

Excerpt from my MFA paper, *Unseen*, Univ. of NSW College of Fine Art, Sydney, 1996.

(Background to *Landmarks Watermarks* Installation at ACP, Sydney June 1996)

In 1992, the market garden that I had spent many years working was being threatened by suburban housing development. I regarded that land as being very much my father's. It was also a place where I had grown up and worked, and one I could revisit. Subsequently, the erasure of this site meant a simultaneous erasure of that large part of my history. Without that site to prompt memory, that history could dissolve like a dream upon waking.¹⁹

The garden itself sat on the side of a hilly crescent, which already contained newly built brick houses. As a child, I used to sit on the top of the hill, upon which our garden sat, enjoying the uplifting sense of a distant panoramic view. Beyond that horizon I would imagine that there was a much larger world that I was yet to experience.

Before it was transformed into streets of houses, I photographed the garden and surrounding landscape in a 360-degree panorama. During that time, I had a vivid dream about a giant Maltese church dome rising up over the opposite horizon of that suburban Australian landscape. Apart from the dome being a symbol of the dominance of Catholicism in our family life, the image also struck me as a symbol for what I imagined was my parents' initial culture shock upon arriving here. I made a montage reproducing the dream image. **(Picture 2.)** It became the first part of a work entitled *Landmarks Watermarks*, an installation I have been working on over the past three years.

What began as a simple documentation of a site developed into a large work about the relationship of landscape to identity as represented through photography, and the particular importance photography has to migrants and their families.²⁰ (I later recognised that this work also partly reflected cultural clashes between my beloved Maltese father and myself—his Australian-born child.)

Landmarks Watermarks includes black and white portraits of my parents taken before leaving Malta and after migrating to Australia. My mother took hundreds of photographs, many of which were sent back home to her large family in Malta. She kept a substantial collection of negatives, mostly taken between their arrival in 1954 and the birth of her last child in the mid-sixties. Her need to document the family diminished proportionately with the

¹⁹ As I was often behind the camera, there are no photographs from that time spent in the garden - no 'proof' that I was ever there.

²⁰ Talking about his work *Diaspora* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1995, Australian artist Imants Tillers, remarked that image reproduction is particularly pertinent to migrants whose origin is also elsewhere - that one's origin is far removed from oneself.

accumulation of years lived in Australia, and particularly after both her parents had died. My mother hardly thinks about taking photographs now but told me that family photographs were immensely important to her then.

The portraits of my young Maltese parents have fascinated me since I was a child. Looking at them, I have often wondered what those migrants had been like - they looked strong, almost defiant. I imagined that they felt isolated in this vast foreign land, so far from their small familial village. They said that they had felt isolated; however, those feelings were swamped by the demands of parenting seven children and by a determination to succeed here.²¹

(Pictures 4, 5 &6.)

In our portrait photographs as migrants or travellers, the landscape locates us, it is our backdrop and support. The moments frozen in these photographs are records of having been in a particular place at a certain time. We see ourselves in landscape photographs from the outside, the way others see us, thereby affirming our being in the world.

Portrait photographs seem to show ghosts of people who have migrated literally and metaphorically from some unknown and absent time and place. In a sense, all portrait photographs are just slivers of paper upon which are recorded the impressions of light reflected from the faces of people who no longer exist as they appear there, and who perhaps only existed as such for the instant it took to take the photograph. A portrait photograph is more like a death mask of a unique and unlocatable instant of life, and perhaps for this reason the people in portrait photographs remain the strangers they always were. A photograph cannot prove anything about us because it cannot show the continuity of life that is always outside its frame.

However, we attempt to recognise people in photographs by looking for sameness. The people in those old family photographs do, more-or-less, resemble the parents I know. In those photographs they look remarkably the same also with either the Maltese or Australian landscape behind them - apparently unchanged by having migrated to the other side of the earth. This is because they conformed to the conventions of photographic portraiture. Their poses are similar: they are in their Sunday best with children, house, car, garden, filling the frame—they symbols of achievement.

²¹ My mother could speak and write English before she emigrated. My father was orphaned at a young age and consequently had little schooling - he cannot read or write at all but was able to support himself as a labourer from the age of 12 through various forms of self employment.

Roland Barthes made an insightful analysis of portrait aesthetic in Dutch painting of the 18th century which might equally apply to these migrant photographs: *"Men inscribe themselves upon space, immediately covering it with familiar gestures, memories, customs, and intentions."*²²

As well as through seeking the familiar, we orient ourselves by *making* things familiar. These portrait photographs are intrinsically familiar and familial.

Nearly all the family portraits were taken out of doors and most often with the market garden as a backdrop. In one photograph, my mother stands impeccably attired in a formal silk dress, silk stockings and high heels in a bed of parsley. Other photographs show both parents working the land together.

Owning land would be of paramount importance to my parents' sense of belonging to a place and having a right to live there. For my parents, land is synonymous with livelihood and the land they worked wherever they chose to live would support them.

The resemblances found between portrait photographs of ourselves suggest that our identity is continuous with us regardless of where we are. One's identity is constantly changing, whether or not one migrates, and is always influenced by its context. Identity is a living aspect of being which is both cumulative and temporal. Instants of time that can be captured in photographs are being continuously shed like skin. Portrait photographs represent us in an accumulation of time to the present, and in a shedding of the present into the past.

One's origin from anything is immediately and irrevocably lost upon making the shortest journey. As Stuart Hall says, *"Migration is a one way trip. There is no 'home' to go back to."*²³

The photographs of my family which my mother sent to Malta served as its substitutes and would allow their families to recognise them should they choose to return. The migrant the portrait photograph has replaced the ancient Greek tradition of the *symbolon*. *"For the Greeks, the 'symbolon' was a piece of pottery or earthenware that was broken in two prior to someone's (usually a warrior's) voyage. One of the two pieces remained at the site of departure while the other was carried by the traveller and 'voyaged' with him. Upon his return (often many years*

²² Roland Barthes, "The World as Object", *Calligram* Ed. by Norman Bryson, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p107.

²³ Iain Chambers, "Migrant Landscapes", *Migrancy Culture Identity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p9. Thanks to John Conomos for bringing this text to my attention.

*later), the traveller's piece of pottery served as a sign of recognition and as proof of his identity when it was rejoined with its matching complement. The word "symbol" referred to each of the two pieces individually, as well as the act of putting the two pieces together (from the Greek sýmballo = to put together)."*²⁴ **(Fig. 10)**

I was also trying to locate my origin through those photographs taken in a small foreign country 14,178km from my birthplace. I grew up with a sense of groundlessness, of being of no particular place, without an anchor to an origin while being pulled in two cultural directions.

In those portraits my parents face the camera squarely, with feet planted firmly on the ground and their bodies intersecting an unreachable horizon line. Perhaps this horizon is an apt metaphor for the mirage of a locatable certainty. Perhaps identity here is not a noun but a verb - a nebulous, malleable and indeterminable process of being, the criteria of which are relative to one's life and all its unpredictable and transformative experiences that erode and build it into a complex continuum, wherever one may happen to live. Perhaps what has been rightly lost in migration is the illusion of fixture, a fixture analogous to the death mask of the portrait photograph. Photographs present to us the illusion of an origin to which we might return. But photographs cannot show the continuous transformation of identity across time and place which prohibits such a return.

²⁴ Esther Raskin, op. cit. p47.

Over time, the sense of being from, or an incomplete part of, a foreign culture has dissolved into recognition of the rich complexity of being of two cultures. Perhaps we are all migrants, complex transient identities who can never return to our origins. We are the ever-changing vehicles of culture and this is perhaps why clear cultural definitions cannot be photographed or possessed. What we possess are portrait photographs that are inevitably indifferent to our sense of being.

Landmarks Watermarks will contain several life-sized projections of family photographs, a photographic landscape mural, computer montages, a large landscape projection, and a soundtrack. Upon entering the low lit, self-contained space through a slit in a suspended backdrop, the viewer will come face-to-face with a convex mirror which will reflect her/himself against the backdrop showing a photograph of the street outside the gallery. A seascape viewed through a cave will be projected onto the opposite wall facing the doorway. The projection and soundtrack will stop at three-minute intervals when the gallery lights are automatically activated to illuminate the drawing and the photographs.

Through *Landmarks Watermarks*, I hope to give some sense of the effects of migration and transition: the crossing of water, the crossings of culture - my parents and mine. These crossings are a one-way journey, which magnify the transient and ephemeral nature of being.

Like many Maltese of their generation, my parents, Giovanni and Veneranda Mifsud, survived what had been the most heavily bombed country on Earth in World War II. They left Malta in March 1954 and spent forty days at sea in transition between two lands, with little to see but the thin blue edge of water that encircled and suspended them. Time enough perhaps, upon that vast amniotic fluid, to turn one's vision inward for an anchor. They were yet to be claimed and oriented by solid ground under foot - a rebirth into a new life here. My parents have lived in Australia now for 50 years. Distance and time have gently released them from Malta and they continue to live in Sydney. This exhibition is dedicated to them.

Preliminary work for *Landmarks Watermarks* really began many years earlier in childhood when I began collecting china shards from various places I have lived and worked. More recently I collected a large swag of china, ceramic and glass shards from the edges of Sydney Harbour at low tide. I found a wide range of shards in different stages of

wear, some perhaps dating back to the earliest settlers here. Those remnants of different histories travelled from many parts of the world and were found together like a mixed group of migrants who had arrived on the same shore, united by common circumstances. The ebb and flow of the sea had tossed many of those shards against one another. Time and mutual abrasion had smoothed off their sharp edges.²⁵

When I began to work with found photographs, I saw them as bits of the world. They are the remnants of unlocatable pasts - of a continuum that can be sensed but not seen.

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²⁵ The sharp edges of cultural difference in mixed race countries like Australia are perhaps similarly smoothed off.

