

About *Landmarks Watermarks*, 1996

(Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, June 1996)

Old outdoor family portraits taken in the 1950s included in my last major installation entitled, *Landmarks Watermarks* (ACP, Sydney June 1996) prompted my interest in landscape imagery. In those portraits of my young migrant parents are shown respectively, in their tiny Maltese hamlet of Santi and soon after, in Baulkham Hills (what was then rural western Sydney). What struck me about these photographs was that my parents appear to be unchanged by their emigration to Australia. In each instance they confront the camera in similar poses and similar Sunday dress. Those photographs were sent 'back home' in letters to their Maltese families.

The vastly different landscape backdrops in the portraits signal the cataclysmic shift that is migration. In the installation I included a photomontage showing a Maltese village sitting on a hillside in rural western Sydney. The incongruity represented by these two landscapes in the one picture plane represents the sense of cultural disorientation that 'new Australians' feel. Within that cataclysmic shift there is also a cleaving. Migrants cannot bring the 'old country' with them. Racism's simplicity insists that migrants leave their culture on the shores of the old country as though it were possible to separate culture from self.

Migrants are inevitably disoriented by their arrival to the 'new country'. Initially they can only make sense of it through the old one. (Just as we can only make sense of new images through old ones, and we can only make sense of new experiences through old ones.) Migrants will seek familiarity in order to re-orient themselves. The photographs they take will be composed through a culture that is ingrained in their being. But their new culture will also leave its marks upon them. Not only are their children cultural hybrids, but they will become engendered with a more subtle cultural hybridity that further separate them from their families and country of origin.

Landmarks Watermarks was my attempt to acknowledge, represent and resolve the extraordinary transformation and cultural crisis that follows in the wake of migration not only for my parents but also for myself. That exhibition also represents an end point of my own conscious and unconscious struggles with the legacy of this cultural crisis as a second generation "migrant".

My need to reconcile these two cultures had unconsciously pervaded all of my work in some way prior to *Landmarks Watermarks*. (I discuss this at length in my MFA paper Unseen, University of NSW College of Fine Art, 1996.) Briefly, I came to see how the two apparently irreconcilable media of painting and photography unconsciously became metaphors for the two sides of my cultural heritage. They also represent my own struggle as a photographic artist. The Western medium of painting was seen historically to be the forefather of the younger art form of photography. While making *Landmarks Watermarks* I was also working on a body of work entitled, *After Life* that was exhibited at the same time at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne. This work encompassed another unconscious need: to find my place as an artist working with the medium of photography historically burdened by the weight of painting. In addition, that genre was dominated by men, as was my background.

In my paper, Unseen, I came to the conclusion that the two media need not have the tragic power struggle of Oedipal proportions but can continue to exist side by side and influence one another.

I continue to use the two media or elements of the two, in my work as I have done since the beginning of my artistic career.