

# LOSS

**ARTISTS:**

**DAMON AMB, MIRIAM CABELLO, BLAK DOUGLAS,  
JAGATH DHEERASEKARA AND LINDA SOK**

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**CASULA  
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ARTS CENTRE**

**LIVERPOOL  
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**24 APRIL – 27 JUNE 2021**

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Published by Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, April 2021

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### Content Warning:

The content of this booklet features artists narrating their own stories of loss of homeland and forced migration. If you are experiencing emotional distress help is available. Please contact Lifeline.

Lifeline provides confidential crisis support that is accessible 24 hours a day. We encourage any person in Australia who is contemplating suicide, experiencing emotional distress, or caring for someone in crisis to call or text Lifeline.

Regardless of your age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion, trained crisis supporters are ready to listen, support, and help you work through what's on your mind. 13 11 14

We would like to acknowledge the Cabrogal Clan of the Darug Nation who are the traditional custodians of the land that now resides within Liverpool City Council's boundaries. We acknowledge that this land was also accessed by peoples of the Dhurawal and Darug Nations.

## INTRODUCTION

Australia is a country where a large percentage of the population have moved here from other parts of the world. In the Liverpool Council area 41% of people stated on the 2016 Census that they were born overseas.

LOSS is an exhibition exploring the impact of leaving a homeland, by those who intimately know what that feels like. It features a range of artworks by artists with strong connections to Western Sydney, including Damon AMB, Miriam Cabello, Blak Douglas, Jagath Dheerasekara and Linda Sok. Each of these artists explore the reasons, impacts and losses of leaving their homelands, and the intergenerational impacts. Some of the artists use their art to directly communicate the difficult political histories which have informed their loss, while others make works capturing the feelings and emotions of loss. While each have unique approaches to communicating this theme, it is making art that provides a language for expressing the complicated social-political issues and events which continue to shape their lives.

This booklet features an essay by each of the artists and is an important companion to the exhibition. The artists comment, from their own experiences, on difficult topics including war, torture, destruction and the stolen generations, offering personal insights into reconnecting with culture, home, family, and friends. The exhibition is led by the artist's voice in framing their artworks, and this booklet allows the artists to communicate their works in the way they wish; some essays discuss the specific histories and events which inform their experiences, while others offer more poetic and conversational reflections on their feelings.

It is important that artists are provided the support and freedom to tell stories in the ways they believe their stories need to be told, and to be in control of their telling. We hope the exhibition and this collection of essays help audiences appreciate each of the artworks from a unique angle, and to see the political moments from a more personal perspective.

– Jenny Cheeseman & Luke Létourneau

Cover image: Jagath Dheerasekara, 'Bungarusa panthera: a hybrid' 2021. Video Still. Courtesy the artist



## CRYPTIC WHISPERS

**DAMON AMB**

(b. 1979. Tehran, Iran)

I am inspired by the powerful words of Ahmad Shamlou. 'I wish' is used a lot in his poetry and so many poets have used it in different ways. I wish there was justice in the world.

I wish, I wish, I wish there was  
justice in the world.

When things pass by and pass by  
and pass by

and I'm getting older and older and  
older

without being seen by the people  
and the world

and I'm getting rusted and rusted  
and rusted

– by Damon AMB,  
inspired by Ahmad Shamlou

Each of the photograph in *LOSS* embodies feelings associated with fleeing my homeland of Iran in 2013 and becoming an asylum seeker in Australia. I was born in 1979, during the Iranian Revolution, and I was raised during the eight-year war period. Having lived in Iran where the political situation has given birth to much

suffering in the form of human right violations and restrictions, I spent months being processed in Australia's immigration detention facilities. I was held in two detention centres before I was released and granted a protection visa. I was released with a bridging visa, then after 5 years I got my protection visa in 2018 which I'm still on. After my release from detention my family sent me my camera.

Walking and photographing Sydney during the night became a regular past time for me. This evolved into the *Night Series*, which is featured in this exhibition. The *Night Series* started as my coping mechanism to express my art through photography. I feel compelled to capture these images because they evoke traces of hidden dangers, phobias, taboos, traumas and desolation.

My subjects, captured spontaneously as they emerge from the darkness, are starkly illuminated by the flash of the camera or coloured a blood red. Subjects that seem harmless, ordinary or simple become uncertain, ominous and complex. I hope they provoke thought and lead audiences to wonder

how the subjects were abandoned to the darkness.

As I pass by things in the middle of dark night – creatures, elements, or different things - I see myself, I see moments of my life after I left my home country. For me, photography is the most powerful form of art. Photography transforms the momentary lapse of being into eternal memories.

I see myself in the way the cow is looking, lost in the dark, unidentified in limbo. I see myself in the unidentified cloth wrapped in a strange, human shape; am I dead there or did they chop and leave me? I see myself in a basement at the National Art School that brings me back to the basements used by the current regime, ones that I've been assaulted in and so many others have been tortured to death. I am hidden in these different shapes of essence and form. I am looking at myself.

Metaphor is very important in my art, and is important throughout the history my country's art. It is abundant in the works of famous Persian authors and poets of the Middle Ages such as Omar Khayyam, Ferdowsi, Hafez, Rumi, Khaqani, Attar, Nezāmi, Rudaki and many others. Over the centuries, Iranian artists have experienced suffocating political pressures under punitive laws. This trend has continued since the 1979 formation of the

totalitarian Islamic Republic regime, which has forced a large number of artists to flee their homeland. It is dangerous to speak your mind, especially as an Iranian artist. However, through metaphor, artists express feelings and issues without articulating them directly. In more contemporary art and literature, this trend remains strong as political and social pressures continue to permeate all institutions of culture. Nima Yooshij, Ahmad Shamlou, Forough Farrokhzad, Akhavan Saales are some of our contemporary poets and authors who have used metaphor in their works. Because metaphor has long been present in our art, Iranian audiences are accustomed to looking for deeper meaning and interpreting imagery. I take the photos that I do because I am always looking for deeper meaning in the scenes and images that I experience.

Feelings are often unfolding in my images, and whether the image is straight-forward or abstract it is a direct reflection of my memory or experiences. 'The Butterfly Effect,' in particular, represents a transformative moment in my life when something seemingly random set off a chain reaction that changed my destiny. I was in the second detention centre in Western Australia at the ex-Air Force base called Curtin. It was a terrible time there for me. I became very vulnerable and I got a very terrible lung infection. I received no medical

assistance. It just got worse and worse and worse. On top of that there was a fire reduction hazard burn in the bush there and the smoke increased my suffering. I was dying in a way. I was really dying. There was a girl working in the kitchen and she had a beautiful butterfly tattoo on her neck. She could sense I was not well, physically or mentally. She told me:

‘Damon, this shall pass and things will get better for you.’

Only her words changed things for me. It gave me a very powerful feeling; it was like a strong will to live and achieve my destiny. Her words embodied the philosophy of being powerful and sustaining your own being. All these things will pass. These things will make me even stronger. And things did get better. Her words set me on a path that led to me being here now.

My photographs are a form of self-portraiture, even though my face rarely appears in them. The photos depict a person who has experienced deep loss, physical abuse, fear and sadness – but also – I hope they depict a person who has experienced incredible moments of transformation, strength and developed a beautiful sense that all things will pass and all challenges in life will make us all even stronger.

The photographs are only part of my

installation for *LOSS*, for the first two weeks of the exhibition I will also be living on-site at Casula Powerhouse and writing my stories directly on the North East wall, in the white space between my photographs. These words, written in Farsi in a semi-cryptic way, will be spontaneous and in response to conversations and feelings I experience during this time and as I consider themes of loss. The calligraphy performance is visually cryptic in the way that Persian alphabet would be foreign and rather exotic to anyone of non-Persian background. To the native Persian, the message might still remain cryptic as it contains poetic euphemism. For me as the artist, the calligraphy will be an enigma by the end of its writing as it takes full form as an abstract painting.

Strangers

No common ties

Simply shared kinship in humanity



## THE FINAL EMBRACE

**MIRIAM CABELLO**

(b. Santiago, Chile 1966)

The loss of family, extended family and friends, is the ultimate melancholy of forced migration.

‘The Final Embrace’ is a recently completed drawing of my cousins and myself translated from a photo taken in Buzeta, Chile. I was just about to turn three when this photo was taken with my cousins’ ages one to four. Our parents captured a moment in time when we all played together in the garden of our home, a time that perhaps they somehow knew would never be repeated and lost forever. The photo is blurry, and rightly so as it symbolises how our memories fade with the passing of years, how we faintly recall the times we laughed and played as children.

I found out when I arrived in Sydney at the age of four the meaning of loneliness. I lost my best friend, my cousin Chanito. The friendships, companionships and bonds that begin in childhood did not evolve into adulthood for my cousins and me.

Once we landed in Sydney, these connections of love would never be felt again. Surrogates were framed, and we willingly called strangers Auntie, Uncle.

Ironically the photo was taken in September 1969. Four years later, on that fateful month of September 11, 1973, the Chilean Military violently overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende.

My politically charged artworks foreground the often overlooked *first* September 11. The U.S backed military coup d’état brought General Augusto Pinochet to power and heralded an ominous chapter in my home country’s history.

In 1971, my parents fled the impending doom of Chile’s internationally-backed dictatorship. This series presented as part of *LOSS* is inspired by my family’s rich history, political passions, and personal experience.

Pinochet and his supporters consistently referred to the events of September 11 not as a coup d’état but as “a war.” Santiago certainly looked like a war zone: tanks fired as they rolled down the boulevards, and government buildings were under air assault by fighter jets. But there was something strange about this war. It had only one side. From the start, Pinochet had complete control of the

## THE FINAL EMBRACE

army, navy, marines and police.<sup>1</sup>

“Tanks of Terror” and “City in Curfew” are two paintings that respond to Santiago’s physical and psychological impact. While the paintings depict scenes in 1973, inspiration came to me in 1990. In 1990 I travelled through Santiago with my brother and cousin Eduardo, our nominated tour guide – suddenly, people started screaming and running frantically. What I saw made me freeze; it seemed like forever as the tanks were encroaching up the plaza towards us, the ground under my feet starting to shake. I witnessed the loss of a city, the loss of the streets that once belonged to the people—the loss of walking freely in Santiago.

The paintings evince meticulous research. Street signs, logos and colours. Red for the blood that floods the streets to this day; copper for plundering resources; blues for melancholy - the privatisation of water (poor neighbourhoods were without water, and preventable diseases ran rampant). Signs allude to corporate interests, media censorship, oppression and diaspora. Thousands of Chilean civilians were murdered, tens of thousands were imprisoned, tortured and “disappeared”.

Binding the series with golden streets and buildings represents the tanks’ purpose of subduing the people to

plunder their wealth and exploit and remove resources with U.S mining giants.

Pinochet was determined to break his people’s habit of taking to the streets. The tiniest gatherings were dispersed with water cannons, Pinochet’s favourite crowd-control weapon. The junta had hundreds of them, small enough to drive onto sidewalks and douse cliques of schoolchildren handing out leaflets; even funeral processions, when the mourning got too rowdy, were brutally repressed. Nicknamed guanacos, after a llama known for its habit of spitting, the ubiquitous cannons cleared away people as if they were human garbage, leaving the streets glistening, clean and empty.

My family were divided by my home country’s conflict, and this is a story shared by many. Mine is of two brothers. My father and my Uncle both were conscripted by the army. My father, in 1962, during a time of peace, took advantage of studying at the Military Academy, an opportunity he was denied when forced out of school at the age of 12 to work under a trade apprenticeship.

My Uncle served in the military, leading up to the coup in 1973. Unwittingly he dedicated a photo postcard to me for my seventh birthday, which is the 3rd

of November, two months after the Chilean Military Coup. I was so proud of him, a young man in uniform. His photo was lovingly displayed by my bedside. I was not aware of the daily news highlighting the bloody overthrow that bombed the City Palace and that he was one of those soldiers that marched into the City. This photo is recreated in the painting ‘Mi Tío, My Uncle.’

He was stationed at the Tacna Regiment, located twelve blocks from the Palacio de La Moneda, which received the detainees from La Moneda and many other places.

Immediately after the 11th of September events, the armed forces did not have enough sites adequately set up to serve as detention centres. Hence during the first few hours, they used transitory places like the Ministry of Defence, the Military Academy, and the Tacna Regiment base.

That base served as a prison for all the troops of the investigative police in La Moneda when army troops entered on the 11th of September and President Allende’s security guard, who was held in the stables there. Later they were taken out to be executed and buried, presumably in Peldehue (land that belonged to the Tacna Regiment).<sup>2</sup>

The more I researched and read about the military’s atrocities and terror against the civilian population,

the harder I found it to paint my Uncle’s essence through his eyes. As I contemplated the face’s development, his eyes reflected a coldness, not the loving warmth I saw as a child. I felt I lost my Uncle during this process, the young man that sent me the photo was to become a man I didn’t recognise. I found it difficult as a young woman to console the conflicting emotions. While painting subsequent layers, I couldn’t bring warmth and colour to his face, leaving a ghost-like effect manifesting the loss of his soul. The painting will remain unresolved, unfinished, as is my relationship with my Tio Silvano.

My first visit to Chile was after almost 20 years of absence; I returned to Santiago with my mother and brother. Endeavouring to fill a void of twenty years felt like re-reading One Hundred Years of Solitude by García Márquez, widely regarded as one of the century’s greatest writers. The pillar of the collective Latin American story.

While travelling on an old rickety rusted bus from my childhood home to the city centre, La Moneda, I witnessed the impoverished ghettos, malnourished children in torn clothes, filling dirty buckets with water that slowly dripped from a tap in the muddy soil. In the Plazas, beggars lined the streets blinded with missing limbs. Were these tortured bodies that I saw, the hidden history of torture in public

1 The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism, Naomi Klein, Pg. 75.

2 Source: Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation

## THE FINAL EMBRACE

display - I wondered. No one spoke of their experiences while I was present.

During our second family reunion, 30 years had elapsed, and the conversations flowed more easily about their individual life-threatening encounters; perhaps time had healed the immediate pain. Visiting the Museum of Memory and Human Rights with my cousins solidified our joint mission to draw attention to human rights violations committed by the Chilean state between 1973 and 1990.

My artistic identity and heritage were strengthened when I recently returned in 2019. I spent my days absorbing my cultural institutions and revolutionary icons, Gabriela Mistral (the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1945), Pablo Neruda, Violeta Parra, and Victor Jara. Jara was tortured and executed in the immediate aftermath of the coup in 1973. One of the last songs he wrote was called "Manifiesto", it reinforced my conviction to continue exhibiting and creating artworks that connect to my activist legacy.

Every cultural institution, mural and graffiti was a reminder of my mixed heritage. European, North American, Middle East and the Aymara people. The Aymara people are an indigenous nation in the Andes and Altiplano regions of South America, about 2.3

million live in Bolivia, Peru and Chile.

My Latin American identity as an activist artist was solidified during my sojourn. I felt entrenched in the history and traditions of the activist artists and poets targeted through the coup d'état. I visited the soccer stadium, where Victor Jara was among the first detained. His treatment was the embodiment of the fierce determination to silence a culture. First, the soldiers broke both his hands so he could not play the guitar, then they shot him forty-four times, according to Chile's truth and reconciliation commission. To make sure he could not inspire from beyond the grave, the regime ordered his master recordings destroyed. He was one of thousands of leftist academics, artists and activists rounded up in the stadium<sup>3</sup>. A culture was being deliberately exterminated.

I am inspired by the canon of Latin artists, and my objective as an artist is to encourage empathy and critical reflection. I live in Australia, but I am a Latin American artist, and I hope my art also inspires the community to celebrate humanity and social justice. My commitment to my lineage is to continue to create artworks that celebrate perseverance, despite adversity and reveal the cultural bonds that unite us.

3 In 2004 it was renamed Victor Jara Stadium as a memorial to the folk singer

PHOTO BY SALLY TSOUTAS



## INTERGENERATIONAL FAUNA

**BLAK DOUGLAS**

(b. 1970. Blacktown, Australia)

The contemporary Aboriginal art realm is, by and large, governed by authoritarian caucasians and or foreign First Nation subordinates. Granted, since entering its capricious landscape some twenty years ago, I've often been scrutinised regarding my identity. Perhaps blak fullas conceived nepotism as a cultural past time. A veritable 'rank & file' measure to be rolled out at the very gates of the institutions guarded closely by their security swipe card.

*Domestic Violets* is a triptych featuring three large canvases (portrait) painted in only the hues of violet. This suite of works draws focus on the disenfranchising of my tribal origins and the homogenising of the descendants whom were / are expected to assimilate and coexist today, within the youngest British colony on the planet. It is indeed a perplexing experience to ultimately reach a point in one's life, having become 'woke' and surmising that one is a celebrated example of Commonwealth assimilation.

The center canvas is a portrait of my Father's Mother, Chlorine Morthem (Dhungatti). Typically leading a harsh life of a 'half-caste'. Stolen at 13yrs

and institutionalised as a Ward of the State at the Cootamundra Girls' home. This piece was painted referencing an archival photograph of her in her late teens. The portrait was taken at a photographer's studio on George Street, Sydney, as was popular during the era. However, when 'dark' subjects sat before photographers it was fashionable to excessively powder the face and don three quarter length white gloves. This (in societies mind), made the whole experience a little more palatable for all.

Young Chlorine was trained into servitude and worked on properties as a domestic as far as Brewarrina and Walgett. She was 'released' at age seventeen and presumably returned to Jerseyville (Kempsey) for an undisclosed period. At some point in this time, Chlorine met her future husband Frederick Hill. Later she bore my Father Robert and following stints of residing at Thubbagah (Dubbo) she would return to Kempsey and live at Burnt Bridge Mission. A tragic bout of Pneumonia saw her pass in my Father's arms at the age of 36. Dad recalls his joy riding atop the electric polisher at the Westpac Bank

## INTERGENERATIONAL FAUNA

in Dubbo on the evenings that Nanna Morthem would spend buffing the floors. He said that 'by the time Nanna had finished, you could see your face in the floor and the handrails'.

The paintings flanking the center portrait of Nanna Morthem feature pop art style domestic cleaning products. The almost comical irony in the information and names of the labels attribute the perfect metaphors pertaining the 'white Australia policy'. Examples include - 'removes 99.9% germs', 'White King' and my stylised 'Oh No' (Omo). Of course, the title 'Domestic Violets' is a sad yet quirky play of words closely resembling domestic violence. An all too common fact of life within the general Aboriginal populace and a direct result of intergenerational trauma. Violet as my primary colour of choice is an adoption of mood. Having not come close to meeting my only Aboriginal Nanna, I've envisaged her sweetness and softness and caring nature. To me, this colour best represents the colour of cultural change and ironically ventures close to the official colour of the Catholic church. The highly detailed pointillist technique is designed to give the obvious 'Aboriginal' aesthetic which acts as an antithesis given that; it was the Aboriginal aesthetic that was forcibly removed from my Grandmother and her Dhungatti tribes people.

As a companion to 'Domestic Violets', I have presented 'Scarred for life', a video installation in collaboration with director and cinematographer Rowan du Boisee and editing, colour grading and sound design by Angelica Cristina Dio.

This video piece is a dedication to my Great Uncle, Great Aunt & Grandmother, each stolen from their Jerseyville home mid-North coast New South Wales, 1928. To place into perspective, fourteen years of age was / is particularly late to kidnap a child. Generally, First Nations children were removed under the age of ten. Therefore, the word would have been directed via the Aboriginal Protection Board (APB) for a specific aged female of specific skin tone, sought for a white pastoralist family somewhere afar. If it weren't heart breaking enough to have one's younger child taken captive by the Government Officials, imagine your child being at the delightful age of mid-teens being swept away before your eyes.

Being familiar with a variety of ceremonial practices of various First Nations here, I sought to replicate my own faux initiation via the fashionable modern western medium of tattooing. Many initiations involve scarification and endurance of pain. I'd heard that the sternum presented a particularly sensitive experience when being 'inked'.

I was no stranger to such having had exquisite pieces created upon both hands a few years prior. An artist and mate whom I'd much admired in the past - 'Flex' was conveniently working out of 'Little Tokyo' Tattoo Parlour just down the road. Dear colleagues Cristina and Rowan, astute cinematographic aficionados had already begun piecing together a documentary on myself and Nanna Morthem so they were only too keen to comply with my wishes in creating this video piece.

For the second time I was contacted by the State Archives regarding additional records of Nanna's 'working' life. Previously, the staff there had invited Dad and myself to a morning tea whence they'd presented Dad with several photographic reproductions of images he'd never seen before of his Mum. Sadly Dad had passed by time the archives team arranged our second meeting. An antique ledger revealed a paragraph featuring the words that hit me like the sound of a cell door slamming. The words written by the white man's hand that would determine the fate of Chlorine Morthem and her dislocation from her Dhungatti tribal origins and idealistic lifestyle at Jerseyville. Her thereby conscription to the white Australia policy would read -

*'Fred Drew, half - caste, 13 years to be removed to Singleton Home,*

*Lizzie Drew, half - caste, 14 years, and Chlorine Morthem, half - caste, 13 years, to be removed to Cootamundra'.*

The words are now tattooed across my heart. They hurt... twice. This is my monument. My Grandmother was removed from her family home on the 11th March, 1924. The 11th of March is my birthday. This date shall now be my public holiday however I shan't be waving an Aussie flag.



## THE WALL THAT TRAVELS WITHIN ME

### JAGATH DHEERASEKARA

(b. 1965. Colombo, Sri Lanka)

*“A team of researchers has discovered, with the help of residents of the area, a new large species of the genus *Bangarusa* making its home in a rock cave at an ancient archeological site near Medawachchiya, Sri Lanka. This highly venomous snake ‘whose staple diet is human flesh appears to be an unusual kind’, Dr Pahan Jayakody, a herpetologist told ACR News. Scientific research has confirmed that *Bungarus ceylonicus* or Sri Lanka krait and *Panthera leo* or Lion were the evolutionary relatives of this unique species. The newfound species, named *Bangarusa panthera* is the newest addition to the list of endemic fauna of Sri Lanka, a globally important centre of endemism. Deputy Director of the Institute of Archeology and Ancient Civilisations, Professor Ravindra Palangasinge, a world renowned zooarchaeologist said; ‘this two headed reptile had been documented by Edward Charles Gordon, a colonial era archaeologist on a plastered wall of the rock cave. He described it as a mythical creature in Buddhist-Sinhala art and dated it to 3rd century A.D. i.e. Anuradhapura period. It was only in the*

*last century, that this colourful ancient work of art was given life and slowly gathered strength to prey on humans’. People, particularly young men and women have been disappearing for sometime in the area. Aggrieved family members of nearby Sinhala and Tamil villages, wandering in search of their loved ones who had fallen victim to this two headed snake, paved way to its discovery”.*

- Elaine Balmond, ACR News, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, 18 May 2009.

Little effort is needed to understand that the story of the two headed snake is fictitious. However, the violence of the Sri Lankan state towards its people - both Sinhalese and Tamil - is no fiction. It was and is factual.

Large scale violence by the State, frequently involving torture and death in custody, has become a norm in dealing with dissent, in post-independent Sri Lanka. In 1971, a relatively new leftist party, the People’s Liberation Front (JVP), mainly driven by the younger generation, staged an uprising, entirely homegrown and with the ambition of ushering a socialist

state. The then Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led coalition government crushed it within a few weeks with a grossly violent military response. The government of Sri Lanka received military and economic aid from a number of countries including the United States, Britain and Australia to suppress the insurrection. I was a young child at the time and have some distant memories of the occasional sounds of gunfire and curfews that ran for days on end. My family’s life wasn’t directly affected by the events.

The second uprising of the JVP, which spanned from 1987 to 1990 captured the public imagination and gained wider popular support in the majority Sinhalese south of the country, in challenging the existing socio political oppression. The United National Party (UNP) government in power at the time countered it with a response that eclipsed the violence of 1971, both in its scale as well as brutality. My life during this period as a student activist was marked by detention and torture which was then followed by an underground life to avoid recapture and death. Led by military as well as paramilitary groups affiliated to the government, extrajudicial killings with public display of victims and

disappearances became the order of the day.

The European Parliament’s mission to Sri Lanka in 1990, which three members of Students for Human Rights, including myself, met with in clandestine, reported that “..various estimates we have received suggest that at least 60,000 people disappeared in the south of Sri Lanka since 1987. This represents about one in every 250 of the [southern] population.”<sup>1</sup>

In October 1991, by which time I was in exile, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances visited Sri Lanka. The Working Group report stated that the disappearances which had occurred in Sri Lanka between 1983 and 1991, involving all parts of the country from Tamil majority North to Sinhalese majority South was “by far the highest number ever recorded by the Working Group for any single country.”<sup>2</sup>

Four Presidential Commissions were appointed between 1994 and 1998 to investigate the “disappearances” that occurred across the island from 1988 to 1994. As has been noted by the United States Institute of Peace, “[o]f the several thousand suspected

1 Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament 1990, Report of Investigative Mission into Alleged Violation of Human Rights in Sri Lanka 27 October - 4 November 1990.

2 The Asia Watch Committee of Human Rights Watch 1992, Human Rights Accountability in Sri Lanka.

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perpetrators that the commissions identified, less than 500 were indicted and even fewer were convicted.”<sup>3</sup>

By 1991, with the virtual decimation of the JVP’s second uprising, the Sri Lankan government fully focused on defeating the Tamil liberation struggle in the north and east of Sri Lanka, led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Sri Lankan state successfully weaponised Sinhala-Buddhist mythology and narratives of ancient chronicles and those of colonial time. The mainstream Buddhist institution fuelled the war effort and took the frontline in mobilising the support of the country’s Sinhala majority. Where the Sinhalese are concerned, the irony here is cruel; as a community that was already in the grip of the iron fist of Sri Lankan state, the Sinhalese aided the very same State to take another, an even more oppressed community, into its grips. This dynamic has not only bolstered state repression of Tamil people in Sri Lanka but also helped the State enormously to erase the collective memories within both communities of being subjected to state violence.

I returned to Sri Lanka from my life in exile after the UNP regime fell in the mid 1990s. I carried fifteen 5 1/4”

floppy disks with me on my journey back home. They each contained information about political violence and human rights violations that occurred in the south of Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990. After immigrating to Australia I managed to recover some of the data on these disks. I continued gathering records and reports related to the 1987-90 period in the South. From time to time I would take those disks out of the box in which they were kept, look at them and then safely return them back to it. One day I arranged them on my desk and it looked like a wall; a wall that holds memories of people who were taken from us, some who were known to me and many others not known to me.

In 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared its victory against the LTTE’s struggle for an independent Tamil homeland. The conflict, and particularly the behavior of the Sri Lankan military, has left deep scars on the soul of Tamil society. The Report of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka observed the Sri Lankan government’s extensive use of heavy weapons and intentional disregard of human casualties.<sup>4</sup> In reference to the number of civilian deaths during the

final stage of the war, another probe by the UN concluded that other sources “have referred to credible information indicating that over 70,000 people are unaccounted for.” Yasmin L Sooka, who was a member of the United Nations Report of the Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka which investigated war crimes that occurred during the final stages of the Sri Lankan Civil War has identified that “[y]ou can draw a direct line from 1989 to 2009 in terms of the violations and many of the characters involved ... Military officers who were involved in crushing the second JVP uprising, went on to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity against Tamils with total impunity.” She goes on, “[t]here is no doubt that torture in Sri Lanka is State sponsored and is an important instrument of State policy in which the full authority and structures of the State are drawn in and fully utilised to implement the policy at all levels by the security forces.”<sup>5</sup>

So far, no meaningful transitional justice or reconciliation process has been attempted. As geopolitics of the Indian ocean region takes precedence, regional and global powers continue to show a laissez-faire attitude towards Sri Lanka’s record on human rights.

Meanwhile, facts, memories, reflections on the past and future within the nation inch slowly towards oblivion.

3 United States Institute of Peace 1995, *Commissions of Inquiry: Sri Lanka*, viewed 21.01.21, <https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/01/commissions-inquiry-sri-lanka>.

4 The Asia Watch Committee of Human Rights Watch 1992, *Human Rights Accountability in Sri Lanka*.

5 Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka 2020, *First Ever Map of Sri Lanka Identifies Over 200 Torture Sites*, viewed 21.01.21, <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/news-features/human-rights/956-first-ever-torture-map-of-sri-lanka-identifies-over-200-torture-sites>.



## QUESTIONS FOR MY SISTER, MY MOTHER, MY GRANDMOTHER

**LINDA SOK** (b. 1993. Cecil Hills, Australia)

How did Khmer turn on Khmer?

Where did it all fall apart?

Where do I start?

Where do I begin?

I suppose I can begin with the question of why.

Why did it happen?

So many questions run through my head.

Yet when it comes to knowing where to start, I hesitate.

I first learnt about the Khmer Rouge through stories my parents would tell my sisters and me. The fragments I can recall include stories of lions that get tricked by mice, and rabbits that would outsmart farmers for a carrot to chomp on. These tales were peppered between stories that conveyed the great distances that they had to walk, through ponds filled with reeds and leeches that would cling to their skin, and the small little treasures my grandma was able to sneak away in secret pockets in her shirt. Or at least that is how I remember the descriptions of the Khmer Rouge being revealed to 12-year-old me.

The Khmer Rouge pushed people from the cities into the countryside. They

forced them to work in the rice fields, with no proper shelters, no school, only hard labour. No hospitals, no medicine, no food - people were starved to death. An estimated 2 million people were lost.

...

She cuts the long leafy green vegetables from just above the root, taking care not to damage the stems. She places them into a large red basket, stacking them on top of one another, preparing them for drying. They sit in the sun for days. Until she is ready for them.

Boiling the ingredients together, she adds a measured ratio of mustard greens to salt, sugar, and water into

a large enamel pot. A concoction fundamental enough to preserve them for an indefinite amount of time. She pulls out a large jar, almost as big as a child's torso and fills it with the greens, packing them in as tightly as the stiff foliage would allow. She pours in the rest of the liquid. With the chopsticks she forces the greenery that pokes up above the solution, below the water's edge.

Over the years I have caught glimpses of these techniques. Recently I have adapted them into my art making. The method of boiling, marinating, and curing once applied to vegetables grown in the backyard are bestowed onto precious silk fabrics brought over from Cambodia.

...

We sit on the floor of my mother's walk-in closet to view the traditional kramas and silk scarves. My mother would pull them out, one by one and delight in the stories behind each... "this one was from a wedding I went to..."

"this one was a gift from an old friend..."

"this one we bought but we've never used it..."

"look at this one, it's such a nice colour."

"did you know they used to wash the

silks in the river?"

"what are you going to do with them?"

"to think that the practice was almost erased..."

...

Having everyone gather around the dinner table is a rare thing in a family with so many members. But when we do gather, the table is covered with a mix of Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Western cuisines, enough to feed our family of 11. Amongst all the soups, stir fries and seafood stacked at the table, about all I can eat is the chrouk spey. I grab a bowl of rice and stack a bunch of the pickled leafy greens on top and eat until I am full.

Around the afternoon is when my Grandma takes her coffee.

What was it like?

How did you escape?

"Nothing to eat. We were so hungry."

"They sat us around in a circle, right near the river."

"They killed them... do you know what that means? To kill someone?"

...

A return to year zero.

Those encounters with grief, loss, and starvation instilled deeply ground principles around food and its scarcity. Despite having migrated to a new

## QUESTIONS FOR MY SISTER, MY MOTHER, MY GRANDMOTHER

country, they are still haunted by ghosts that tell them to hold on to things; we keep stocked on the shelves assortments of food, water, utensils, newspapers, plastic bags and other items that never get used but are there in case things go awry.

I sit at my computer writing out instructions on how to proceed:

Step 1: Collect water from Tucoerah River (Georges River). Use the blue buckets to do this. Perhaps you can wear gum boots and wade into the river. Try your best not to collect too much dirt along with the water. I've marked a path you can take on Google maps.

Instead of being there in person to instruct my sister, I sit in front of a screen 17,000km away, trying to picture what she would be feeling, trying to anticipate her moves and preface any difficulties she might encounter.

Step 19: If the salt has dropped to the bottom of the bucket and not attached to the fabric, then adjust the fabric so it sits on the floor of the bucket. Be careful, if the water is hot it might burn you. Also, if you have cuts on your hand, this will sting.

The act of preservation became crucial for survival. Salt in particular became a vital ingredient for making food such as

fish, cucumbers, bean sprouts, Chinese cabbage and radishes last longer.

These rituals around preservation are still maintained in the safety of their new homes.

...

Once more, I am having to imagine her struggle.

How many buckets did you collect? Did you get enough water? What did the water feel like, as you waded through it? Did anyone ask what you were up to? How did you know where to go? How did you get there? How thick was the grass that you had to walk through? What did the leeches feel like on your skin? Did you have enough to eat? What was running through your mind? Were you afraid? How many were killed? How did you survive?

Questions for my sister, my mother, my grandmother.

Through the process of collecting water for this work I can't help the questions that present themselves in my mind. So much was lost during that period. So much left unsaid. Connections between generations ebb and wane as the closeness of the mother tongue fades and no longer passes through the lips of younger generations.

When did you begin to feel safe again?

...

I am privileged to be able to face this tragedy one generation down. For me, my practice is the way through which I began to rediscover my Cambodian culture. Inevitably, looking back at the culture also necessitates looking at the events that broke that culture. It ends up being a never-ending unearthing of things that feel simultaneously like too much and also not enough.

I turn down to view the river, tracing its form in my mind. I timidly waded my feet through the river and let its motion move over my body.

I lay the silk fabrics down into the salt water. An attempt to preserve an ancient practice. Despite its classification as one of the strongest natural fibres in existence, I cradle it like a fragile body in my arms and slowly set it down to float in the healing solution I have created. Gently, the pieces of salt drift towards the silk, each of the crystal structures encasing the cloth beneath. I hang them out to dry on the clothesline, ready to process the next batch.

# PUBLIC PROGRAMS

TO REGISTER FOR ANY OF THE PUBLIC PROGRAMS AS PART OF  
LOSS, SCAN THIS QR CODE:



## FORBIDDEN CONVERSATIONS: HUMAN RIGHTS

Sat 19 June • 11am-12pm  
\$15 • For ages 16 +

Forbidden Conversations will be a single event at Casula Powerhouse, held during LOSS exhibition. It will run for two hours in the Theatre at Casula Powerhouse. There will be a panel of speakers including a representative from the human rights perspective and contemporary artist.

## GENERATOR: MASTER ART CLASSES

Sat 19 June • 1-4pm  
\$50 • For ages 16 +

Meet fellow art loving friends and find out tips and hints for advancing your art practice through a series of professional development sessions. The sessions are guided by experienced practicing artist who will encourage participants to develop both creative and professional skills

Our first session is led by artist Jagath Dheeraseskara to celebrate the exhibition *LOSS*. Jagath will go into the creative art making processes of creating and developing a political and social art practice.

## EXHIBITION CAFÉ – HOME

Saturdays  
15, 29 May, 12 & 26 June  
10-11.30am • \$25 per session or \$60 for 4  
For ages 18+

The Exhibition Café is about opening the conversation of diverse topic relating to the exhibitions at Casula Powerhouse Art Centre. It is an opportunity to have informal discussions with a range of professionals, including artists. Open to, and respectful of, people of all communities and belief systems.

This program will align with ideas and themes from - *George Gittoes: on being there, LOSS and Gina*.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Catalogue design - Mandarin Creative