



THE
Gift
ART, ARTEFACTS
& ARRIVALS

NEW CONTEMPORARY
ART EXHIBITION
NOW OPEN

The Gift: Art, Artefacts and Arrivals

MEDIA KIT

Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House



MUSEUM
OF AUSTRALIAN
DEMOCRACY
OLD PARLIAMENT HOUSE

MEDIA RELEASE

13 February 2018

FROM UNIMAGINABLE HORROR, THE GIFT OF A NEW LIFE **An exhibition from MoAD**

Can you imagine receiving a gift that would change your life? Out of the rubble and destruction, from hopelessness and grief comes a second chance in a new country. And it is not just you, but your whole family who will be transformed by that gift.

At the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House (MoAD), the message about migration in ***The Gift: Art, Artefacts and Arrivals*** exhibition is as simple as a suitcase full of nappies and as poignant as a sacred candlestick rescued from the ashes of war.

Four artists have collaborated with migrants who came through the Holocaust to make artworks that talk about suffering, joy and family in a way that relates to all migration. It is a two way process: migrants bring with them skills, culture, and experiences to enrich this country and they receive the gift of freedom and hope. Each artist will be in Canberra on Tuesday, February 13 for a lunch that celebrates this moving portrait of migration's meaning for Australia.

Among the works is a belt that survived three concentration camps, woven bone figures of twins separated forever at Auschwitz and a joyous scroll of family portraits, descendants of two determined migrants who went through hell. At the front of the exhibition sits a much loved and well-worn koala called Kookie, a gift from Arthur Calwell himself, the patron saint of the post-war migrants.

Linda Wachtel, who spent two hours photographing Holocaust survivors Adalek and Marysia Kohn's family, says that art can have a profound impact on the way people view the world.

"In a museum context it gives people a chance to look at issues without being force-fed facts, figures, dogma or slogans. This story, and stories like it, might help reduce the fear people have of the unknown, and people coming to this country from backgrounds they aren't familiar with," she says.

MoAD Director Daryl Karp says that, "This exhibition does what art does best – bringing contentious issues back to the personal, telling stories that may open hearts and minds. The idea of combining history and art through the notion of a gift was a perfect opportunity to make a small, beautifully formed creative experience that punches above its weight. I'm really proud of that."

Noting that ***The Gift: Art, Artefacts and Arrivals*** is set in the building where decisions ranging from welcoming Vietnamese boat people to enforcing the White Australia policy were made, Ms Karp says that MoAD's role is to be a place for conversations about big ideas of today.

"The museum is uniquely positioned to start a dialogue about the kind of Australia we want to be, where we come from and where we want to head. And we are trying to do it in a way that has real humanity."

The significance of the artwork has been recognised by the National Portrait Gallery's decision to acquire two pieces.

"Both of these works clearly relate to the experience of the Holocaust, having significance alongside the fact that Australia has a high proportion of Holocaust survivors globally", Mr Tumble said. "They both extend the boundaries of what a portrait can be or do, and in that respect they'll make valuable contributions to the National Portrait Gallery collection."

So what you would like to say to a modern migrant? Visitors have been writing, drawing and posting messages on postcards for new Australian migrants. There are warm welcomes, messages connecting with family stories, and from 16-year-old Edward, these words: "You will always be welcome, you will always be loved. Our nation was built on migration, this will never change".

The Gift: Art, Artefacts and Arrivals is open now at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House. For more information visit www.moadoph.gov.au.

- Ends -

For further information, interviews or photo opportunities, please contact:
Alice Brown, alice.brown@moadoph.gov.au, 02 6270 8120, 0410 997 741

INTERVIEW OPPORTUNITIES:

- Linda Wachtel, artist
- Linde Ivimy, artist
- Hedy Ritterman, artist
- Lousje Skala, artist
- Daryl Karp, Director, Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House
- Angus Trumble, Director, National Portrait Gallery

ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL:



MEDIA ENQUIRIES:

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High res images of exhibition objects are available here:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/n7zcu7or54n0npe/AAAvE_9-Vv6F3hhQ66GIU_lra?dl=0

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY AT OLD PARLIAMENT HOUSE:

The Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House is a living museum of social and political history. Set in the former Parliament House building, it is the place where our story as a nation developed and where the conversation continues. MoAD helps people understand Australia's democracy by interpreting the past and present and exploring the future. MoAD is a place for spirited conversations about big ideas of today. MoAD's role is to celebrate the spirit of Australian democracy and the power of your voice within it.

KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT *THE GIFT: ART, ARTEFACTS AND ARRIVALS*

- What is the nature of the gift? Who gives and who receives when people migrate to Australia?
 - What difference do personal stories make to how we understand migration?
 - The artworks are about Holocaust survivors. Why was this choice made and how does the exhibition discuss wider Australian migration issues?
 - How has migration changed our own family stories?
 - Why is contemporary art a good way to prompt these discussions?
 - What is MOAD's role in the national conversation about migration?
 - How can people connect on a personal level with newly arrived Australians?
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THE ANSWER'S ON A POSTCARD

Imagine you're leaving everything behind. All your family and your friends, your neighbourhood and your nation. Migration is a gigantic leap in the dark, full of urgent questions. Will I be happy? Will I like living here? How much will I miss my home? When will I feel like Australia is home?

The Gift: Art, Artefacts and Arrivals exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House focuses on four stories of Holocaust survivors, interpreted through work by four artists with a strong personal connections.

When Adalek and Marysia Kohn came to Australia in 1949, they had nothing but a battered suitcase full of nappies, a baby in their arms and the clothes they stood up in. They had so little that even their passage here was a gift from an uncle in Shanghai.

Richard survived three concentration camps and came to Australia from Poland with a single reminder of his former life - the belt around his waist. He never married, he never had a child and the belt was his only link with a vanished world.

Josef Kleinmann lost his twin sister Marta at Auschwitz and never knew whether she survived or died. Fountains made of delicate old world glasses cascade with water for all the family gatherings, the weddings, the Fridays they missed.

And somehow, Elizabeth Weisz came through the Holocaust and reached Australia with her Shabbat candlesticks, miraculously retrieved from her childhood home in Czechoslovakia.

How would you answer questions from people who have been through so much? What would you say to people who have fled Sudan or Somalia, Syria or Yemen with nothing more than a belt or a suitcase? What do you say to people who come here with nothing but their scars and their hopes? If you were that person, what would you want to hear from your new neighbours?

The answers are on a postcard, literally. Visitors to the exhibition have been writing, drawing and posting messages for new Australian migrants. Many of them have their own family stories to share: "My father was a refugee from Latvia, coming to Australia after world war two. He was always grateful for Australia", said Harold. "I migrated here as a child and I can tell you it was a wonderful place to live and grow", reads another. "It is an honour to be an Australian". There is plenty of joy in a message that says, "You are now an official Aussie. Yay!".

The Gift: Art, Artefacts and Arrivals is now open at the Museum of Australian Democracy.

- Ends -

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF PORTRAITURE

How can a piece of jewellery be a portrait? How can a scroll of photographs represent a family history? Two collaborative artworks from ***The Gift: Art, Artefacts and Arrivals*** exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House will be acquired by the National Portrait Gallery, whose Director, Angus Trumble, says push at the boundaries of what a portrait is and what it can do in telling our national story.

Lousje Skala's work *Prisoner 20671 Alsbeta* is a series of necklaces tracing the phases of her late mother-in-law Elizabeth Weisz's life, including the time she spent in Auschwitz. Linda Wachtel's scroll of photographs documents 14 descendants of Adalek and Marysia Kohn, also Auschwitz survivors.

"Both clearly relate to the experience of the Holocaust, having significance alongside the fact that Australia has a high proportion of Holocaust survivors globally", Mr Trumble said. "The idea of lives transplanted from the blackest depths to a land of opportunity, and then creating lives out of that in the face of every possible challenge is a major theme of post-war Jewish Australian history."

But how can a necklace portray a person? "Well, in some sense there is a self-portrait in every work of art", Mr Trumble says. "At the tip of the iceberg are the Crown jewels, in terms of wearing precious stones and precious metals as a projection of your personality and identity. Lousje belongs to a long tradition in that respect. I think rings also have a universal symbolism at every level of completing the circle, making things whole."

Mr Trumble says he was also struck by the power of Linda Wachtel's scroll of Kohn family portraits, which talks about the existence of second, third and even fourth generation Holocaust survivors.

"As a mechanism for the preservation of memory, it gives rise to thoughts of how far the trauma extends into the future, how long does the suffering last? These issues remain sensitive and potent now, let alone through the past 70 years. Linda's work is also sumptuously printed, so there is a technical excellence in collaboration with her printer with whom some of the credit is shared."

"We are slightly different to other institutions in that the weight of consideration does lean further towards the subject matter than art", Mr Trumble said. "None of those considerations are so fixed, though, that you cannot lean in one direction or the other. Both of these works extend the boundaries of what a portrait can be or do, and in that respect they'll make valuable contributions."

"As the NPG collection grows, the number and the grain of the stories we tell becomes finer. You gain latitude as the collection grows and becomes a more nuanced whole."



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ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Linda Wachtel is a Melbourne based photographer and co-founder of The Contemporary Collective. She photographed the descendants of Adalek and Marysia Kohn, nee Wojdyslawska, Auschwitz survivors who came to Australia in 1949 with their baby daughter. Portraits of their 14 direct descendants are printed on a scroll that unrolls around two walls as part of The Gift exhibition, while in the centre of the room sits the suitcase they brought with them.

Hedy Ritterman is a photographer who received the Human Justice award in the 2014 Blake Prize. Along with Linda Wachtel she founded the critical engagement platform for artists, The Contemporary Collective. Her work for The Gift tells the story of Richard, who survived three concentration camps and came to Australia with the belt he'd worn from his home in Poland. The photograph of Richard, his hands and this simple object are a memorial and a testament to his experience.

Linde Ivimy is also Melbourne based and her work has been the subject of survey exhibitions at Heide Museum of Modern Art and the touring exhibition If Pain Persists at the UQ Art Museum, Brisbane. Her work in The Gift includes two figures made of woven bone and a water sculpture made of assembled European glassware from 1935 to 1945. It is her gift to those who lost everyone and everything.

Lousje Skala is a jeweller whose work explores the idea of portraiture in different forms. Her subject is her late mother-in-law Elizabeth, a Holocaust survivor, about whom she made series of necklaces because "I truly believe you can carry the weight of the world upon your shoulders". These refer to a pair of silver Shabbat candlesticks rescued from Elizabeth's family home and gifted to Lousje when she married into the family.

ARTIST STORY RESOURCES

What motivated you to make this kind of art with a social purpose?

Linda

I formed a collective with Hedy (Ritterman) a few years ago with the idea of mounting exhibitions that have a social impact outcome. This work came about when I met Jane who is a performance artist. I'd photographed her parents and that work was hung in the Blake Prize, so when she told me that two of her children who live in Israel were visiting I thought, wouldn't it be amazing if I could document the whole family? The work is presented as a scroll in reference to the Torah. I loved the idea of its circular nature, and by scrolling at the beginning and end there's a reference to those who come before and those who will follow in successive generations. A scholar from the Holocaust Museum told me that in Judaism the white space between letters in the Torah is regarded as white noise, equally important as the letters that are written on it. So the gaps in between each of these photos is like negative space, a memory of those who didn't survive. So the work is more deeply poetic and poignant than I had consciously intended.

Hedy

Art is my language. Every artist shares what they can of themselves and I feel grateful that I can make art about things that are very personal and universal. I use memory to talk about an individual person and an individual theme. At the moment it's always the "other" in the public discussion and sometimes I worry that we're just preaching to the converted. I do get despondent when I feel like we're fighting a strong tide on the politics of fear. It's quite hard to think about it too much. Other times, when I see that MoAD has taken this on and that it's had such a great response, I'm more hopeful. If we convert one person to being more open and compassionate then it's worth it. All of us who are part of this exhibition are mature women artists who have had quite a lot of human experience and we're talking from the heart, in quite a different way to how migration is discussed in the media. In the end, I want to pay homage to the human spirit and hope that people become more aware that we are all part of the same humanity

Linde

I'd been working on portraits of Holocaust survivors and when original work about Josef and Marta sold, I re-made the piece which now also references my grandparents and their experiences - I'm Irish Catholic on one side and German Jewish on the other. In their day, Australia was a place where names were anglicised, you tried to show less of your foreign side, your identity, and to fit in. The water fountain starts with a night that happened in 1928, Kristallnacht. When I was making my work about the twins, Josef and Marta, I lamented that they were separated for so long. I thought about all the Fridays they missed, all the family celebrations and all the weddings. So I collected all the glass I could find from between 1935 and 1945 from Czechoslovakia and Poland and I made water fountains as a gift to them for everything they missed. Everything is good if you

just add water - that awful need to cry starts the healing, it fertilises the ground. Adding water is what makes it right.

Lousje

This work began with the candlesticks given to me by my late mother-in-law. She was actually very traumatised that her beloved child, born here "of the light" was marrying out of the Jewish faith. She was in the early stages of Alzheimers at the time, and it was the most profound gesture to me. It became more and more obvious that I would use Elizabeth although she never spoke about her experiences. I thought how do I tell this story? When we talk about the Holocaust that reminds us all where we must never go again.

This country was really the lucky country for both our families. I have a strong sense of European identity because I also have a Dutch passport, but I see myself as a fortunate Australian. In my work, I wanted to really address the significance of common humanity. Both my husband and I come from first generation migrant families, and our families both assimilated beautifully. I wonder, why do we go through this awkward process today when in the 1950's and 1960's people were welcomed with such warmth? My father says he wrote to Canada, Australia and New Zealand and Australia answered first so he came here. He was held up as a model immigrant, proof that you could arrive with nothing and within six years build a business, a beautiful home. And you still can, because this is really the most magical country.

Describe the experience of working with your subject and their stories?

Linda

I'm Jewish but I had never had any contact with Holocaust survivors. I would have been impressed with them no matter what their cultural background was. I learnt so much about what it is to be a political refugee, and I tapped into their religious and cultural history in a much deeper way. It was really intense shooting them all. There was about two hours with the whole family and I also took photos of all the partners, group photos of them all holding up the signs according to which generation they belonged. The energy in the room, their love for each other, their excitement that someone thought they were important enough to photograph. They gave me a gift of their time and story, which was so generous. As it has turned out, they think I have given them a gift in documenting their family. As Adalek died, and Marysia has moved out of the family home it has become even more important. The family love the fact that this thing exists and to see the family hanging on the wall of the Museum of Australian Democracy. Adalek used to say, "Australia is the best country in the world, there is no other country like it."

Hedy

It was harrowing working with Richard. He was 94 when he decided to share. He has no family at all and one does not live forever. He was a distant relative who had watched my progress as a later art student, and found the confidence to tell me his story. He was a very private person - I went weekly and he wouldn't let me video him. I learned that I had to let the silences reign. I thought at first that he needed prompting but I realised that when he closed the eyes he was

reliving his story. It was a story I hadn't heard before and it was very hard watching him. He'd have to brace for the experience each time and it took him a while to recover, but I also found it fascinating what he didn't tell me. It took six months to get the story out, and he agreed to one photo shoot at the end. I had to summarise everything in that one picture. He died six weeks later and he left me the belt and the cabinet it was on. He decided now that he'd told the story he wanted the story and the belt in the museum. He gave up his own privacy because he knew he was at the end of the line with no family.

Linde

The art making took me on a total divergence from where I had been working. I got 30 of those pieces out of my system before I could think about making figurative representations in my usual materials of bones and tooth and rag. My studio was amazing, it was full of parcels arriving from overseas. I'd make a collection of glasses and realise I had three from an op shop, three more have arrived in the mail and now I have a little group that's like the diaspora coming back together. In the film those glasses that make up the water fountains are minute. Everything was so much smaller, more precious and so delicate then. It's a bloody miracle they survived after 1945, that anybody or anything with that background made it through. Every time I've shown one of those pieces, people have drawn me into their own history. The water or something must flow through those glasses to make them alive again and it is beautiful to see them with the light on them. It evoked tears from many viewers to see the twins and then to see the glasses and understand that this was my gift to them, for all the weddings, all the Fridays, all the family celebrations they missed.

Lousje

I had lengthy conversations with my husband but he wouldn't speak to me about his mother's experiences. There was a lot of tension that goes back to his childhood, where all the real conversations in his family took place in the silences. I didn't know Elizabeth as well as I would have liked to, but I have this dream in my mind about what sort of mother-in-law she would have been. She definitely would have become a very important part of our family but we didn't have that opportunity because she developed Alzheimers Disease. She was Oma Lizzie to my children, there were lots of photos of her and we spent time together because she was the only grandmother they had, so the kids do have lovely memories of her. Developing this sense of continuity through my work was a gift to my family to keep her memory alive in their minds.

Did the experience of making this work change you as an artist?

Linda

I think every parent wants to give their children a safe happy life with an education, a roof over their heads - it's a human right. And when you have a second chance at life, you work hard if you'd thought you weren't going to survive. I worry about the fear in the current zeitgeist around migration. We didn't want to take Jews in after the war, and the story continues whether it was Europeans, Vietnamese, Sudanese. We are living in perilous times, so if work like this can make

people look at immigration in a different way, this story and stories like it might help reduce the fear people have of the unknown, and people coming to this country from backgrounds they aren't familiar with.

Hedy

The process gave me validation. I thought I was being indulgent working with people that I like, but it gave me a reason to keep going on that, knowing there was a leap to the universal story. I kept working on individual stories but talking about bigger stories. As I've been researching there are more and more examples of people who use their personal connections to make work unapologetically.

Linde

This project changed the materials I worked in; those water sculptures are very different for me. I can't pinpoint anything about that experience, but there is nothing we do as artists that doesn't change us. Every step is in the right direction. If anything, the opportunity to work with these four women artists has been as important as making the work itself.

Lousje

I became much more mindful of the amount of narrative you can place in a piece of work that you can wear. I loved seeing that portraiture can come through an object, that a story can come through something other than a painting. After I did it, I didn't make anything for several months because it was so traumatic. Ultimately though I feel liberated through being able to tell the story and make a connection with the person I didn't know but who mothered the person whom I love most in the world.