boat People 2002 charcoal & coloured pencil
40 x 32 cm Courtesy Watters Gallery & Mambo Graphics

ETHNIC CAGING

I have had no direct experience of the conditions in which 'boat people' and others find themselves following their 'capture' by the Australian State. Apart from having met and spoken to some refugees who have now settled in Australia, like many people, my experience is primarily through the media. Most vivid in my consciousness are intimations of caging practices: people behind fences, hands clutching wires, guards. I've seen the films and the photos, and listened to and read the reports of government officials justifying the way they 'handle' the situation. Of course, in the well-established traditional pattern of knowledge dissemination, the 'point of view' of the caged, from the budge to the prisoner, is seldom or never heard. The government categorises as 'non-persons' those who have attempted illegally to enter Australia's internationally recognised territories.

To many, the images of these 'ethnics behind cages' — for this is how they come across — are shocking. Even if one is supportive of the practice and does not feel particular empathy towards the 'caged', the practice still stands out as extraordinary. Indeed, a nationalist register is sometimes evoked to call this 'ethnic caging' un-Australian. It strikes many Australians as so shockingly 'other' to the Australia they experience in their everyday life. It is certainly different from the 'tolerant' Australia we commonly experience in our everyday life.

The reason why the images of 'ethnic caging' can shock in a tolerant society is obvious enough. At the most basic, ethnic caging appears as a negation of the *historical direction* Australia is pictured to have taken within multicultural discourse: multiculturalism as the historical rise of an ethic of goodwill towards ethnic otherness. If nothing else, multiculturalism encompasses a present struggle by the Australian State to appear to be 'nice' to ethnic otherness in contrast to a past history constructed as a time when Australia was 'not so nice' — the White Australia Policy, assimilation, etc. The 'then we were nasty, now we are nice' polarity clearly structures the imaginary history of multiculturalism and underlies most of its conceptual apparatus. In this context, ethnic caging *appears* as a historico-ethical reversal.

There is, however, a more recent comparative multicultural paradigm within which ethnic caging stands out as an equally shocking phenomenon. Here, the comparison is international rather than historical. It has emerged in light of the atrocities

associated with Eastern European nationalism, particularly the ethnic cleansing of the Bosnian wars. This comparison is structured around what is conceived as two radically different types of nationalism: a nationalism of extermination and a nationalism of tolerance. One is an 'Eastern' nationalism which always aims to eradicate ethnic otherness. The other is a 'Western' nationalism which always aims towards the appreciation and the valuing, and therefore the protection, of this ethnic otherness. Clearly, multicultural Australia is perceived here as very well entrenched in the 'Western' camp, while the 'Eastern' camp is constructed as totally other.

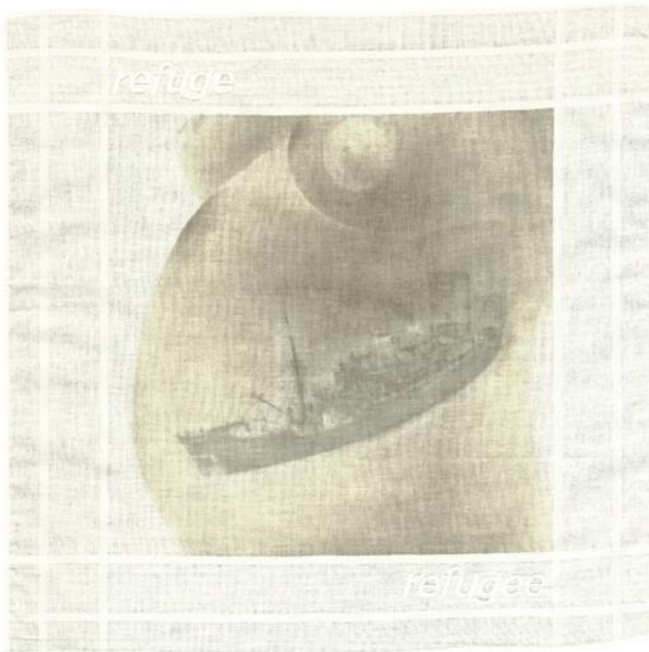
It is clear why ethnic caging shocks within the above dichotomy. The concentration-camp-like images it fosters make ethnic caging appear closer to ethnic cleansing than to anything remotely linked to multicultural appreciation and tolerance. The lack of respect for the humanity of the people concerned, the caging bureaucracy set up to deal with the 'non-people', accusations that institutional procedures are not being respected and that due process is not being followed in dealing with the 'caged', all of this works to position these practices further in the domain of 'Eastern otherness'. Are these remote northern outposts of Broome and Port Hedland really part of an Australia that wants itself to be so nicely tolerant? How can they be?

The government is clearly aware of this 'image problem', and many of its pronouncements on the issue aim at distancing the 'nature of Australian society' from 'what is happening at Port Hedland'. Port Hedland is 'not Australian society' in the same way the refuge seekers are 'non-persons'. At first sight, this idea of a non-social space inhabited by non-people does not seem like a credible idea, but the message the government intends to convey is implicitly quite efficient and credible: dealing with the illegal refuge seekers in this way does not reflect in any way on the values Australians hold regarding how their society should be internally structured. The fact that Australians are committed to kill, if necessary, the soldiers of an invading army does not mean that Australian society values killing. If we are willing to be nasty in protecting our nice nation, it does not mean that we have stopped being a nice nation.

So, the issues raised by the illegal arrivals are shown — convincingly, one must add — to have nothing to do with how Australians live their lives inside Australia. They have to do with a different set of issues such as: Does Australia have a territorial



Mahmoud Yekta Sorry 2003 still from video installation dimensions variable Courtesy the artist



Sue Saxon & Anne Zahalka *Displaced Persons* (detail) 2003 photographic images on white handkerchiefs 160 x 200 x 10 cm Courtesy the artists

integrity or doesn't it? Are we a nation capable of protecting our borders or aren't we? Are we capable of enforcing the international procedures set out for entering our nation, and that are followed by thousands of migrants, or are we going to allow people to 'jump the queue'? We can see how these questions are clear governmental questions: are we or are we not in control of the national social space?

Although the practice of ethnic caging is morally abhorrent, the government does make sense in stressing that illegal border crossings cause problems for the nation in terms of the issues raised above. What is questionable, however, is the neat separation between the internal problems of a nation (social organisation, social values) and its external problems (defence of borders, sovereignty) that is implied by this mode of argument. Can 'we' really be nice to ethnics in the internal organisation of the nation and cage them in its external organisation without there being any relation between the two?

This does not mean that the way 'we' treat illegal refugee seekers is bound to affect the way 'we' end up treating ethnic otherness within the nation. My critical intent is more analytical than prescriptive. I want to argue that the mode of categorising and dealing with national otherness in the process of defending the nation from external threats is intrinsically linked to the way national otherness is categorised and dealt with internally. Both emanate from the same structure of categorisation of national otherness, but they are different deployments of this structure in different contexts. That is, as far as ethnic caging is concerned, the mode of categorising ethnic otherness implied in the context of perceiving it as an external threat to the nation is not at all unrelated to the way ethnicity is perceived internally within multiculturalism. In fact, I want to argue that ethnic caging is best understood in the same way a symptom is conceived in psychoanalysis: a phenomenon which expresses a repressed structure that constitutes and underlies all of the reality of which it is a part. In this sense, the categories of ethnic caging express a structure of perceiving ethnicity which

constitutes and underlies all of Australian society rather than being external to it. It reveals the whole construct on which the tolerant society is erected.

During the Bosnian war, when the Bosnian Serbs became nasty, it was not because they were inherently different from us or from anybody else as nationals. It was because what was at stake was the very formation of a Bosnian Serb national will. The Bosnian Serbs were not fighting over 'Who is going to live in my nation?' They were fighting over 'Will my Bosnian national will live and order the nation?' So, here we have an example of nation-building turning nasty and deadly precisely because what was at stake was not the health of the Bosnian national body, but the life or death of a Bosnian national will capable of governing this body. The quest for ethnic purity is the quest of an ethnic will that is still in formation and still aiming for dominance within the nation. The tolerance of impurity is the preserve of the already well-established ethnic will, secure in its domination of the nation. Nationalists in quest of a national will are not willing or capable of dealing and coping with other national wills. They exterminate them.

When we have a situation where the issue of the national will has been reasonably settled — where the national will has achieved an enduring, although never final, capacity to keep otherness in check, and feels secure in its capacity to stop this otherness from forming a counter-will — national wills are more easygoing with national otherness. This is when they tolerate/not tolerate, accept/not accept rather than merely exterminate. This is when we get a national managerial parlance: 'You come here, you go there.' 'I don't mind you living here.' 'We're better off if you live there.' At the same time, however, while being more pleasant when dealing with national otherness, the national will is still constantly aware of the danger of the otherness constituting itself into a national will and has to ensure that this otherness does not do so and so come to endanger the national will's existence as such. This is why national otherness, even when it is tolerated, has always to be under the threat of extermination to ensure it does not 'take over'.



Guan Wei *Island no. 2* 2001 acrylic on canvas 137 x 165.5 cm Courtesy Sherman Galleries Collection: Anne Summers & Chip Rolley

If we take this brief analysis to Australia and examine the way in which national otherness is conceived within it by the White dominant culture, we find another reason why the series of differentiating criteria that Australian multiculturalism operates with in terms of 'nice'/'not so nice' nation-building, extermination/tolerance, Eastern/Western nationalism are not as dramatically different as multiculturalist discourse would like them to be.

White Australia has not, of course, always been tolerant, as the multiculturalists remind us. Well before the caging of illegal refugees, there were many examples of other instances of caging in Australian history. The Australian colonising national will exterminated and caged Aboriginal people literally and metaphorically, and, in an exemplary fashion, started valuing them when they no longer constituted a communal counter-will in themselves — when they were no longer capable of endangering the British-constituted colonising national will. More recently, Australians engaged in a massive exercise during World War II of caging and detaining 'ethnics', including some who actually held Australian citizenship.

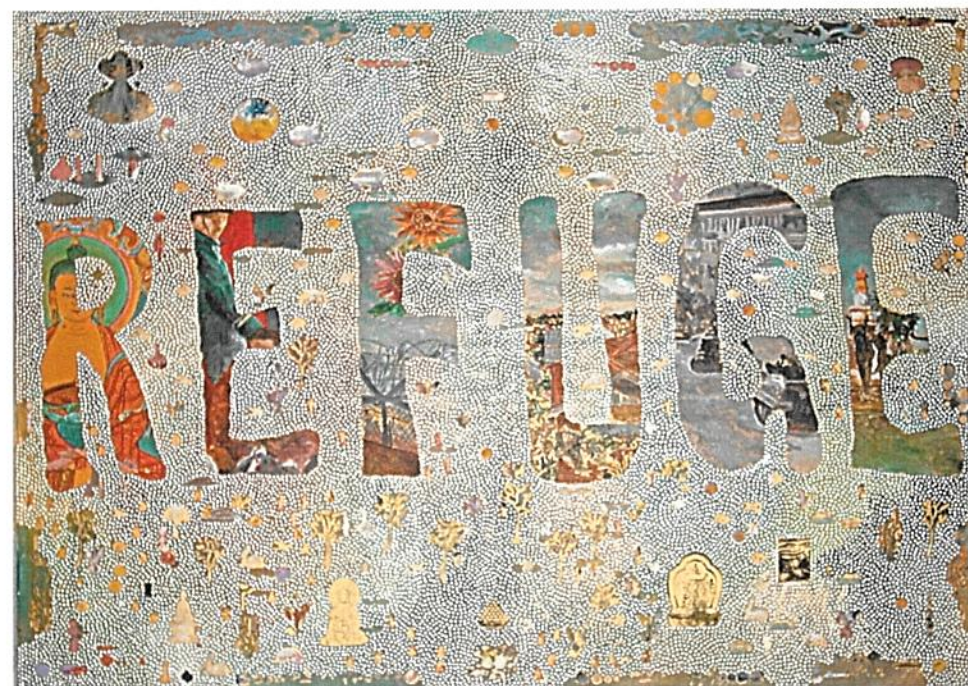
Why were Italians and Germans who were 'tolerated' in the 1930s and early 1940s detained and caged during World War II? Because wars emphasise the problematic nature of the national will. Many things that are perceived as harmless in peacetime become perceived by the dominating national will as dangerous for national survival in wartime. This also explains anti-Arab violence during the Gulf War. The national will cannot cope with the idea of others who may potentially subvert it by acting in the name of another national will (potential spies, the enemy within, etc.) to roam freely within the nation.

Multicultural tolerance does not escape this logic of nation-building. The multicultural national will, like all national wills, tolerates national otherness, but only in so far as this national otherness is in no danger of constituting a counter-will. Indeed, within multiculturalism, we find many examples where, when the national multicultural will is threatened, multiculturalism starts showing a rather nasty side.



Savanhdy Vongpoothorn *Robe II* 2003 paper, acrylic on perforated canvas 95 x 72.5 cm Courtesy Martin Browne Fine Art and Niagara Galleries

To take an example from everyday life today, it is enough to examine the way the notion of ethnic concentration is perceived and turned into a problem by the committed multiculturalists themselves. Multiculturalists are, of course, always readily emitting statements such as: 'We like diversity' or 'We like ethnicity'. Once they see a concentration of ethnicity, however, it is remarkable how they turn a bit on themselves. Some even assert, in a matter-of-fact manner, that the whole point of multiculturalism is to avoid ethnic concentrations or ethnic ghettos.



Tim Johnson & Karma Phuntsok *Refuge Painting* 2003 acrylic on linen 100 x 132 cm Courtesy the artist & Mori Gallery

What does 'too many' mean in the expression 'too many Vietnamese' living together? Why aren't 'too many' Whites living together a problem? Why is the concentration of ethnic otherness such a problem? Because, as Elias Canetti intimates in *Crowds and Power* (1973), concentrations can produce collective will. For instance, what differentiates the concentration camp from the mere prison at the level of its communal effect is precisely that concentration camps, by being 'prisons of concentrations', imprison and break not just individual members of a community, but also the communal itself. So, otherness scattered

around the nation is fine. Once 'they' start concentrating, however, they could become an alternative will and the national will has to go in and disperse them.

Indeed, the multicultural discourse that perceives the concentration as a problem always ends up turning national control over it into a problem. Someone else, another, often dark, criminal forces, disease — these are often perceived by a collective White imaginary as controlling ethnic ghettos. So what is happening here? A typical national will perceives in the concentration a potential counter-will, and readies itself to exterminate it in order to transform it once again into a will-less ethnicity that can once more be appreciated and tolerated. This is all done lovingly from *within* multiculturalism.

Often, in the public discussion of illegal refugee-seekers, we hear things such: 'There's only sixty boat people', 'eighty boat people', etc. Also, people rightly point out that in terms of numbers, it's nothing. Australia has taken many more. So why all the fuss?

Indeed, if the question was about these ethnic others inhabiting the national body, it wouldn't have been a problem. When we are talking about people 'jumping the queue', however, we are not talking about people who are merely taking a position allotted to them in the national home. This 'queue' is nothing other than the manifestation of the national will. Having seen what this queue looks like in an embassy located in a Third World country, it may not be as civilised as the queue in a David Jones department store, but it is a part of the national order, the order imposed by the national will for entering the national body. This is why it is not a matter of numbers: whether two people or one hundred jump the queue, what they have done is engage the nation at the level of its national will. They have literally tried to subvert the national will. They have activated something no national will can perceive without turning nasty: they are ethnic others who have exhibited a will of their own. That it is why they are so dangerous.

The national will does not care about the reason why the other hasn't followed the proper channels set out by that will for entering the nation. What it cares about is that it is a national will and it must be capable of enforcing its proper channels, its queues, its order. Otherness must not be allowed, under any circumstances, to show this national will to be weak. You make it shaky and the national will will have to act accordingly. Ethnic caging is not the caging of ethnic numbers, it is the caging of ethnic wills. It is, as the government itself argues, an example for others: don't try to activate your own will. One will rules in Australia and this is how it is going to be.

As the man falling from the skyscraper in the French film *La Haine* says to himself, 'So far, so good'. So far, so good because, if Australia did not have a sizeable ethnic population, ethnic caging as a message for other *external* ethnic wills about the wish of the Australian national will to keep on

ruling the nation would be relatively without problem. It is unproblematic, that is, in a world where the very condition of the existence of nations has to do with the capacity to enforce national procedures for crossing borders. Australia is a multi-ethnic country, however, and hence this message is not as unproblematic as it may first appear.

I do not think that these images of caged ethnics I started by referring to have grabbed my attention just as an academic. I think they affected me, in part, because I was watching them as an 'ethnic'. That is, because of the make-up of Australian society, we cannot escape the fact that the message of ethnic caging, even if directed primarily at ethnic wills external to Australia, becomes also a message directed at the ethnic wills inside Australia itself. In this process, ethnic caging obtains an added significance which needs to be explored.

Caging is a very interesting phenomenon. For a number of years, I have actually been studying the domestication of animals and its relevance for understanding the domestication of people within nations. That is why caging grabbed my attention almost immediately as an interesting mode of nation-building. As a result, I would like to refer here to the work of the early French naturalist, Geoffroy de St Hilaire, who, in 1861, wrote a book on the domestication of animals.

De St Hilaire differentiates between three states to which humans can reduce animals in the process of subordinating them to their needs. They can be captive, tame or domesticated. Captive animals are those who have to be caged or physically restrained to remain subjected to humans. Without this physical restraint, they would go back into the wild unaffected by their experience. That is, captive animals have not yet undergone any major transformation in their mode of conceiving how they should live. They still conceive of the 'good life', if one can say so, in the same way that they did when they were first captured. Tame animals, on the other hand, have internalised their state of captivity such that the physical restraints are no longer needed as an instrument of subjugation. Their idea of the good life has changed, and they are happy being around the humans who tamed them; caging is no longer necessary to retain them. The difference between tame and domesticated animals is even



George Gittoes *The Yellow Room (Afghanistan)* 2002 oil on canvas 171.5 x 257.5 cm Courtesy the artist

more important. For de St Hilaire, animals that are tame are always so as individuals of a species. What differentiates the domesticated from the tame is precisely that domestication involves the reproduction of the species in captivity. That is, the domesticated are subjugated as a self-reproducing community of tame animals.

De St Hilaire's differentiation of the three states is exceptionally interesting in light of what we have been discussing so far. What is the significance of the difference between captive animals and tame animals as far as our present analysis is concerned? One is tempted to say quickly that captive animals are caged, while tame and domesticated animals are not. There is an element of truth in this, but it is not the whole truth. Tame and domesticated animals are, in fact, often caged. They are not trusted to know that they are not supposed to go certain places and therefore may need to be fenced in. I think what is more important than the difference between caged and not caged is the difference in the function of caging. For captive animals, caging constitutes the main instrument of their subordination. Tame and domesticated animals have incorporated their state of subordination — cages are used to control their movement, to position them within domestic space, rather than as the main instrument of their subjugation. More importantly, however, what does it mean when we say that captive animals have not changed their conception of the good life, while tame and domesticated animals have?

In our terms, it simply means that captive animals still have a will independent of the human domesticator while, for both the tame and the domesticated animals, this will has become subjugated to the will of the domesticator. Here is my point: if we can easily recognise in the wilful caged animal the wilful refuge seeker who has not submitted to the order of the national will, are we not also invited to recognise in ourselves, those ethnics who have 'successfully settled in Australia', the tame and the domesticated animal whose will has been subjugated as the very condition of belonging to the domestic space of the Australian national will? That is, by virtue of the absence of a cage to subjugate us, are we not always post-caged? Mustn't we have undergone a real or metaphoric caging which has shaped our communal wills such that we can no longer constitute any possible counter-will for the Australian governing national will, as the very precondition of our becoming the subjects of tolerance rather than the subjects of extermination or caging?



Albertina Viegas *Untitled* (detail) 2003 mixed media installation, Legal Aliens Identity Card Photographs – Australian Department of Immigration 1976 – Mum, Me, Cissy, Bea dimensions variable Courtesy the artist

It is in this sense that Port Hedland works as a psychoanalytic symptom: what are these pictures of ethnic caging being offered to us but images of ourselves as domesticated Third-World-looking ethnics (TWLE as opposed to NESB) that constitute the very support for the reproduction of the White national fantasy of a multicultural Australia?

A dominant culture in which tolerance is grounded in the necessity of ethnic caging cannot possibly produce a politics which counters a racism which sees, in all Third-World-looking migrants, undesirable people who ought not be accepted into the nation. For it is a culture which is merely producing, through its enacting of the White nation fantasy, the very conception of Third-World-looking migrants proposed by the 'racists'. The difference is that it argues that, *despite this*, they ought to be tolerated. When the tolerant says to the racist, 'I know how you're feeling but ...', they indeed do know how they are feeling.

Ghassan Hage
Anthropology, University of Sydney



My Le Thi *Behind the Fence* 2003 wire fence, plaster, acrylic on paper & sound dimensions variable Courtesy the artist, friends in Villawood & Mori Gallery

ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHIES

GORDON BENNETT

The concept of Australia as an Isle of Refuge, migration and asylum is a somewhat ironic idea for me. Rather, my approach to this project was more one of empathy for the refugees and their situation. I say empathy because Aboriginal people know the reality of internment, both in the physical sense of Aboriginal reserves where people needed a written permission slip (the 'dog tag') to leave, and in the psychological sense of fear of, and the language used to describe, the Other. There may not be any razor wire but language can build walls and imprison people as effectively as fences.



GEORGE GITTOES

During 2002, I travelled extensively around Afghanistan and was horrified by the life threatening conditions of internal refugees and the instability of the country under Northern Alliance warlords, with their general disregard for human rights.



On two previous field trips to Afghanistan (1999, 2001) I had experienced the iron hard fundamentalist rule of the Taliban. Through first hand knowledge of the perils of Afghanistan I felt a great sympathy for those who had travelled the dangerous gauntlet in the hope of a more secure life in Australia. I made contact with some of these families and was shocked by their treatment at such Detention Centers as Woomera. As a result, I participated in fund raisers to assist the legal fight and participated in making the *Tales from a Suitcase* documentary for SBS. I also contributed my video footage and interviews to such programs as *Dateline* and *The 7:30 Report*, gave dozens of radio interviews, and contributed news articles in a personal campaign, as an advocate for these detainees. My aim was to bring a wider understanding to the Australian public by telling very human refugee stories which I felt would appeal to the traditional Aussie sympathy for true battlers deserving 'a fair go'.

TIM JOHNSON & KARMA PHUNTSOK

Tim Johnson and Karma Phuntsok have worked collaboratively on paintings since the 1980s. Karma Phuntsok was born in Lhasa in Tibet and after living in Nepal and India came to Australia. "My family and I fled Tibet after the Chinese invasion in 1959, escaping into India as refugees. Now I live in the bush north of Kyogle with my partner Carol and son Karchung." Tim Johnson was raised in Sydney by an English mother who came to Australia as a "war bride" after World War II and an Australian father of Irish descent.



CHRIS O'DOHERTY A.K.A. REG MOMBASSA

Born in 1951 Auckland, New Zealand. I came to Australia with my parents at the age of seventeen. They came here because my father was a carpenter and there was a recession on in New Zealand at that time so there was little building work available.



Because Australia and New Zealand are culturally and racially very similar (particularly if you are of an Anglo Celtic background) there is little prejudice shown towards New Zealanders living here. What little prejudice there is usually takes the form of a few sheep and gumboot jokes or comments about our thick nerdy accent.

SUE SAXON & ANNE ZAHALKA

Sue Saxon

My father arrived in Sydney in 1950 on the *Surriento*, having survived the German occupation of Hungary with false papers. Much of my family perished in Nazi labour or concentration camps and the family vineyards, for which my father yearned all his life, were first confiscated by the Germans and again by the Communist government. Australia represented the greatest distance between a bloodsoaked Europe and a new future, and, although my father and mother, who joined him in 1956, never completely understood their adopted country, they always appreciated the beauty, opportunity and religious and political freedom they found here.

Anne Zahalka

My parents arrived in Sydney in 1950 on the *Surriento* as exiles from their homeland. My mother, an Austrian Jew, fled Nazism while my father escaped the occupation of his country Czechoslovakia to join the allies. They met in England during the war and married, returning to live in Prague in 1946. After the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia, my mother wanted to find a place as far away from Europe and its traumatic past as possible. Ironically, they escaped to Germany applying for refugee status and on an assisted passage they chose Australia as their new homeland.



LAURENS TAN

The turnstile image is a haunting memory for me as an emigrant from Surabaya, Indonesia. In 1959 my family fled an oppressively hostile environment to embark for Singapore, and subsequently went on to Melbourne, Australia in 1962. Blurred details inform this reconstructed image. On reflection, the perils of this ordeal were acutely felt as we braved the risk my parents undertook. Yet risk is the vital propellant to growth and change.



For some time now, my interest has been in games and game-playing as parody of the drama of survival and growth. The game of risk is introduced into our lives as real-life adventure in receptive purpose-built settings. Resolute in its opulence, the casino environment invites risk-as-pleasure. It is a place where we can play out our adventures and be home by midnight.

MY LE THI

My Le Thi was born in Buon Ma Thuot in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Her mother was a highlander from China who migrated to Vietnam. After surviving the war Thi studied Highlands music and dance. In 1978, a new war broke out between the Chinese and Vietnamese on the border, and many Vietnamese/Chinese fled from Vietnam. She and her family also left Vietnam in 1985 to come to Australia. She studied Arts at the Northern Territory University and graduated in 1993. In 1995 Thi moved to Sydney for further study and since then has lived and practiced art full time in Sydney.



ALBERTINA VIEGAS

When we left, my oldest brother Victor ran back and collected some clothes and belongings, most of which were my mother's *kabaya* and *kain-batik* and my baby sister's nappies. We had no idea where we were going. Mum says waiting at the port felt like we were waiting to die. I hate leaving. I'm yet to process the details of our passage. I'm still frightened of deep water. Returning to Timor the first time felt like returning to the very day we left. I never feel like I'm in one place, always in between places. Maybe that's why I now live in a remote Aboriginal community.



SAVANHDARY VONGPOOTHORN

My family and I escaped from Laos to Thailand in 1979, where we stayed in a refugee camp for 9 months before coming to Australia. After one year in a migrant hostel in Cabramatta my parents became anxious to leave and start a new life in the larger Australian community, so we moved into an apartment in Narwee. One day, Evangelical Christians came knocking at our door and my parents invited them in. They stayed for hours talking about God and Jesus, and how they wanted our family to join their church. My father thought that this was the greatest, that finally somebody in Australia wants us to be part of their community. So we went to church every Sunday for two years, and my three older brothers and I went to Sunday school. But one night, my mother had a dream. She dreamt that two men were fighting at the end of her bed, one wearing a yellow robe with a shaved head, the other wearing white rags with long hair and blue eyes. They fought and wrestled, until the man wearing white rags with long hair and blue eyes walked away. My mother saw this as a sign: the Buddha was telling her she was betraying her own ancestral roots and culture by going to church. After working for two years, my father had enough money saved, and he and my mother decided to buy a house in Campbelltown.



GUAN WEI

I first came to Australia in 1989 for artist-in-residence in Tasmania School of Art. When I went back to China, the students were protesting in the Tian An Men Square. Then the protesting develops into crises. I was very disappointed by the Chinese government. After this event in 1990 I came back to Australia and decide to live here permanently.



MAHMOUD YEKTA

Mahmoud Yekta is a glazer, filmmaker, writer as well as a refugee. He recently wrote the following: "He is thirsty.

Every time he tries to swallow his saliva he hears a disappointing dry noise. He drags his feet on the changing patterns of desert sand that form in front of him. 'So this is what they mean by eternity ...' says the hallucinating Australian soldier to his fading self. Suddenly he notices a little girl who is rubbing the sand off her sandals. 'Who are you?' the young man asks. 'I am your great great grandmother. In ten years time your great great grandfather will force himself upon me. You will be one of the later results of that.' 'What ... on earth ... are you talking about?' The soldier manages to spit the words out with a considerable amount of sand. 'Fate, confused by the similarity of circumstances, has thrown you well back to the past of your present.' The little girl bangs her sandals against each other, drops them on the ground, wears them and walks away."



Anecdote: "That we do not proceed from an actual present to the past, that we do not recompose the past with various present, but that we place ourselves directly in the past itself. That this past does not represent something that has been, but simply something that is and that coexists with itself as present."

Giles Deleuze

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Ashley Carruthers, Rilka Oakley & My Le Thi

ISLE OF REFUGE

12 June – 19 July 2003

Curators: Ashley Carruthers, Rilka Oakley & My Le Thi

Design: Sally Robinson

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(FRONT COVER IMAGE) Gordon Bennett

Watch Tower 2002 (detail) chalk pastel on colourfix paper 140 x 148.5 cm
Courtesy Bellas Gallery, Brisbane; Greenaway Gallery, Adelaide; Sherman Galleries, Sydney and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

(BACK COVER IMAGE) Laurens Tan

Adapt Enforce 13 2003 digital 3D modelled animation stills in lightboxes
90 x 64 x 4 cm each Courtesy the artist

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