

Bright Ideas



Refugee Council
of Australia

**Local strategies to support
refugees and asylum seekers**

16. REFUGEE ART PROJECT



Kamaleshwaran Selladurai in the Pop-Up Parramatta Studio (Photo courtesy of Chrissie Lanssen)

What?

Refugee Art Project was conceived among a collective of academics and artists, united by a concern for the plight of refugees to Australia and the asylum seekers who wait in Australian detention centres. Since its inception in late 2010, more than 500 artworks created by refugees and asylum seekers have been exhibited to the Australian public. Refugee Art Project is passionate about showcasing the enormous talent, locked away, beyond the razor wire.

Refugee Art Project supports the creativity and self-expression of asylum seekers and refugees in the Villawood detention centre and in the Western Sydney community through art workshops and artistic collaborations. By organising public exhibitions and producing zines and other publications, Refugee Art Project hopes to convey the diverse voices, opinions, self-expression and artistic productions of refugees to the Australian public. This serves an educational role and helps to challenge the misconceptions that are harboured towards refugees.

Who?

Refugee Art Project works with any asylum seeker or refugee in detention or in the community (regardless of visa status, gender, language group, culture etc.), or anyone who is of a refugee background. The project has worked with about 70 people since starting in late 2010.

Why?

- Refugee Art Project seeks to support asylum seekers and refugees through the facilitation of art workshops and to convey their voices and artistic productions to the Australian public.
- Refugee Art Project wishes to throw a light on the trials and hardships faced by refugees in general and within the detention environment in particular. Its work features powerful examples of 'outsider art', which asylum seekers are in a political sense, and also has an educational role.
- The intention is "simply to enable asylum seekers to communicate to the public in their own voice, through art, which creates a bridge between them and the community."
- Due to the government's heavy restrictions on access to detention centres, the Australian

public is rarely exposed to the opinions, stories and self-expression of refugees. Refugee Art Project seeks to redress that through the art, comics and poetry refugees produce.

- Refugee Art Project also supplies an important activity within the Villawood detention centre for those who do not have much access to art materials and tuition. The workshops also offer a good chance to socialise and form new connections and friendships.

How?

- Refugee Art Project runs art workshops for asylum seekers and refugees in the Villawood detention centre every weekend.
- Workshops and other social gatherings are also held every Thursday afternoon for those in the community at the Pop-Up Parramatta art studio.
- Exhibitions and galleries are held throughout the year around Australia to exhibit and sell paintings made by asylum seekers and refugees.
- Refugee Art Project is largely funded through its own fundraising events and through donations. It has also received support from many wonderful institutions and art galleries, including Mori Gallery, Eckersleys Art and Craft, UTS Foyer Gallery, Level 17 Gallery at Victoria University, The Sydney Democracy Network at Sydney University, The Institute for Creative Health and Stanley Street Art Gallery.

Successes

- Refugee Art Project is proud to have hosted numerous public events and exhibitions involving refugees, their families and communities. They have also raised money for refugees through the sale of their works.
- Refugee Art Project has shown the value of artistic collaborations with refugees as a means of support, advocacy and education, thus engaging the wider community about the issues that refugees and asylum seekers face.

Challenges

- “There are no challenges commensurable to the difficulties refugees have faced in their efforts to make it to this country and the problems they face in detention.”
- “As a community arts organisation, our greatest challenge is to maximise the impact of what we do so it can reach as many people as possible. Arguing with those who believe the lies about refugees (being 'queue jumpers' who 'shop around for countries to migrate to') is always a difficult and unpleasant challenge.”

Advice for others

“Our advice for someone doing something similar, or any kind of refugee advocacy for that matter, would be to always respect the privacy, integrity and viewpoints of the asylum seekers and refugees with whom you collaborate.”

More info

Website: <http://therefugeeartproject.com/home/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TheRefugeeArtProject>

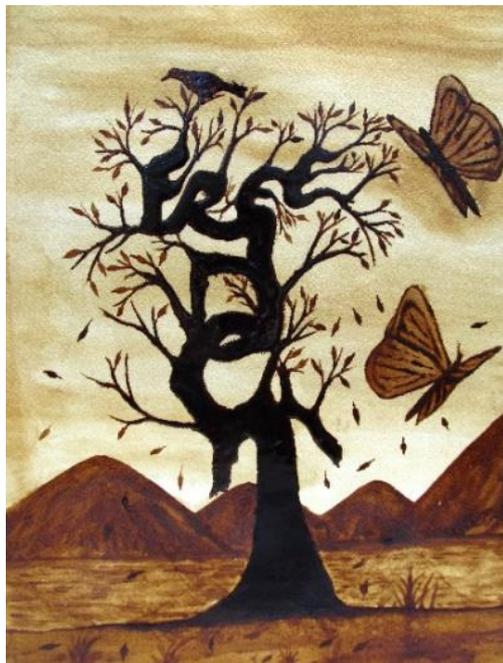
Online video of recent TEDx talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7Wi8vqhze0>

Bright Ideas

Bright Ideas highlights innovative programs, initiatives and projects developed to support refugees and asylum seekers. It provides a way to share ideas, success stories and good practice to improve service provision and assist organisations and communities in addressing key issues and challenges.

If you have an initiative you think could be profiled in *Bright Ideas*, please contact the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) on admin@refugeecouncil.org.au or call (02) 9211 9333.

To download other *Bright Ideas*, go to: www.refugeecouncil.org.au/brightideas.php



Painting by Mohammad, 'Freedom', coffee on paper.

This image is one of a number of works made with instant coffee powder that has been diluted in water and then put to the page. The technique was initiated by an Iraqi detainee who had some knowledge of art and who liked to paint in his free time. Upon entering detention, he had no access to paints so he reached for whatever was at hand, in this case finding an alternative use for instant coffee. Coffee painting has gained a life of its own inside the Villawood Detention Centre and is now something of a tradition. The recourse to food as an artistic medium speaks to the ingenuity of detainees who have limited access to adequate materials and tools.